

Foundations of Christian Theology

Lesson 4

The Attributes of God: What is God Like?

Objective: To recover and restore the centrality and weightiness of God as God in our lives, by understanding his incommunicable and communicable attributes.

I. Review

II. Orientation

What do people typically mean when they say “God”?



If someone came into our worship service and said, “What are you doing?” we would say, “Worshipping God.” If the person then asked, “What is your God like?” how would we answer?

“What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us... For this reason the gravest question before the Church is always God Himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like... This is true not only of the individual Christian, but of the company of Christians that composes the Church. Always the most revealing thing about the Church is her idea of God, just as her most significant message is what she says about Him or leaves unsaid, for her silence is often more eloquent than her speech.” – A.W. Tozer (1897-1963), *Knowledge of the Holy*

“In no other subject is error more dangerous, or inquiry more laborious, or the discovery of truth more profitable.” – Augustine (354-430), *On the Trinity*

“Christianity is not primarily about lifestyle change; it is about knowing God. To know and grow and enjoy him is what we are saved *for*.” – Michael Reeves (living), *Delighting in the Trinity*, 10

III. What Is God Like?

The first thing to note about God is that he is a God of revelation.

In what way does God tell us about himself?

Not direct, unfiltered, transparent revelation (Ex. 33:20; Jn. 1:18; 1 Tim. 6:16). Instead, God has spoken to us *analogically* (cf., archetypal theology vs ectypal theology).

“The Scriptural teaching concerning God’s infinite and spiritual essence ought to be enough, not only to banish popular delusions, but also to refute the subtleties of secular philosophy... But even if God, to keep us sober, speaks sparingly of his essence, yet by those two titles that I have used he both banishes stupid imaginings and restrains the boldness of the human mind. Surely his infinity ought to make us afraid to try to measure him by our own senses. Indeed, his spiritual nature forbids our imagining anything earthly or carnal of him... For who, even of slight intelligence, does not understand that, as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to lisp in speaking to us? Thus, such forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like as accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity. To do this he must descend far beneath his loftiness.” – John Calvin (1509-1564), *Institutes*, 1.13.1

“God explicitly forbids univocal comparisons (Nu 23:19; 1Sa 15:29; Isa 40:25; 44:8-9; 46:5; Hos 11:9)” – Michael Horton (1964-Present), *The Christian Faith*, 240

Numbers 23:19, God is not man, that he should lie,
or a son of man, that he should change his mind.
Has he said, and will he not do it?
Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?

1 Samuel 15:29, And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret. (cf. Hos. 11:9)

Isaiah 46:5, To whom will you liken me and make me equal,
and compare me, that we may be alike?

Exodus 3:13-14, Then Moses said to God, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”

IV. Attributes

WLC Q. 7. What is God?

A. God is a Spirit, in and of himself infinite in being, glory, blessedness, and perfection; all-sufficient, eternal, unchangeable, incomprehensible, everywhere present, almighty, knowing all things, most wise, most holy, most just, most merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth.

“Those attributes can properly be called incommunicable strictly and in every way, which are so proper to God that nothing similar or analogous, or any image and trace can be found in creatures. Such are the negative attributes which remove from him whatever is imperfect in creatures (such as infinity, immensity, eternity, which are such that every creature is either without them or has their contraries). But others are not badly termed communicable (of which there is some appearance or certain faint vestiges in creatures) and by simple analogy of name and effects. Such are the affirmative attributes which are attributed to God by way of eminence or causality.” – Francis Turretin (1623-1687), *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:190

A. Incommunicable Attributes¹

Attribute	Description
Simplicity (Unity)	As infinite spirit, God is not made up of different parts; his attributes are identical with his being; God is not the sum total of his attributes but is simultaneously everything that all of his attributes reveal; God’s attributes also cannot be ranked or one made more “essential” to God than another
Aseity (Self-Existence)	Independence from his creation; God has no need outside of himself, rather he has life, blessedness, goodness, and all things in and of himself
Immutability	God is pure act, with no potential; he is pure being, never becoming; because he is perfect in every way, his essence does not and cannot change
Impassibility	God is not subject to anything outside of himself; he cannot suffer or be overwhelmed by what he has created
Eternity	God transcends the very category of time; this is not a denial of his involvement in time, rather he freely involves himself in time as one who is not restricted by it as creatures are
Immensity (Omnipresence, Invisibility)	This attribute is really a collection of truths; it includes several denials—God does not have a body, is not restricted by space as creatures are, and cannot be seen as material things can be

¹ The two charts in this outline are largely taken from Michael Horton, *Pilgrim Theology*, 74-88, though I have made some changes.

- **Simplicity (Unity)**

Definition: As infinite spirit, God is not made up of different parts; his attributes are identical with his being. God is not the sum total of his attributes and his attributes aren't added on to some other divine essence—God's attributes tell us what it means that he is God; God's attributes also cannot be ranked or one made more "essential" to God than another.

"Though we are almost driven to think in terms of divine attributes as entities in themselves (thus we see love, righteousness, and holiness as abstractable qualities), the truth is that God is simple in his being. He is all that he is in everything that he is."
— Sinclair Ferguson (1948-Present), *Holy, Holy, Holy: Proclaiming the Perfections of God*, 20

"Attributes are not ascribed to God properly as something superadded to his essence (something accidental to the subject), making it perfect and really distinct from himself; but improperly... inasmuch as they indicate perfections essential to the divine nature conceived by us as properties." — Francis Turretin (1623-1687), 1:187

This means that there is not some idea of "god-ness" to which infinity, omniscience, love, wisdom, etc. are added. God's attributes are identical to his being. This means that all that is in God is God, and all that he is is essential to his being God.

Also, this means that each attribute is inseparable from the other. God's love is a holy and righteous love. It is also an omniscient and self-sufficient love. His knowledge and power are good knowledge and loving and wise power. His patience is a patience that is not at odds with his justice or his wisdom, and it is also an immutable patience.

But it also means that God's attributes are not ranked. Yes, "God is love" (1 Jn. 4:8), but also, God is holy (Lev. 19:2) and "God is a consuming fire, a jealous God" (Deut. 4:24; cf. Ex. 20:5), and he is "abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ex. 34:6).

- **Aseity (Self-Existence)**

Definition: God is independent of his creation. God has no need of something outside of himself; rather, he has infinite life, blessedness, goodness, and all things in and of himself.

Acts 17:24-25, The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

Psalm 50:8-12, Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you;
your burnt offerings are continually before me.
I will not accept a bull from your house
or goats from your folds.
For every beast of the forest is mine,
the cattle on a thousand hills.
I know all the birds of the hills,
and all that moves in the field is mine.
If I were hungry, I would not tell you,
for the world and its fullness are mine.

Romans 11:35-36, Or who has given a gift to [God] that he might be repaid? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

John 5:26, For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself.

God does not need anything. He did not create the world because he was lonely or needed humans to be his slaves or because he was bored. He has no lack.

A corollary to God's aseity is his eternal blessedness or happiness (see Rom. 1.25; 9.5; 2 Cor. 11.31; 1 Tim. 6.15-16).

1 Chronicles 29:10-13, Blessed are you, O LORD, the God of Israel our father, forever and ever. Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might, and in your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. And now we thank you, our God, and praise your glorious name.

- **Immutability** (*im* – negation; *mutare* – to change)

Definition: God is pure act, with no potential. He is pure being, never becoming. Because he is perfect in every way, his essence does not and cannot change.

God, being perfect in all that he is, does not change. This is true of his essence (Jas. 1:17; Ps. 102:26-27; Heb. 6:13-18), of his character (Mal. 3:6-7; Heb. 6:13-18; Heb. 13:8), and of his plans/purposes (Ps. 33:11; Is. 14:24; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28).²

² For those who wonder how to understand God's seeming changes of mind in light of this doctrine, I would suggest Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 235-242. I can send you a scan of those pages if you ask.

James 1:17, Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

Psalms 102:26-27, They will perish, but you will remain;
they will all wear out like a garment.
You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away,
but you are the same, and your years have no end.

Hebrews 6:13-18, For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, "Surely I will bless you and multiply you." And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise. For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.

Malachi 3:6, For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.

Hebrews 13:8, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

"The essence of God by which he is what he is, possesses nothing changeable, neither in eternity, nor in truthfulness, nor in will." – Augustine (354-430), *On the Trinity*

"The doctrine of God's immutability is highly significant for religion. The difference between the Creator and the creature hinges on the contrast between being and becoming." – Herman Bavinck (1854-1921), *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:156

Question: What is hard about this understanding of God? What would be hard about the alternative—believing that God does change?

- **Impassibility** (*in* – negation; *passio* – suffering)

Definition: God is not subject to anything outside of himself. He cannot suffer or be overwhelmed by what he has created.

This is a logical consequence of God's aseity. If God is independent of his creation, then he cannot be overwhelmed by any part of that creation in either a negative or a positive sense.

While emotions are ascribed to God, we must remember that there is not a univocal relation between divine and human emotions, but an analogical relation (i.e., his anger is not our anger, his sorrow is not our sorrow, his joy is not our joy).

“God’s free decision to enter into creaturely history never threatens his essential transcendence. God is always “other” even when he is near. God shares in the joys and sorrows of his people, but he is never *overwhelmed by distress*... As the Covenant Lord, God is jealous and even filled with wrath when his covenant is violated, but is never *overwhelmed by emotion*.” – Michael Horton (1964-Present), *The Christian Faith*, 251

This ought to be an encouragement to us. God is not subject to our actions and the events of the world like we are. It is good to know that he hears our cries and cares for us in our distress, but that news would not be good if he were affected by those things in the same way we are. No, it is only about an impassible God about whom the faithful could say,

Psalm 46:1-3, God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way,
though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble at its swelling.³

- **Eternity**

Definition: God transcends the very category of time. This is not a denial of his involvement in time; rather, he freely involves himself in time as one who is not restricted by it as creatures are.

God is not bound by time (Deut. 33:27; Ps. 90:1-12; Is 40:27-31; cf. Rom. 16:26; Heb. 9:14). The doctrine of God’s eternity teaches that God transcends time. Time is a creaturely category, and even though God enters into it, he is not subjected to it in the way we are.

- **Immensity (Omnipresence, Invisibility)**

Definition: This attribute is really a collection of truths. It includes several denials—God does not have a body, is not restricted by space as creatures are, and cannot be seen as all material things can be.

Just as God is not bound by time, he is not bound by space. Both are creaturely categories that the Creator is not subject to. Scripture teaches and talks about this in a

³ For those who still struggle with how to understand this doctrine, I would suggest “Does God Suffer?” by Thomas Weinandy (<https://www.firstthings.com/article/2001/11/does-god-suffer>) or *Rejoicing in Lament* by J. Todd Billings (Brazos, 2015), especially pages 149-167. I can send you scans of those pages if you ask.

few different ways. Both God’s immensity (1 Kgs. 8:27) and his omnipresence (Ps. 139:7-12; Jer. 23:23-24) teach that he is not bound to a location like we are. His invisibility (Col. 1:15; 1 Tim. 1:17; Heb. 11:27) is related to his not having a body (John 4:24). We are prone to think of this as a negation, but Scripture actually connects God’s invisibility to his incomprehensibility (Ex. 33:20; 1 Tim. 6:16; Deut. 4:9-24).

B. Communicable Attributes

All the communicable attributes are *analogical*; he is not just more loving or righteous or knowledgeable than me (quantitative); his love and knowledge and righteousness are of a different kind than mine (qualitative).

“The communicable attributes are not predicated of God and creatures univocally because there is not the same relation as in things simply univocal agreeing in name and definition. Nor are they predicated equivocally because there is not a totally diverse relation, as in things merely equivocal agreeing only in name. They are predicated analogically, by analogy both of similitude and of attribution... So these attributes may be predicated of God essentially and in a manner plainly singular (i.e., infinitely and most perfectly) and so also in the abstract. In this sense, God alone is said to be good (Mt. 19:17), i.e., originally, independently, essentially; but concerning creatures only secondarily, accidentally and participatively. Believers are said to be partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4) not univocally (by a formal participation of the divine essence), but only analogically (by benefit of regeneration which impresses upon them the marks of holiness and righteousness most properly belonging to God, since they are renewed after the image of their Creator, Col. 3:10).” – Francis Turretin (1623-1687), 1:190

Attribute	Description
Knowledge	Possession of truth, including contingencies; in God’s case, knowledge of all things from eternity—includes free acts of creatures
Wisdom	The power to discern truth from error and righteousness from unrighteousness, and to make deliberate choices that eventuate in good rather than evil
Truth	Both in an ethical sense (fidelity, faithfulness) and in a logical sense (knowing and communicating how things really are)
Power	Ability to act as a free agent; in God’s case, comprehensive freedom as Lord of all
Goodness	Faithful to his own character, God also seeks the welfare of his people
Love	Favor toward and regard for the other; mutually interdependent in the case of human beings, but utterly free of the need for reciprocity in God’s case

Mercy	God's goodness and love exercised toward those who deserve his wrath, specifically in not giving them the evil that is due to them
Grace	God's goodness and love exercised toward those who deserve his wrath, specifically in giving them the good that they have not deserved
Patience (Longsuffering)	God's goodness and love exercised toward those who deserve his wrath, specifically in restraining his wrath for much longer than they deserve
Holiness	As glory is a weightiness (significance), holiness is a separateness from all unrighteousness and injustice; for God, it is both an ontological uniqueness and an ethical purity
Righteousness	Similar to justice, righteousness is integrity; in God's case, an inability to sin
Justice	Conforming desires, actions, and judgments to the standard of truth rather than expediency, favoritism, or personal advantage; in God's case, absolute commitment to what is right and to judging transgressors of that standard
Jealousy	Demanding what rightfully belongs to you; human jealousy is often really covetousness (demanding what is not yours), but God's jealousy is always right

- **Knowledge, Wisdom, Truth [Intellectual Attributes]**

Knowledge: God's knows everything there is to know

- All facts about his creation (Is. 40:12; Ps. 147:4; Matt. 10:30)
- What we do in secret (Matt 6:4,18)
- Our thoughts and intents of the heart (Ps. 139:1-2; Heb. 4:12; Acts 15:8; Mt. 9:4; 12:25; Lk. 9:47)
- Words before we say them (Ps. 139:4)
- What we need (Mt. 6:8,32; Rom. 8:26)
- Things that will happen before they happen [i.e., foreknowledge] (1 Sam. 23:10-13; Isa. 42:9; 46:10; 1 Pt. 1:2; Acts 2:23; Jn. 13:19)
- Things that could have happened if he would have done things differently [i.e., contingent knowledge] (Matt. 11:21,23)
- Himself perfectly (Matt. 11:27; Lk. 10:22; Jn. 10:15; 17:25; Rom. 8:26)

Wisdom: God knows perfectly what actions are best

- Romans 11:33-34; Job 21:22; Is. 40:13; 1 Cor. 2:16

Truth: God is true in a logical sense (knowing and communicating how things really are)

- Num. 23:19; Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18; Rom. 3:4

Truth: God is also true in an ethical sense (fidelity, faithfulness):

- Deut. 7:9; Ps. 36:5; 2 Tim. 2:13
- This ethical truth is also related to the term *hesed* (which the ESV often translates “steadfast love”), which focuses on God’s covenant faithfulness:
 - Gen. 39:21; Ex. 15:13; 34:6; Deut. 7:9; Ps. 136

- **Power, Will [Attributes of Sovereignty]**

Power is a reference to God’s ability (nothing is impossible for him, nothing is too difficult for him).

Will is a reference to God’s desires or intentions. We see this attribute anywhere that God’s plans or purposes are referenced.

Sovereignty is the truth that God’s will (i.e., what God desires to do) and his power (i.e. what God is able to do) are never at odds with one another. He is not a frustrated God.

- **Ps. 115:3**, Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.
- **Ps. 135:6**, Whatever the LORD pleases, he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps.
- **Job 41:1-2**, Then Job answered the LORD and said: “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.”
- **Dan. 4:35**, All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he [God] does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, “What have you done?”
- **Rom. 9:19**, Who can resist his will?

- **Goodness, Love, Mercy, Grace, Patience [Moral Attributes]**

“Grace, mercy, and long-suffering are the form that God’s love and goodness take in relation to sinners.” – Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 268

A reminder: God’s communicable attributes are not predicated of God and creatures univocally, but only analogically (remember Turretin above). What this means is that God’s love is not simply quantitatively different than the love of humans (i.e., it’s like my love but more intense and more consistent) but qualitatively different (i.e., of a different kind).

“God loves absolutely and without any compulsion from the object of his love... Only God can love in absolute freedom, desiring the other without needing the other.” – Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 266

“The love of man comes into being through that which is pleasing to it. The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it.” – Martin Luther, Heidelberg Disputation, 1518

In other words, God’s love is of a kind that only an infinite, immutable, impassible, and self-sufficient being could have.

- **Holiness, Righteousness/Justice, Jealousy [Moral Attributes]**

“Like mercy, grace, and patience, jealousy and wrath are aroused only in the context of an offense. God does not need to display these attributes in order to be who he is, but they are the response we would expect from the kind of God who is good, just, and holy.” – Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 270

“With this God, it is not as if sometimes he *has* love and sometimes he *has* wrath, as if those are different moods so that when he’s feeling one he’s not feeling the other...Like God’s holiness, then, his wrath is not something that sits awkwardly next to his love. Nor is it something unrelated to his love. God is angry at evil *because* he loves.” – Michael Reeves (Living), *Delighting in the Trinity*, 117-18

Discussion Questions

- **Inward Application:** Which attribute(s) of God warm your affections for God the most? Which ones make it hardest for you to relate to God?
- **Outward Application:** How does understanding God’s attributes help you with talking about God to non-Christians?
- **Basic Understanding:** Clarifying questions.
- **Further Understanding:** Discuss the impassibility of God. How does this help you read Scripture with more clarity?
- **Reading Scripture:** Exodus 34.