

drulogion

thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 06, 2006

Attributes of God (IX): Grace and Holiness



As we continue the third and final phase of our series on the attributes of God, we will dedicate these last three weeks to three different

pairs of character attributes: grace and holiness, mercy and justice, patience and goodness. There are numerous reasons for exploring these divine characteristics in pairs: (1) these attributes are easier to understand than the previously addressed "metaphysical" attributes, (2) they are less contentious and therefore less interesting unless brought into conversation with each other, (3) although not yet employed, the method of juxtaposing two seemingly contradictory affirmations is always an illuminating procedure, (4) such a procedure especially befits God, whose simplicity and perfection indicates that all his attributes describe him fully and thus modify each other, and (5) believe it or not, it was my plan all along. So here goes.

Our first pair of divine characteristics is grace and holiness.

Let's start with **holiness**.

What does it mean to say that God is holy? A common definition of holiness that accounts for most of its Biblical usage is "**set apart for God's use**." This general definition is great for creatures, but how

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exactly would such a definition be applied to God? Is God set apart for God's use? That's seems oddly reflexive.

I think this very oddity is illuminating. The attribute of holiness bears witness to God's **distinctness**, his **set-apartness**, his **otherness**. God is God. "God is not 'man' said in a loud voice," to quote a phrase. God is set apart from all that is not-God.

Although this may sound a bit empty, we must remember that what God *is* (in contrast to what he is not) has been revealed in the history of the covenant fulfilled in Jesus Christ. So God's holiness doesn't just mean he is nothing like us; rather, **God's holiness refers to the distinctive shape of life God takes in the history of his dealings with us**. God is *this* God, and no other

But to even speak of God's holiness in this specified historical way, we are affirming that God has actually chosen to enter in history with us. God has condescended to us, coming among us by becoming one of us. The term which characterizes **this act of condescension is grace**. God is gracious. He doesn't abandon us in our sin, but enters into our sinful condition to overcome our plight and bring us back into relationship with him. That God has done this is sheer grace: God was not compelled to join with us, but he does it anyway.

God is God. He is set apart from all that is not-God. And so out of reverence we declare that God is holy.

God is *this* God. What sets this God apart is that he cares for us humans. And so out of gratitude we declare that God is gracious.

Any thoughts?

Do you have any misgivings about the procedure of pairing up divine attributes?

Does talk of holiness in terms of God's set-apartness make sense?

Does it befit God?

What is missing from my account of God's grace? Is the act of condescension get to the heart of the matter, or is there a better point of departure?

How might God's holiness and God's grace further illuminate each other?

Labels: [Attributes of God](#)

posted by JohnLDrury @ 4:50 PM

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I think these are good to juxtapose. Nice work.

I've heard some theologians use the term "condescension" as you did here and I'm smiling at the fact that in the world today that is such a negative term! Of course, it simply means "coming down so as to be with someone" which is a highly accurate term for what God the Son did (Immanuel). But it's hard to translate in our world that takes offense at any sense of inequality. But I condescend down to one knee so I can look my kids in the eye before I give them a big hug. There's a good condescension is all I'm saying.

At [1:22 PM, December 09, 2006](#), [Keith.Drury](#) said...

I am seeing over and over the importance of "Simplicity."

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