

## Systematic Theology Part 1, Week 4: Attributes of God Part 2

### I. INTRODUCTION

Is there a God? And if so, what is he like? These are perhaps the two most important questions a person ever asks. So last week we considered God's existence. The Bible doesn't argue for God's existence, it assumes it. God has revealed himself generally in creation and history; propositionally in his inspired Word; personally in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh; and savingly through the work of his Holy Spirit.

And because he's revealed himself, we can know what he's like. This gets to the question of God's attributes. First, Justin said that God is *independent*. fully self-sufficient and self-existent. Next, we saw that God is *immutable*. He doesn't change. He's perfectly consistent, reliable, and faithful. And we learned that God is *infinite*. That means he has unlimited power over all things. His presence is everywhere. And he is eternal, not bound by time, with no beginning or end.

God is infinitely great. We could spend years, decades and centuries trying to plumb the depths of his wonder – and one day we will. But this morning we want to use our time to explore several more attributes of God that he reveals in his Word. Why? Because *knowing God* is the greatest joy of our life. This isn't merely an "abstract" exercise. Theology is practical, it's devotional, it teaches us *who* is the God that we trust in all of life's trials, and it should stir our hearts to love, adore and praise God.

So, we'll look at several more attributes of God today, though the first two topics we'll explore aren't as much attributes as descriptions of God's essential nature. After all, the attributes of God aren't different hats he wears at different times. God isn't divided. He is, forever and always, ALL of these attributes. Each attribute is merely a biblical category that provides us with language to describe various inter-related and united aspects of God's character and greatness.

On that note, it's appropriate to start with:

#### 1. The Unity of God

God is the only Divine Being. He has a total unity of character. In other words, everything he does is fully consistent with all of his attributes; there are no contradictions in his character. He doesn't have a "good side" or a "bad side" – he's all good. He's *not* different in the Old Testament and the New. He is one in essence, He is indivisible. This is often referred to as the simplicity of God, which basically means that God's attributes aren't little bits that you add up together and get God, like parts of a car. Instead, each attribute is completely true of God and all of His character.

We see this in Exodus 34:6-7, "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the

children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.” God is both merciful and just, and though those traits may seem at odds, they are resolved in Jesus who mercifully dies in the place of sinners, thus vindicating the claims of God’s justice.

So God is one, and he’s not a schizophrenic God. He always is, and always acts, according to his united character. But that’s not all. God has clearly revealed himself in three distinct persons:

## 2. God is Triune

I’m aware that when we discuss the doctrine of the Trinity, it feels like our brains are turning to mush and many conclude that this is an abstract idea, best left to philosophers in cluttered libraries. It feels unrelated to day-by-day Christian life. But that couldn’t be farther from the truth. Yes, God’s triune nature stretches our understanding. It’s mysterious. But the Triune God is beautiful, delightful, and worthy of our awe. It makes all the difference in the world that God is not a lonely, solitary being but rather a trinity in unity, existing in eternal love and fellowship and extending that harmonious love to us. I’m not overstating when I say that the trinity makes all the difference between true Christianity and false understandings of God.

Our time is brief, and many great books have been written on this central doctrine. Let me point out just one – Michael Reeves’ *Delighting in the Trinity*. He doesn’t just explain the trinity, he stirs our hearts to see God’s triune nature as beautiful, wonderful news. *WHO would like a copy?*

Let’s look at the Trinity, appropriately, by answering **three questions**:

### **A. What does the doctrine of the Trinity mean?**

Wayne Grudem’s definition is excellent: “God eternally exists as three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and each person is fully God, and there is one God.”<sup>1</sup> This means that God is one in essence. Theologians in the 4<sup>th</sup> century argued from scripture that the Son and Spirit are equal in *substance* to the Father. That is, there is only one being known as God. Scripture consistently affirms this. Deut 6:4 says “The LORD our God, the Lord is one.” Isaiah 45:5, “I am the LORD, and there is no other;” verse 21, “There is no other god besides me.”

But this God is a unity of three distinct “persons.” The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. But the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Spirit, and the Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son. Each person plays a distinct role in the harmonious work of redemption. The Belgic Confession of 1561 put it this way: “The Father is the cause, origin, and source of all things, visible as well as invisible. The Son is the Word, the Wisdom, and the image of the Father. The Holy Spirit is the eternal power and might, proceeding from the Father and the Son. Nevertheless, this distinction does not divide God into three, since Scripture teaches us that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit each has a distinct subsistence [which means personhood] distinguished by characteristics—yet in such a way that these three persons are only one God.... These persons, thus distinct, are neither divided nor fused or mixed together.”

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<sup>1</sup> *Systematic Theology* (Zondervan, 1994), 226.

So, the three persons of the Trinity are distinct – eternally so. They’re not just flavors or modes that God has adopted at different stages in history. They have existed together as one God forever in total love, unity and delight.

So much for a definition; is it true? Question B, **How does Scripture teach the doctrine of the Trinity?**

Good question! You won’t find the word, “trinity,” anywhere in Scripture. It was actually first coined by Tertullian after the generation of the Apostles. But it’s a helpful word. It summarizes all that Scripture speaks regarding the relationship of the Godhead. The Bible clearly teaches that there is only one God, as we’ve already seen in the verses I’ve mentioned earlier. And yet it also teaches that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God. There isn’t much controversy that the Father is God: Jesus prays “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.”

But scripture teaches that the Son and Spirit are God too. We’ll explore all those verses in coming weeks when we look at the person of Christ and the person of the Holy Spirit. But here’s a brief preview: Jesus is the Word of God who “is God” according to John 1:1-4, who is called “Mighty God” according to Isaiah 9:6, and who is called “Our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” in Titus 2:13. The Son forgives sins and accepts worship, both of which only God could do. On the other hand, the Holy Spirit is present everywhere according to Psalm 139, comprehends and reveals God’s thoughts according to 1 Cor 2, creates life and new life according to Genesis 1 and John 3, and throughout scripture such things are only true of God.

Finally, there are several key passages where we see the three persons of the Trinity mentioned together and distinguished from one another.

*Matt 3:16:* And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; 17 and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

Here the three persons of the Godhead play distinct roles. God the Father speaks from heaven, God the Son is baptized to fulfill the Father’s will, and God the Spirit anoints the Son to empower his ministry.

Think also of Matt 28:19 – Jesus says, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Notice that Jesus doesn’t instruct his disciples to baptize new believers in the “names” of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, as if we were dealing with three different beings, but in the “name,” which is singular.

Perhaps the most wondrous place to see the Trinity in scripture is John 14-17. The climax is chapter 17, where we see the love that has characterized the Trinity for all time: Jesus prays in verse 24, “Father, I desire that they also [believers], whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.”

So, the Trinity is a biblical doctrine through and through. It's not something we could figure out on our own, and it has no analogy in nature. All the silly illustrations you hear about the three phases of water, or the three parts of an egg, they all break down eventually. The Trinity is beyond our ability to grasp fully, and yet it's been revealed as clearly true. And the fact that it has should be great comfort for us, which leads to one final question,

### **C. Why does the Trinity Matter?**

Simply put, the Triune nature of God shouldn't make us run away from God scratching our heads, but run to him as our loving Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver. The Trinity helps us understand that God isn't lonely. He didn't create the universe because he needed friendship. The Father, Son and Spirit already enjoyed perfect fellowship. Crucially, God didn't need to make us in order to be a loving God. A single-person God, like Allah in Islam, could never be eternally loving, for he would have no one else to love. He would, strangely, *need* his creation in order to be loving. God as Trinity, however, has always been a fountain of love, and it is only appropriate for the three persons of the Godhead to overflow in self-giving love toward us. As the Trinity, he saves us from our own self-love. That's what we see in Eph 1:3-14, easily one of the most glorious passages of scripture: the Father predestines us to be adopted as sons, the Son sheds his blood to redeem us, and the Spirit seals our inheritance. So, we should praise and love our triune God.

ANY QUESTIONS?

The last two topics have been focused on God's being or essence – let's turn now to a few attributes that deal more with God's knowledge.

### **3. God's Omniscience – His Perfect Knowledge**

Omniscient means "all knowing." In 1John 3.20 we read that, "[God] knows everything," the past, present, and future. But God not only knows what will happen, but what would happen if we were to have left for church an hour later and not come to core seminar. He knows the actual *and* the possible. Matthew 11.21 Jesus says, "*Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.*" It's one thing to know everything. But to know the actual *and* the possible outcomes of billions of people who make thousands of decisions each day - mind boggling.

God's knowledge isn't like ours. It's not obtained from experience or observation. God knows our every thought before we think it. He knows our every act before we do it. God knows when you were born because He knit you together in your mother's womb. And he knows when you're going to die because He has numbered your days. This means nothing *surprises* him. Surprises shake us to the core, but not God.

We don't know our future, but God does, which should motivate us to prayerful trust. Jesus says in Matt 6.31ff "Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'" 32 For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. 33 But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."

God answers prayer, but our prayers don't provide God with new information. God knows what we need, which means we don't need to panic as if God is unaware. Rather our prayers are the humble petitions of weak and needy people to the all wise, all powerful, all knowing God who delights to hear the needs of his children.

#### **4. Truthfulness**

God is true, and all of his knowledge and words are the final standard of truth. This means not only that everything God tells us is accurate, but that he will be faithful to all his promises. Thus Proverbs 30:5 reminds us, "Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him."

So my brothers and sisters, God is infinitely dependable. Satan will lie to you whenever he can to get you to distrust God. That's been his way since the garden. But God will never lie to you. Hebrews 6:18, it is impossible for God to lie.

Politicians, employers, and family members make promises all the time, and then break those promises. God *never* breaks a promise. When he promises to never leave you nor forsake you, he never will! When he says, "*I am going there to prepare a place for you. 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am*" (Jn 14.42), that's exactly what he's doing even now.

#### **5. Wisdom**

But God is also wise. Wisdom is the practical use of knowledge. It's knowledge applied. Thus God's wisdom means that God always chooses the best goals, and the best means to those goals. We'll talk about this in coming weeks when we study God's providence.

Scripture affirms this wisdom of God. Job says that God's wisdom is profound (Job 9:4) and that counsel and understanding are His (Job 12:13).

We can see this wisdom shown in creation. In Jeremiah 10:12-13 we read that, "*God made the earth by his power; he founded the world by his wisdom and stretched out the heavens by his understanding.*" We also see God's wisdom in the plan of redemption. God's wisdom and power are perfectly shown in the gospel where we see that "*the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God (1 Cor. 1:18).*" 1 Corinthians 1-3 is all about the wisdom of God in the gospel.

We thus are to reflect God in being wise. Wisdom isn't just something elders should have, or the super-spiritual should aspire to. The whole book of Proverbs commends wisdom, for God is wise and calls us to the joy and delight that we can know when we walk according to his wisdom.

*Any comments, questions?*

Let's now look at several attributes that speak to God's character and moral standards.

## **6. Holiness**

First, holiness. Holiness refers to God's "otherness," or his majesty. The fact that he's not like us. He's transcendent. It's the amazing vision of Isaiah 6, where seraphim cover their faces and exclaim, "*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, the whole earth is full of his glory.*"

Holiness also refers to God's "purity." He's ethically distinct from us, separate from sin. Which is why Isaiah will go on in that vision: "'*woe to me, I cried, for I am a man of unclean lips.*'" God is wholly unlike us, totally clean and radiant, without spot or blemish, pure and blameless.

And yet, though God in his holiness is totally unapproachable, he is also irresistibly beautiful. He is unstained by sin. He is the fountain of light. Jonathan Edwards said that holiness "is as it were the beauty and sweetness of the divine nature."<sup>2</sup> God's holiness is awe-inspiring, like standing before the Grand Canyon or Niagara Falls. It's overwhelming, but you can't look away! And why is his holiness so beautiful? Edwards brings us back to the Trinity – "The holiness of God consist[s] in his love, especially in the perfect and intimate union and love there is between the Father and the Son."<sup>3</sup> That's what's so irresistible and distinct about God: his perfect love.

As he is holy, so we are to be holy. Now the Pharisees saw holiness as what one *doesn't* do. Sadly, that's how a lot of people think about holiness. But when we look at the burning bush from Exodus 3, what makes that ground holy is God's presence. It's that he's entered into a relationship with his people. So holiness isn't first defined by what we do or don't do, but *to whom we belong*. *It's not just being separate from something, but devoted to somebody (God)*. Fundamentally, pursuing holiness – which we do because the *Holy Spirit* lives in us – is how we get to reveal every day that heaven is our hope. That we live for better desires, because we have a better savior.

## **7. Justice/Righteousness**

But God isn't only holy, but just and righteous. In common English we think of justice as "public," and righteousness as "private." But not so when it comes to God. Justice and

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<sup>2</sup> *Religious Affections*, in *Works*, 2:201, 347.

<sup>3</sup> "Writings on the Trinity, Grace, and Faith," in *Works*, 21:186.

righteousness stem from similar root words in Greek. They refer to strict adherence to a law or standard. God always is right and he always acts according to what is good, right, and just.

God's justice and righteousness are also our assurance that sins and wrongs will one day be dealt with. [*Mention most prominent crimes and acts of terrorism recently...*] But God is righteous. He will judge. So we need not finally despair. Romans 12:19, “*Vengeance is mine, I will repay, ’ says the Lord.*”

Of course, God's justice applies to all without favoritism – including us. He will deal with us according to our adherence or lack of conformity to his laws. And that is why he sent Christ to be a sacrifice for sinners. God's Son himself received the sentence of justice that we deserved. Romans 3:25: “God put [Christ Jesus] forward as a propitiation 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. 26 It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

## 8. Goodness/Love

Finally, God is a God of goodness and love. He is perfectly good. He always does what is best, and is the source of all that is good. In James 1:17 we read that “*Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father.*”

God's goodness manifests itself in several ways. He is benevolent and cares for his creation in his common grace, as we see in Psalm 147. God's goodness is also demonstrated in his love and grace towards the undeserving. It's shown in his long-suffering; He is slow to anger (Exod. 34:6).

By way of application, what does God's goodness mean for us? Think of all the ways that we doubt God's goodness. When we sin. When we fear for the future. When we fear men more than God. When we worry. God's goodness invites us to cast our cares on him because he cares for us. It reminds us that he will *always* do what is best. He is a good God.

When it comes to **love**, we have a difficult time thinking biblically. Today people aren't surprised when you tell them “God loves you.” But they're furious when you tell them God is a holy and righteous judge. That's because we've separated divine love from the other complementary truths about God. Yes, he is loving, but he always loves in harmony with his righteousness.

When Scripture speaks to God's love, it refers to it in at least four different ways. This comes from Don Carson's extremely helpful book, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*, which is short and easy to read.

1. First, there's the unique intra-trinitarian love between the Father, Son and Spirit.

2. Second, God's providential love over all he has made. Genesis 1, he made all of creation good. Matthew 6, he feeds even the sparrows.
3. Third is God's salvific stance toward a fallen world. John 3:16 – He showed his love for the world by sending Christ, and he lovingly invites all to repent.
4. But fourth, scripture also highlights God's particular, effective, selecting love toward his elect – in passages like Deuteronomy 7, Ephesians 1, 1 John 4:10, and many more.

So we don't want to absolutize any one of these ways of talking about God's love. God's love isn't sentimental and warm feelings. God's love refers to how he tenderly seeks the good of his creatures. And where can that good be found? Only in God himself. In his love, he gives himself. In his love, he draws us away from ourselves and to himself. And as he makes us like himself, we find that we love him and love others, just as Jesus taught: *"By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."* John 13.35

## Conclusion

God's attributes reveal his *transcendence* and *immanence*. To a first century Jew transcendence was a given: meaning, God is holy, set apart, totally distinct from us. Today, God is largely thought of as exclusively immanent: He is here, present, comforting us. It's casual. God's our buddy, our friend, someone we hang with.

These attributes help us understand that God is both immanent and transcendent. He is immanent in Christ, in the indwelling and loving presence of the Holy Spirit. But God is still God, there is no one like him, pure and righteous and powerful. He invokes awe and wonder. So we must respect God, and yet God invites us into relationship with him as well. So before you leave, ask yourself this one question. *In light of all this, why would you be tempted to place your affections, your security, your well-being in anyone else than our glorious God?*

## PRAY