

Theology for Life
Faith Presbyterian Church
Lesson 5: God's Attributes

Last time: *The Holy Spirit has worked in Christians throughout the centuries to help shed light on the correct interpretation of Scripture. Creeds and Confessions help us steer clear of errors we would make as individual interpreters.*

Do you and your non-Christian friends mean the same thing when they use the word "god"? If there is a difference, what is it?

The Attributes of God

God's attributes refer to the qualities that belong to God mentioned in the Bible. These are generally classified in two groups.

Incommunicable: Attributes that belong to God alone. No one else in creation has these same attributes.

Communicable: Attributes that people have in common with God. God has these qualities in an unlimited degree. We have them only in a limited way.

Incomprehensible

Westminster Confession of Faith II.1a

*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**...*

Incomprehensible does not mean that he is unknowable, rather it means that we can't fully comprehend him. His is not like us. He is qualitatively different.

- Rom. 11:33 *O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 34 "For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" 35 "Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return?" 36 For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen.*
- Job 11:7 *"Can you find out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limit of the Almighty? 8 It is higher than heaven--what can you do? Deeper than Sheol--what can you know? 9 Its measure is longer than the earth, and broader than the sea.*
- Job 26:14 *These are indeed but the outskirts of his ways; and how small a whisper do we hear of him! But the thunder of his power who can understand?"*
- Ps. 145:1 *I will extol you, my God and King, and bless your name forever and ever. 2 Every day I will bless you, and praise your name forever and ever. 3 Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; his greatness is unsearchable.*

J.I. Packer writes, "God is not the sort of person that we are; his wisdom, his aims, his scale of values, his mode of procedure differ so vastly from our own that we cannot possibly guess our

way to them by intuition or infer them by analogy from our notion of ideal manhood. We cannot know him unless he speaks and tells us about himself."

Therefore, we can't simply understand God by taking human characteristics and maximizing them. God isn't known by contemplating what a perfect being would be like in all of his characteristics. We must know God as he has revealed himself.

What are some ways we confuse God's being with ours? How does that lead to misunderstanding?

God is a spirit, without a body: Sometimes the Bible speaks anthropomorphically about God. His arm saves. His ear hears. But God does not have a body.

What about the incarnation? We will talk more about this under the Doctrine of Christ. Christ is fully God and fully human. His divine and human natures are whole, perfect, and distinct (without conversion, composition, or confusion).

Without Parts (Divine Simplicity): God's attributes are identical with his being. God's attributes are interrelated and never in conflict with each other: For example, his love and justice are perfectly aligned in the cross. This doesn't mean that all attributes are the same.

One attribute doesn't outrank the other; they both reflect his one being. God never wrestles with being omnipotent or kind. When we emphasize one over the other (sovereignty over love), we are becoming idolatrous, not more honoring to God

Independence: God's existence doesn't depend on anyone or anything.

This doesn't mean that God is detached or disinterested in the events of the world. God loves the world, but he doesn't need the world to exist or to be satisfied.

Is the fact that God doesn't need you bad news? How do you teach this to kids?

"Whatever relationship God chooses to have to that which is other than God is free rather than necessary...The covenantal relationship, in which the transcendent God condescends to bind himself free to creatures, exhibits the utter freedom of God's love and the significance of those he created in his own image for that relationship." Michael Horton

Immutable: God doesn't change.

Immutability implies that God is eternally perfect. Change involves either improvement or loss, but God remains the same.

"One should not be misled into thinking that God's immutability is like the immutability of a rock only more so...God is unchangeable not because he is inert or static like a rock, but for

just the opposite reason. He is so dynamic, so active that no change can make him more active.” Thomas Weinandy

The persons of the Trinity are immutable not because they are static or inert in their relationships, but precisely the opposite. They are constantly interacting, in their self-giving to one another without loss or change.

What about passages where it says God relents? What about prayer?

God may choose to work out his sovereign will apart from our decisions, in accord with our actions, over against our actions, or even contingent upon our behavior and prayers. He is free to act as he wills.

Weinandy explains how God can express different emotions and yet remain completely unchanged:

“If a person sins, he or she knows and experiences God’s love as a rebuke and as an admonishment. If the person repents, he or she knows and experiences God’s love as compassionate and forgiving, and so rejoices in his merciful love. If a person suffers due to injustice, he or she knows, in faith and sometimes by experience, that God’s lovingkindness and consolation are present. God’s love as fully actualized is ‘ready made’ to meet any situation, and human beings are able to know and experience this love in all its varied actualized fulness.”

Without Passion: God doesn’t suffer.

Scripture clearly depicts God as a God of passions and emotions. He loves, grieves, becomes angry, jealous, and shows compassion. And, doesn’t God suffer on the cross?

Again, this does not mean that God is aloof and Stoic. It does, however, mean that he is consistently true to himself.

“To say that God does not suffer means not only that he does not feel any physical pain, since he is not corporeal, but also that he does not undergo some passible changes of state whereby he experiences some form of divine emotional agitation, anguish, agony, or distress. God is never in a state of inner angst.” Weinandy

Horton writes, *“God is not like the pagan deities, which were little more than exalted human beings. Determined by their passing whims and passions, the gods could without notice range from beneficent aid to benign neglect to drunken rage. Slaves of their lust, greed, and power, they could also exhibit virtue on occasion.”*

Is this good news? Does a God who does not suffer mean a God that lacks empathy? It is far more palatable for God to know suffering when you are going through the horrors of personal suffering or global injustice.

“Actually, since God does not suffer, his love becomes absolutely free in its expression and supremely pure his purpose. If God did suffer, it would mean that God would need not only alleviate the suffering of others, but also his own suffering, unless there would be an inbuilt

self-interest in God's loving and consolation. However, since God does not suffer, his care for those who do suffer is freely given and not evoked by some need on his part. His love is freely expressed entirely for the sake of those he loves." Weinandy

Even better news: We know that God will not be overcome by rage or jealousy to destroy us. He will not sway from one emotion to the next, leaving us guessing at his mindset.

Immense and Eternal: God transcends space and time.

This is a difficult concept to wrap our minds around. It is true that he can be everywhere, but also with us. He can be in all time, yet present.

Communicable Attributes

What is the value of knowing that we share some of the same attributes as God? God has them in greater degree, but sharing them can be another way we relate to God.

Wisdom: Discerning right from wrong, good and evil.

Knowledge: God knows all truth. His perspective on all things is the true perspective.

Power: God's ability to act. He is all powerful. Can God do anything? Can God create a rock so heavy that even he cannot lift it?

God can do anything that does not contradict his character, his covenant, or his decrees.

Holiness: God's holiness is separation from all unrighteousness and injustice. This doesn't mean that God is unable to relate to us.

"It is fatally easy to think of God's holiness simply as a mode of God's sheer otherness and transcendence—that is, as the opposite of relational; as concerned, not with God with us, but God with God apart from us...God is holy precisely as the one who in majesty and freedom and sovereign power bends down to us in mercy." John Webster

In the gospel, God uses his holiness to make us holy.

Righteousness: God is unable to sin.

Justice: God doesn't play favorites. He is committed to what is right.

Jealousy: It is right for God to be jealous, because we belong to him.

Wrath: God's holy response to sin.

Goodness: God is that standard of good.

Love: God's love utterly free. He does not need our love, but offers his without obligation.

Mercy: God's favor toward those who deserve wrath.

Connecting the Dots: Where Theology meets Life

Summary: God is like us in many ways. These qualities help us to know him and guide us to act like him. He is, however, unlike us in many ways. Confusing these incommunicable attributes will lead us to believe wrong and harmful things about God.

- What are common mistakes in believing God is like us?
- How do you teach these attributes to children?