

27. The God We Love to Fear

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.

[Matt. 6:9]

What exactly does the Bible mean by the word *holy*? We tend to use *holy* as a synonym for moral righteousness or purity. This is not wrong, but it can be misleading. In the Bible there is a primary and a secondary meaning of holiness. The secondary meaning refers to moral righteousness, but the primary meaning of the word *holy* is “separate.”

That which is holy is that which is “other” than or different from something else. When the Bible speaks of God’s holiness, the preeminent thrust of such statements is a reference to his transcendence. God is superior to

anything in the created realm.

All religions have holy places and holy times, specific locations and periods set aside from the normal course of life. But why is it that human beings are drawn to set apart certain things? It is because they have a special significance for us. It is not because of their intrinsic value, but rather what makes something holy is the touch of God upon it.

One aspect of otherness is demonstrated in *Xenophobia*, a fear of strangers, of people with strange customs and manners. The supreme form of xenophobia is the fear of God, the Holy One, the supreme Other. Rudolph Otto, in the book *The Idea of the Holy*, said that the holy is the *mysterium tremendum*, the awe-full mystery. By this he meant that the experience we have of the holy is certainly mysterious, but it is also powerful. This awesome, mysterious power provokes fear within us.

We have conflicting feelings about the holy. There is something about the holiness of God that

attracts us, but there is also something about the holiness of God that frightens us. It fascinates us, but it also terrifies us. However, as we become aware of what God's holiness truly means, our beliefs will be strengthened, our behavior will be changed, and our gratitude to our Savior will be unending. When we see even a glimpse of God's holiness, we will bow in worship.

Coram Deo

For so long our culture despised the transcendent, desiring only this world and the things of it. Dissatisfaction with worldliness has caused many to look elsewhere for meaning and purpose. Talk with another believer about how you might direct those who are searching to the God we love to fear, and help them overcome ambivalence toward holiness.

For further study: [Leviticus](#)

[11:44–45](#); [19:1–2](#); [Psalm](#)

[30:1–4](#); [Revelation 1:9–18](#)