SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY: REVELATION AND GOD
Week Nine: God’s Attributes, Part 2

Introduction and Review

This is the ninth session in a twelve week study of the doctrines of revelation and God. Last week, we began discussing God’s attributes. We focused on God’s incommunicable attributes, those divine characteristics that are most dimly reflected in humanity. God is eternal, independent, unchanging, all-powerful (omnipotent), all-knowing (omniscient), present everywhere in the universe (omnipresent). This week, we’ll discuss God’s communicable attributes, which are reflected more clearly in humanity.

What’s the Big Idea?

Both the created order and Scripture testify to God’s existence. But only the Scriptures explain in specific detail God’s nature and character. We can know that God is there through general revelation, but we can only know the God who is there through special revelation. Studying God’s attributes is one way to know more about the God who is revealed to us through his creation and his words—especially his written word, the Bible.

Before proceeding, it may be helpful to discuss some of the many ways Christians study the attributes of God. Some study God’s attributes topically—they arrange each attribute individually and list the scriptural support for that attribute. Some study God’s attributes canonically—they focus on all the ways God reveals his attributes within the developing storyline of Scripture. Some study God’s attributes onomatologically—it’s a big word, but it means learning about God’s character through the various names used of God throughout Scripture. Because we only have two weeks to discuss God’s attributes, in this class we’ve opted for the topical approach, but either of the other two approaches would make for an excellent personal or group Bible study over a longer period of time.

What Do the Scriptures Say?

God is wise, meaning he “always chooses the best goals and the best means to those goals.”¹ Wisdom is … the practical side of moral goodness. As such, it is found in its fullness only in God.”² Though humans also possess varying degrees of wisdom, unlike God, our wisdom is limited by our “creatureliness” and bent by our sin.

13 “With God are wisdom and might; he has counsel and understanding (Job 12:13).

24 O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom have you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures (Psa 104:24).

33 Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! (Rom 11:33).
God is truthful, “all his knowledge and words are both true and the final standard of truth.” He is perfectly faithful and trustworthy in all his words and actions because of his perfect character. Like God, humans value truthfulness and faithfulness, but no human being is always truthful and consistently faithful.

4 “The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he (Deut 32:4).

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? (Num 23:19).

10 But the Lord is the true God; he is the living God and the everlasting King (Jer 10:10a).

3 And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent (John 17:3).

God is good, which “means that God is the final standard of good, and that all that God is and does is worthy of approval.” “He is originally good, good of Himself, which nothing else is; for all creatures are good only by participation and communication from God. He is essentially good; not only good, but goodness itself: the creature’s good is a superadded quality, in God it is His essence…. He is eternally and immutably good, for He cannot be less good than He is; as there can be no addition made to Him, so no subtraction from Him.” Humans also care about goodness, and some people are clearly better than others in terms of moral conduct, but no human is perfectly good like God.

8 Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him! (Psa 34:8).

1 Praise the Lord! Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever! (Psa 106.1).

68 You are good and do good; teach me your statutes (Psa 119:68).

19 And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone (Luke 18:19).

God is love, “God eternally gives of himself to others.” “God’s love is an exercise of his goodness toward individual sinners whereby, having identified himself with their welfare, he has given his Son to be their Savior, and now brings them to know and enjoy him in a covenant relation.” God’s love is perfect and is the standard by which all other loves are measured. Though humans also have the capacity to love, even deeply and powerfully, our love is always imperfect and tainted by the influence of sin.

5 For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your sons marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you (Isa 62:5).

8 but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Rom 5:8).

8 Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love (1 John 4:8).
God is **merciful** and **gracious**. Mercy is God showing goodness to those who are hurting and in need. Grace “is God showing goodness to persons who deserve only severity and had no reason to expect anything but severity.”

Humans are capable of showing great mercy and grace, but only imperfectly so.

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 (Exod 34:6).

8 The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love (Psa 103:8).

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort (2. Cor 1:3).

16 Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Heb 4:16).

11 Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful (James 5:11).

God is **holy**. “he is separated from sin and devoted to seeking his own honor.”

Many theologians actually argue that holiness is at the core of God’s other attributes: “holiness is the sum of all excellence and the combination of all the attributes which constitute perfection and character.”

All humans are careful to separate themselves from at least some sin, though never perfectly. Our honor, which should be directed toward God, is naturally turned inward because of sin’s influence over us.

2 “Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy (Lev 19:2).

22 I will also praise you with the harp for your faithfulness, O my God; I will sing praises to you with the lyre, O Holy One of Israel (Psa 71:22).

9 Exalt the Lord our God, and worship at his holy mountain; for the Lord our God is holy! (Psa 99:9).

14 As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, 15 but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, 16 since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy” (1 Pet 1:14–16).

God is **righteous** or just, “God always acts in accordance with what is right and is himself the final standard for what is right.”

His justice is a further application of his holiness and goodness; he deals with humanity in a way that is in accordance with his other attributes. Humans care very much for righteousness and justice, though in an imperfect way that is often colored by our own sin-bent inclinations rather than God’s standards.

4 “The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he (Deut 32:4).

19 I did not speak in secret, in a land of darkness; I did not say to the offspring of Jacob, ‘Seek me in vain.’ I the Lord speak the truth; I declare what is right (Isa 45:19).
... This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. 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 (Rom 3:25b–26).

God is wrathful, meaning “he intensely hates all sin.” “The wrath of God … denotes God’s resolute action in punishing sin…. it is the active manifesting of his hatred of irreligion and moral evil.” All humans hate some types of sins, but each of us also tolerate other sins. Our wrath is often self-centered rather than God-centered, reflecting the tendency toward idolatrous self-worship that is in the heart of every person.

And the Lord said to Moses, “I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you” (Exod 32:9-10).

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him (John 3:36).

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth (Rom 1:18).

What Has the Church Said?

As with the attributes we discussed last week, it’s generally true that God’s attributes were rarely questioned until the past couple hundred years. In our modern context, liberal Christians reject some of God’s attributes (especially his wrath) and redefine most of his other attributes to fit the spirit of the age. Southern Baptists and other evangelicals, as well as the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions, defend the traditional views of each of God’s attributes, though Christians debate among themselves the best way to articulate some of the attributes. All Christians sincerely seek for a biblical understanding of God’s attributes, even if there are sincere and even sharp disagreements among believers.

It’s true that every theological tradition is tempted to overemphasize some of God’s attributes to the exclusion of others. Some fundamentalists emphasize the God of truthfulness and holiness, but sometimes to the exclusion of God’s grace. Some Arminians emphasize God’s love and grace and mercy, but sometimes to the exclusion of God’s wrath. Some Calvinists emphasize God’s righteousness and wrath, but sometimes the exclusion of God’s love. But these are just temptations; no Christian sets out to embrace an unbalanced view of God’s attributes.

What Should We Believe?

The Baptist Faith and Message (2000) and the Confessional Statement of The Gospel Coalition each provide brief, helpful summaries of the doctrine of God.

There is one and only one living and true God. He is an intelligent, spiritual, and personal Being, the Creator, Redeemer, Preserver, and Ruler of the universe. God is infinite in holiness and all other perfections. God is all powerful and all knowing; and His perfect knowledge extends to all things, past, present, and future, including the future decisions of His free creatures. To Him we owe the
highest love, reverence, and obedience. The eternal triune God reveals Himself to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, with distinct personal attributes, but without division of nature, essence, or being.\textsuperscript{14}

We believe in one God, eternally existing in three equally divine Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who know, love, and glorify one another. This one true and living God is infinitely perfect both in his love and in his holiness. He is the Creator of all things, visible and invisible, and is therefore worthy to receive all glory and adoration. Immortal and eternal, he perfectly and exhaustively knows the end from the beginning, sustains and sovereignly rules over all things, and providentially brings about his eternal good purposes to redeem a people for himself and restore his fallen creation, to the praise of his glorious grace.\textsuperscript{15}

As mentioned last week, the Second London Confession (1689) provides the most comprehensive confessional summary of the doctrine of God written from a Baptist perspective, though we won’t duplicate it in this handout. For parents with small children, the Children’s Catechism is a great tool for teaching your kids about God’s attributes (and basic Christian doctrine in general).

\textbf{How Should We Then Live?}

\textbf{Worshiping God:} The better we know God, the better we know ourselves. The better know God and ourselves, the more it deepens our humility and magnifies his greatness. This ought to lead us to more authentic, heartfelt worship of the only truly eternal, independent, unchanging, all-powerful, all-knowing, everywhere-present Being in the universe. If we our growing knowledge of God doesn’t lead to greater worship of God, then we don’t know as much as we think we do.

\textbf{Defending God:} We live in a world that questions many of God’s attributes, especially those that highlight the distance between God’s greatness and downplays our dependence upon him. This makes it all the more important that we clearly teach and accurately defend a biblical view of who God is and what he does. It’s not enough to be a theist—we must love and obey the one true God who is most clearly revealed to us through the Scriptures.

\textbf{Discipling God’s People:} It is often the case that new Christians know only a few basics about God when they first come to saving faith. A key part of discipleship should be instructing believers to learn as much as possible about who God is and what he expects of us. We should want to know God intimately and help others to as well. (The same principle applies to “pre-Christian” children being raised in Christian homes.)

\textbf{Recommended Resources}


John Piper, \textit{The Pleasures of God: Meditations on God’s Delight in Being God}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (Multnomah, 2001).


In 2010, Andy Davis taught through God’s Attributes during ACTS on Wednesday nights. The audio for that series can be found in the Media Library on the FBC Durham website.

End Notes:


8 Packer, *Knowing God*, p. 132.


