

What is holiness?

God's holiness.

"Oh dear!" you might sigh — and I'd understand, for without the Trinity, holiness does have the smell of mothballs about it, the look of a Victorian matron administering castor oil. And much of what purports to be holiness has just that aura about it: all prickliness and prudery. People even say things like, "Yes, God is loving, but he is *also* holy" — as if holiness is an unloving thing, the cold side of God that stops God from being too loving.

Balderdash! Poppycock! Or at least, it is if you are talking about the holiness of the Father, Son and Spirit. No, said Jonathan Edwards:

Holiness is a most beautiful, lovely thing. Men are apt to drink in strange notions of holiness from their childhood, as if it were a melancholy, morose, sour, and unpleasant thing; but there is nothing in it but what is sweet and ravishingly lovely. 'Tis the highest beauty and amiableness, vastly above all other beauties; 'tis a divine beauty.^[1]

What is holiness?

What is holiness, then? The words used for holiness in the Bible have the basic meaning of being "set apart." But there our troubles begin, because naturally I think I'm lovely. So if God is "set apart" from me, I assume the problem is with him (and I can do all this in the subtlest, most subconscious way). His holiness looks like a prissy rejection of my happy, healthy loveliness.

Dare I burst my own bubble now? I must.

For the reality is that I am the cold, selfish, vicious one, full of darkness and dirtiness. And God is holy — "set apart" from me — precisely in that he is not like that. He is not set apart from us in priggishness, but by the fact that there are no such ugly traits in him as there are in us.

"God is God," wrote Edwards, "and distinguished from [that is, set apart from] all other beings,

and exalted above 'em, *chiefly by his divine beauty*" (for the connection between holiness and beauty, see verses like Psalm 96:9).^[2]

How the Trinity shapes holiness

Now the holiness of a single-person God would be something quite different. His holiness would be about being set apart *away from others*. In other words, his holiness would be all about aloof distance. But the holiness of the Father, Son and Spirit is all about love. Given who this God is, it must be.

Edwards again: "Both the holiness and happiness of the Godhead consists in this love. As we have already proved, all creature holiness consists essentially and summarily in love to God and love to other creatures; *so does the holiness of God consist in his love, especially in the perfect and intimate union and love there is between the Father and the Son.*"^[3]

The holiness of the triune God is the perfection, beauty and absolute purity of the love there is between the Father and the Son. There is nothing grubby or abusive about the love of this God — and *thus* he is holy. My love is naturally all perverse and misdirected; but his love is set apart from mine in perfection. And so, the holiness of the triune God does not moderate or cool his love; his holiness is the lucidity and spotlessness of his overflowing love.

Called to be holy

It all dramatically affects what it means for the believer to be holy, to be godly — in other words, what it means to be like God. Being like another God would look quite different. If God is a being curved in on himself, then to be like him I should be like that. If Aristotle's eternally introspective God is God, then plenty of navel-gazing seems to be just what's called for.

For what we think God is like must shape our godliness, and what we think godliness is reveals what we think of God. So, what, for example, if love and relationship were not central to God's being? Then they wouldn't feature for me either as I sought to grow in God-likeness. Forget others. If God is all single and solitary, be a hermit. If God is cruel and haughty, be cruel and haughty. If God is the sort of oversexed, beer-sloshing war-god beloved of the Vikings, be like that. (Though please don't.)

But with this God, no wonder the two greatest commands are "Love the Lord your God" and "Love your neighbor as yourself." For that is being like this God — sharing the love the Father and the Son have for each other, and then, like them, overflowing with that love to the world. Or look, for example, at Leviticus 19, where the Lord famously says, "Be holy because I, the Lord

your God, am holy" (Leviticus 19:2). What does holiness look like there? It means not turning to idols but coming to the Lord with proper fellowship offerings (Leviticus 19:4–8). That is, it means fellowship with the Lord. And it means not being mean to the poor, not lying, not stealing, and so on (Leviticus 19:10–16) — that is, it means: "Do not hate your brother in your heart . . . but love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:17–18). Love for the Lord, love for neighbor — that is the heart of holiness and how the triune God's people get to be like him.

The beautiful, loving holiness of this God makes true godliness a warm, attractive, delightful thing. It is not about becoming more mean and pinched, for this God is not mean and pinched. Holiness for God, said Edwards, "is as it were the beauty and sweetness of the divine nature," and so "Christians that shine by reflecting the light of the Sun of Righteousness, do shine with the same sort of brightness, the same mild, sweet and pleasant beams."^[4]

And most essentially, to know and enjoy the God who is love means becoming, like him, loving. "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love" (1 John 4:7–8).

Endnotes

[1] Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, [10:478](#).

[2] Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, [2:298](#), my emphasis.

[3] Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, [21:186](#), my emphasis.

[4] Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, [2:201](#), [347](#).



Michael Reeves

Michael Reeves is President of Union and Professor of Theology. He is the author of *The Good God: Enjoying Father, Son and Holy Spirit* (Paternoster, 2012).

Discipleship, Love, Jonathan Edwards, Holiness