

§ 3. Doctrine of God
Lecture 19
Practical Application of God's Holiness

Last time we looked at the first of God's moral attributes – the holiness of God. I articulated a non-voluntaristic divine command theory of ethics according to which God is himself the highest good and is so essentially. His nature expresses itself toward us in the form of divine commandments which then constitute our moral duties. I suggested that this not only gives a satisfactory account of objective moral values and duties as grounded in God as the highest court of appeal, but it also enables us to understand in a consistent way the otherwise very troubling examples in Scripture where God commands people to do things which, if done under their own initiative, would have been sinful. I suggested that in cases like this God has the ability to command a person to do something which had he not commanded it would have been wrong. But given God's commandment it becomes that person's moral duty to carry out. I suggested that these commandments are always consistent with God's own perfectly loving and compassionate and just nature so we don't need to fear that God might completely upend the moral law and make hatred good and love evil, for example.

START DISCUSSION

Student: I had asked you last week one question about the different statements in Scripture that God is not partial toward one person as compared to another person. That is a theme, I think, you see throughout Scripture. It is in several places in the New Testament and Old Testament, also. I wondered how you would reconcile that with, for example, the commands to kill the Canaanite children and spare the Jewish children. That is one question. The other question I had was: what is your take on the position that some Christian philosophers have taken that the descriptions of the destruction of the Canaanites is hyperbole? Nicholas Wolterstorff (I think, a guy who spoke at one of your conferences here) and Matthew Flanagan argued that. Paul Copan, I think, argues that. What do you think of that position?

Dr. Craig: Let's take the second one first. This is a very appealing view – isn't it? – to say that God really didn't issue these commands. This is just hyperbole. For example, Paul Copan will give an illustration – when a high school basketball team says, "We slaughtered them last night," it doesn't mean they actually killed these people. It was just a hyperbolic way of saying they won. Paul claims that this is very typical in ancient near Eastern military accounts. The winner will say that they utterly annihilated the other side; they completely destroyed them. But it is not literally true. What some that you have mentioned would say is that these commandments should not be construed as literal commands to kill all of the men, women, and children that were remaining behind, and

that in fact these commandments were not taken literally and were not fulfilled because there are lots of Canaanites later on in the narrative that are still around, still alive, and in the land.

As I say, this is a temptingly attractive view because it makes it so easy to get God off the hook, so to speak, by saying this is hyperbolic. I hope it is right! I think that would be wonderful. But I am not persuaded that it is right. One reason is that when I look at the supposed parallel texts that are offered about military accounts in the ancient near East it seems to me that they don't approximate at all to the sort of commands that are given here in Scripture that seem to be so adamant about killing not only the people but the livestock and the other animals and so forth.¹ These are a lot different than statements by, say, the Egyptian Pharaoh that they utterly annihilated the enemy. I wish there were some more convincing parallels in extrabiblical literature to these commands that are obviously non-literal, and I haven't seen them. The other thing that disturbs me is in the account when Saul is supposed to kill the people off and the animals, the livestock, you will remember the prophet Samuel arrives on the scene and Saul hadn't done it. He hears the bleating of sheep and cows and so forth and says, *What is this? Why have you disobeyed the Lord? Why are these animals spared?* He reprimands Saul and makes him carry out the commands. There seems to be a pretty clear example that these commandments were meant to be literally carried out. Otherwise, it is hard to understand Samuel's displeasure at Saul's not doing it.

So I prefer to take the worst possible case. I often do this in apologetics. I say, "Let's assume the worst." Let's assume that these commands are literal and that this is exactly what God wanted them to do. Can we give a consistent and biblical account that will make sense of these ethical commands? I think that the account that I offered does so. If I am incorrect – if these aren't literal and they are merely hyperbolic – then I say all the better. That is great. I am open to be convinced. But even given the worst-case scenario I think we can show that there is no incompatibility between God's being a loving and just God and his issuing these commands.

As for partiality, as I said last week, the commands to be impartial or that says that God doesn't show partiality to persons isn't meant to imply that God treats all persons alike. I gave the example of Jacob and Esau from Romans 9 which we read earlier where he selected Jacob as the heir through which the line of promise would continue and Esau was rejected. God has the sovereign ability to do that. Not everybody is treated alike in life. Some people die young, others live to a ripe old age. Some suffer debilitating illnesses throughout their life, or poverty, or failure. Others have successful and prosperous lives. God isn't under any obligation to treat everybody exactly the same. Where I think God is impartial, and this is a reflection of my more Wesleyan theology, is

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that I think God wants every person he creates to be saved. He doesn't arbitrarily pick out of the mass of humanity some elect persons to be saved and pass over the rest and let them go to hell. Rather, God gives sufficient grace for salvation to every person he creates and he wills and works for the salvation of every person that he creates. That, I think, is a fundamental impartiality on God's part but doesn't require that, as he works out his sovereign plan for human history, everybody's lot in life will be the same. God has the sovereign right to allow some people to die in infancy and others to live to a very old age and no one can claim that they have some sort of a right to a long earthly existence. There is nothing in God's promises that would say that they have a right to claim such a thing. Indeed, paradoxically, I would say that those who die young and go to heaven are really happier than those who struggle through this earthly life for many, many decades and finally go to be with the Lord.

Student: I would call to your attention Jesus' story of the rich man and the poor beggar Lazarus who sat at his doorstep. He tells about both of them dying and the rich man ends up in not a good place and the poor beggar ends up being comforted.² Jesus said, *In your life you had every good thing, now you are in torment. The poor beggar Lazarus had nothing and now he is being comforted.* If that is not making things right, I don't know what is. It just says that partiality doesn't mean just here. It means total partiality.

Dr. Craig: That is a very good point. We are so focused – aren't we? – on our finite existence here on this planet when compared to divine eternity this life is an infinitesimal eyeblink compared to the time we will spend in eternity with God. Those who suffer horribly in this life – say twenty-five years of debilitating cancer – in the afterlife will have this overwhelming reward that will make the sufferings of this life fade into an infinitesimal triviality by comparison. You are quite right in drawing our attention to the fact that our earthly state is just infinitesimally brief compared to the time that we will be with the Lord in eternity.

Student: I think it is a mistake to draw the conclusion that what we go through in this life is all we are going to go through. That is not true.

Dr. Craig: Right. That is exactly right.

Student: A number of bulletpoints jump into my head, but I will make it quick. Nobody complains about the flood, but sometimes God has to be God. If you want to take – and I agree with your approach on the worst case – but in mitigation you have situations of the intermarriage with these people that occupied the land, and going through the Kings and the Chronicles you see these people remained. So there were survivors from these groups. That would be the second point. The third point is, for the critics you have to have a

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moral imprint to make a judgment about whether God is acting rightly or not. That begs the question – where does that come from?

Dr. Craig: Let me just comment on that very briefly because this is a good point. What you are saying is: how is the atheist or naturalist in any position to say that God has done something wrong here? Because apart from God how do you ground objective moral values and duties so as to say that God has done something that is wrong? On an atheistic view there isn't anything wrong with what those Israeli soldiers did. As one pastor – I think Douglas Wilson was his name who often dialogued with Christopher Hitchens – would put it, *The universe doesn't care*³. In a morally neutral universe, it doesn't care who gets slaughtered and who doesn't. That is a good point.

How should we understand this objection then? I think the way to understand the objection is for the atheist to say *You Christians believe in God, and you believe that he is all-loving and all-just. Yet he issues these commands. You have an internal inconsistency in your system.* That is the way I would understand the objection – that biblical theism is internally inconsistent in affirming that there is a just and loving God and yet also affirming that he has issued these commands. What that means is all you have to do is provide a possible moral theory (a possible explanation) that would show there is no inconsistency. You don't need to show it is true. You just need to show it is possible. Then the inconsistency would be resolved. I noticed in my dialogue with Lawrence Krauss where he kept bringing this up that he didn't really understand even his own objection. Because at the end of the day, he was quite willing to admit, *Yeah, what you are saying is consistent but that doesn't mean it is true.* And I thought, *The man doesn't even get the objection that he is pushing himself.* The objection is an inconsistency claim. So all you have to do is offer a moral theory that will show there is no inconsistency between God's being all-powerful, all-loving, and all-just and issuing these commands. I think that that is what I've done.

Student: Also, one last point is in Hebrews it says Christ tasted death for every person. When I share the Gospel, if that comes up, I would share that God suffered his own alienation in Christ for everyone.⁴ He suffered what it is like to spend eternity in hell for every man, woman, and child. That is why he had to be God because only God could do that.

Dr. Craig: When we get to the problem of evil, the problem of pain, we will talk a little bit about this more. I think this is useful in dealing with what I call the emotional problem of evil. I think that really is the problem for most people. It is not that they have an

³ See Wilson vs. Hitchens debate transcript at <http://hitchensdebates.blogspot.com/2010/07/hitchens-vs-wilson-kings-college.html>

⁴ 15:10

intellectual objection here that they can prove. It is just that they emotionally react to this. Your point is that we are worshiping and serving a God who is not some cool and distant Creator standing aloof and watching his creatures suffer. Rather, we are talking about a God who enters into human history in the person of Jesus. And what does he do? He suffers. He suffers a pain and torment that is literally beyond human understanding, and he takes this upon himself voluntarily for our sake and our salvation. I think emotionally that can make it easier to bear the cross that we are often called upon to bear in this life when we remember that we follow a crucified savior who gave himself for us.

Student: When God gave us free will he basically put a limitation upon himself as he divided the sea from the land. The water just does not surpass the boundary until in the case of Noah's flood that when everything that men think of are evil and there is no return and then God kind of comes in and restores it. That is almost like with all situations when sin becomes so rampant to a point there is not a turning force then he basically cleans up the pollution kind of thing. So if you call this a consistent model and God is not inconsistent in that way.

Dr. Craig: I think that is right insofar as one is dealing with adults who fall under God's judgment. These Israeli armies were merely the tool or instrument of God's judgment that he was meting out on them. The difficult question is the children, or to think of the story of Abraham's sacrificing his son Isaac. That is a pointed example as well. How can God command Isaac to go and kill his own son? Obviously he stops him before he can do it, but he does issue this command and expects Abraham to be obedient. The divine command theory that I have offered I think makes sense of that. Abraham, having been given this command, has a moral obligation to sacrifice Isaac even though had he undertaken such an action in the absence of a divine command would have been sin. It would have been wrong.

Student: Taking about the children, the Bible says the sin of the father passed down to third and fourth generation. So those children will be growing up in a curse because the sins of the fathers. So when I say they reach a point of no return that means that the generation down three or four generations is just no hope.

Dr. Craig: One might say that in the case of the Canaanite tribes.

Student: I agree with you that God was using them to judge, but mainly his purpose – he could have judged the sin with viruses or earthquakes or stuff like that.

Dr. Craig: Like Sodom and Gomorrah, for example – rain fire down upon the cities or something.

Student: A lot of people do not judge others for their fear of judging themselves. They have to acknowledge at some point judgment comes upon me. So when you are a people

that are following and trying to get close to God you know is loving and he commands you to do that he is talking about in your own life you only keep the goal when you are coming from a prior realm city of God which Jericho was. But when you are in a nation – your people who are descendants of Noah – that have totally come away then you don't keep anything.⁵ It is only like when you come out of Egypt you have no leaven for seven days. After that then you are able to let the Lord be fruitful and multiply you and bless you and grow you in other areas. Leaven is getting too far afield. You are not supposed to partake of anything that they had – their gods or anything. Making you do it is to force upon you – you only cling to God. That is your only hope.

Dr. Craig: I think you are making a very good point here. God could have carried out his judgment on the peoples of Canaan through some impersonal means like earthquake or weather or something of that sort and destroyed them. But he didn't do it that way. He chose to use Israel. Why? I think you are right. God had called Israel to be a holy people set apart for himself. There was an object lesson about the holiness of God in using them as the instrument of his justice and wrath upon these pagan peoples in the land – a lesson that wasn't to be overlooked. I think you are absolutely right that in calling upon Israel to be the instruments of his justice there was an object lesson for Israel that needed to be taught here and not simply judgment upon the Canaanites.

Student: How would you respond to, as far as divine command theory in today's day and age, people who (and I don't think that there is less than one percent of churches who have kind of a Westboro Baptist type philosophy) saying that this was commanded by God to kill these people or do this? How would you respond by saying that this is not happening anymore? How would you respond to somebody who would ask you a question of that nature today?

Dr. Craig: This is a very good point that you are making. Here I think Paul Copan's book alluded to earlier is very helpful – *Is God a Moral Monster?* What Paul rightly points out is that the Israelis were living in a theocratic state at that time. There was no human ruler – God was the head of Israel. These commands that were given were unique to this time and place in history where you had a theocracy – where God was the head of the government. But in the time of Jesus there was a Roman emperor who was the head of the government. As we know, Paul in Romans 13 says *be submissive to the governmental authorities. Do what they tell you to do.* The laws were different in that society than they were in ancient Israel. Similarly, the mistake of folks like the ones you mentioned are thinking that we live in a theocratic state today, and we don't. We are not the New Jerusalem. The United States is not God's people. We have a secular government and God is not the head of this government. It is a misnomer to think that our society will have the same sort of laws that were provisional in ancient Israel. There simply is no way

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to translate from one to the other given that we have a totally different kind of civic society today.

END DISCUSSION

Let's move on to our application. What application does the attribute of God's holiness have to our lives? I think this is evidently of profound importance for Christian living.

1. *We should strive for personal holiness in our lives.* The holiness of God reminds us of how much God hates sin. Read the book of Revelation, for example, on the wrath of God. That is such a sobering reminder of God's hatred for sin and evil. For example, Revelation 14:18-20 gives this terrifying image of the wine press of the wrath of God.⁶

Then another angel came out from the altar, the angel who has power over fire, and he called with a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, "Put in your sickle, and gather the clusters of the vine of the earth, for its grapes are ripe." So the angel swung his sickle on the earth and gathered the vintage of the earth, and threw it into the great wine press of the wrath of God; and the wine press was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the wine press, as high as a horse's bridle, for one thousand six hundred stadia.

That is about two hundred miles! What a horrifying image this is of the wine press of the wrath of God flowing with the blood of its victims as high as a horse's bridle for two hundred miles. This is an image that should remind us of how much God hates sin and is opposed to it. One sin kept Moses out of the Promised Land. One sin destroyed Ananias and Sapphira. The problem I think that we have is that we blink at sin because we don't really think it is that bad. We think that God is like us, and he will simply wink at sin and overlook it.

Psalm 50:21 is an interesting verse in this connection. God is speaking here and he says, "These things you have done and I have been silent; you thought that I was one like yourself. But now I rebuke you and lay the charge before you." What was the problem the Jews had here? They thought that God was like them. They had small thoughts of God. They didn't understand his terrible and awesome holiness. So he had been silent and they thought it was all right. But now he says he rebukes them and lays the charge in front of them.

Having said that it is important to remind ourselves that God doesn't hate you; he hates your sin. God loves you. He loves you so much that he sent his Son to die for you. But he hates the sin that pollutes your life. Far from being something negative, the wrath of God which is an expression of his holiness is, I think, absolutely vital to a correct concept of

⁶ 24:52

God and to Christian living. Stephen Davis is a prominent Christian philosopher. I was struck by this paragraph in his book *Risen Indeed*. He says,

I think we ignore the concept of the wrath of God at our own cost. Indeed, I would argue for the radical proposition that our only hope as human beings is the wrath of God. (It is also true, of course, that our only hope is the grace of God, but that is another matter). The wrath of God shows that we do not live, as so many today suppose that we do, in a random and morally neutral universe. God's wrath shows us that right and wrong are objectively real, they are to be discovered, not created. The wrath of God is our only hope because it teaches us the moral significance of our deeds and shows us how life is to be lived.⁷

So don't be afraid to affirm the wrath of God upon sin. This is an indication of his holiness and, as Davis says, the objectivity of right and wrong which is our only hope in the world.

As those who are called to a righteous and holy life, *we need to strive for lives without blemish*. 1 Peter 1:14-16: "As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; since it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.'" We are to strive for holiness in our lives which reflects the holiness of God. To live lives that are without blemish.⁸

Here is the paradoxical thing that we've discovered that I think is such an incredible irony or paradox of God's economy. That is that *holiness is the secret to happiness*. So many people want to be happy. They will compromise morally or do things that the Bible says you shouldn't do because, as they put it, *I just want to be happy*. But the truth of the matter is that happiness is like a will-o'-the-wisp. If you seek it directly – you try to be happy – it will always elude your grasp and you won't find it. But if you strive for holiness then in seeking to be holy you will suddenly discover that happiness has crept up on you and is sitting there on your shoulder because you are doing the will of God. In Matthew 6:33 Jesus says, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well." We need to make it the focus of our lives to seek for God's holiness in our lives. I really do believe that as we do that we will find that we are living lives that are deeply and profoundly happy.

That is the first application.

The second application is that *in Christ God's holiness becomes our justification*. For those outside of Christ, as we have just seen, God's holiness is an awful terror. It is the

⁷ Stephen T. Davis, *Risen Indeed: Making Sense of the Resurrection* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), p. 166.

⁸ 29:57

source of the justice and the wrath of God which comes upon people who are separated from him and apart from Christ. But, ironically, for those who are in Christ, God's holiness becomes the source of their salvation. This was Martin Luther's great insight into Romans 1:16-17. Let's just read Romans 1:16-17:

For I am not ashamed of the Gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed though faith for faith; as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live."

Luther, as a Catholic monk, was obsessed with the holiness and the wrath of God which filled him with terror. He strove to live a holy and righteous life full of spiritual disciplines. But he could never rid himself of the terrible guilt that he felt he carried before a holy God. He realized he could never measure up. Despite his every effort, Luther was filled with terror before this holy God, until he saw that through faith in Christ the righteousness of God becomes our righteousness. As I am in Christ, his righteousness is imputed to me, and God sees me clothed in the righteousness of Christ himself. So that very holiness that once condemned me now becomes the source of my salvation.

Romans 3:21-26, I think are some of the most profound verses in the New Testament – the heart of the Gospel. I will close by reading those.

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies [or makes righteous] him who has faith in Jesus.⁹

⁹ Total Running Time: 35:17 (Copyright © 2015 William Lane Craig)