

What We Believe: Knowing and Loving our Doctrines

Adult Sunday Studies 2023-24

5 | Doctrine of God - Beholding the Attributes of God

BEHOLDING WHO GOD IS

"We are all starved for the glory of God, not self. No one goes to the Grand Canyon to increase self-esteem. Why do we go? Because there is greater healing for the soul in beholding splendor than there is in beholding self... The point is this: We were made to know and treasure the glory of God above all things; and when we trade that treasure for images, everything is disordered. The sun of God's glory was made to shine at the center of the solar system of our soul. And when it does, all the planets of our life are held in their proper orbit. But when the sun is displaced, everything flies apart. The healing of the soul begins by restoring the glory of God to its flaming, all-attracting place at the center." - John Piper

Getting Started - Qualifications to Help Us Discuss the Being of God

1. ***Order of Knowing*** - Note that we must learn the attributes NOT from what we know, say, about love and then apply that to God; but rather learn what love is from God, and then apply that to what we know. The order or direction is crucial, lest we define God according to our categories, rather than the other way around! Only God can reveal God. Only God can define who and how God is.
2. ***Our language of God is always, as humans, analogical.*** It is not univocal - we don't know God as God knows Himself; but neither is it equivocal - as if our use of "good" is so unlike how God is "good." Praise God that He chose to reveal himself in a true way, yet in a way humans can understand!
3. ***Properly approaching God as incomprehensible mystery*** - "The true goal of theological inquiry is not the resolution of theological *problems* but the discernment of what the *mystery* of faith is. Because God, who can never be fully comprehended, lies at the heart of all theological enquiry, theology by

its nature is not a problem solving enterprise, but rather a mystery discerning enterprise." - Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*

1. Major heresies always try to resolve the problem as if the mystery can be dispelled and God can be comprehended.

4. *Posture of Receiving Truths Passed Down*

1. Innovative ways of thinking about God - similar to innovative interpretations of Scripture - are almost always wrong. We seek to receive what has already been declared to be true and, if necessary, explain in a way that's more understandable. For example, the early Church didn't *invent* the concept of the Trinity, they discovered that it was there all along revealed in Scripture, and needed to be explained in light of new misunderstandings.

5. *Never Forgetting the Trinity* - we must always remember the centrality of Christ sent by the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit. These discussions are not meant to be vain philosophical speculations apart from the revelation of God in Scripture. Let us keep Jesus Christ always in mind.
6. *The Thrilling Romance of Orthodoxy* - "[Christianity makes one] more angry with theft than before, and yet much kinder to thieves than before. There was room for wrath and love to run wild. St. Francis, in praising all good, could be a more shouting optimist than Walt Whitman. St. Jerome, in denouncing all evil, could paint the world blacker than Schopenhauer. Sometimes this pure gentleness and this pure fierceness met and justified their juncture; the lion lay down with the lamb. But remember that this text is [often] too lightly interpreted, that when the lion lies down with the lamb the lion becomes lamb-like. But that is brutal annexation and imperialism on the part of the lamb. That is simply the lamb absorbing the lion instead of the lion eating the lamb. **The real problem is--Can the lion lie down with the lamb and still retain his royal ferocity?** THAT is the problem the Church attempted; THAT is the miracle she achieved. . . . People have fallen into a foolish habit of speaking of orthodoxy as something heavy, humdrum, and safe. There never was anything so perilous or so exciting as orthodoxy. The orthodox church never took the tame course or accepted the conventions; the orthodox Church was never respectable. It would have been easier to have accepted the earthly

power of the Arians. It is easy to be a madman: it is easy to be a heretic. It is always easy to let the age have its head; the difficult thing is to keep one's own. . . . **It is always simple to fall; there are an infinity of angles at which one falls, only one at which one stands.** To have fallen into any one of the fads from Gnosticism to Christian Science would indeed have been obvious and tame. But to have avoided them all has been one whirling adventure; and in my vision the heavenly chariot flies thundering through the ages, the dull heresies sprawling and prostrate, the wild truth reeling but erect." - GK Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*

The Attributes of God - let us read this devotionally!

WCF II.1. There is but one only, living, and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions; immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute; working all things according to the counsel of his own immutable and most righteous will, for his own glory; most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek him; and withal, most just, and terrible in his judgments, hating all sin, and who will by no means clear the guilty.

II.2. God hath all life, glory, goodness, blessedness, in and of himself; and is alone in and unto himself all-sufficient, not standing in need of any creatures which he hath made, nor deriving any glory from them, but only manifesting his own glory in, by, unto, and upon them. He is the alone fountain of all being, of whom, through whom, and to whom are all things; and hath most sovereign dominion over them, to do by them, for them, or upon them whatsoever himself pleaseth. In his sight all things are open and manifest, his knowledge is infinite, infallible, and independent upon the creature, so as nothing is to him contingent, or uncertain. He is most holy in all his counsels, in all his works, and in all his commands. To him is due from angels and men, and every other creature, whatsoever worship, service, or obedience he is pleased to require of them.

- A Key Text - Exod. 34.5-9 - *"The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. 6 The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to*

anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, 7 keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." 8 And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped. 9 And he said, "If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, please let the Lord go in the midst of us, for it is a stiff-necked people, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance."

- Notice the context of the biblical text is not a sterile lesson of defining who God is, it is revealing Himself to Moses in the context of salvation from Egypt and establishing His presence with His people

The Attributes of God

1. **Incommunicable Attributes** - belong only to God alone, they make him God and he does not share ("communicate") them with his creatures. *"He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen. (1 Tim. 6:15-16).*
1. **Simplicity:** God is not made up of different "parts." His attributes are identical with his being. On the one hand, his attributes are not the same: his love is not his justice. On the other hand, you cannot rank God's attributes: his love is not greater than his sovereignty, for example.
 1. How can we reconcile section 1's statements concerning God's "most loving...forgiving iniquity" and God's "most just and terrible judgments...by no means clear the guilty"? The Cross!
 2. "If God should be composed of parts—of components that were prior to Him in being—He would be doubly dependent: first, on the parts, and, second, on the composer of the parts. But God is absolute in being, alone the sufficient reason for Himself and all other beings, and so cannot in any respect derive His being from another. Because God cannot depend on what is not God in order to be God, theologians traditionally insist that **all that is in God is God**. In His essence, it is not one thing to be good, another to be wise, another to be powerful, and so on. Properly speaking, God is good by virtue of God, not goodness. The distinctions we make among the attributes in our God-talk follow from the manner in which God's perfection is **revealed**, not

from the manner in which it exists in Him. Each attribute, in its distinction from all others, enables us to glimpse a sliver of the perfect fullness of God's being. The *manner* in which we know and talk about His perfection does not—indeed, cannot!—correspond univocally to the way God is in Himself. Rather, **in revelation He refracts through the prism of creation and history His perfect fullness of simple being.** What is simple in Him thus appears to us under the form of a spectrum of distinct virtues.” - James Dolezal

2. **Aseity:** God is self-existent. In short, God doesn't need the world, yet the world needs God. The world is not necessary for God's happiness. "Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases" (Psalm 115:3)
 1. How can this be good news? What does it tell us about his love?

3. **Unchangeability:** If we define change as either improvement or loss, God cannot be eternally perfect and change.
 1. What are we to do with passages that seem to show God reacting or being affected? God relents when Nineveh repents (Jonah 3:10). God regrets having made Saul king (1 Samuel 15:11).
 2. God's unchangeability does not mean that he is untouched or unprovoked. He isn't distant or removed from his creation like the Stoic or Deistic god. Yet, he is not overcome by surprise or anger. Why is this good news?
 3. "[It's not] that *despite* God's impassability he is nonetheless loving and kind, but rather precisely *because* he is impassible that he is loving and kind. I want to argue in this study that *only* an impassible God, and not a passible God, is truly and fully personal, absolutely and utterly loving, and thoroughly capable of interacting with human persons in time and history." - Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*
 1. In other words, because God is wholly unlike us and wholly transcendent, can He be utterly near and compassionate. The wonderful mystery is that the very same God who is unchanging and impassible became fully human. One is not like the other because God's nature does not compete with human nature on the same "plane." [we'll come back to this in the Trinity and Person of Christ]

4. ***Eternal and Omnipresent:*** God transcends both time and place. God can be present with us and for us in all circumstances.

1. God is a Spirit (John 4:24)...He does not have a body like humans.

What implications does this have for us?

1. Note: Scripture will use images to help us relate to him (God has a listening ear, mighty arm, powerful hand).

2. **Communicable Attributes**

1. G.I. Williamson explains that this distinction is like a person and her mirror image. There are some things that are communicated, but others that belong only to the real person.

2. God is a being (Ex. 3:14), wisdom (Ps. 147:5), power (Rev. 4:8), holiness (Rev. 15:4), justice, goodness, and truth (Exod. 34:6-7).

3. We know these attributes more intimately than the incommunicable, yet God has all of these in an unlimited degree, and He sets the terms for what they mean *first*.

3. **Remembering the Purpose for all this - Praise!**

1. "I never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise. The world rings with praise — lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favorite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favorite game... Men spontaneously praise whatever they value, so they spontaneously urge us to join them in praising it: "Wasn't it glorious? Don't you think that magnificent?" Indeed we can't help doing it...because praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation." - C.S. Lewis

How ought this to impact our prayer, character, and community?