**Maranatha Bible Church 2020**

**Equipping Hour: Systematic Theology**

**Week 3: Attributes of God Part 1**

**Introduction**

After the last two weeks, we know that God exists and that He is both above His creation and interacting with it. We know that God is in total control of not only the elements around us, but also our very existence. At any given time, God can do whatever He pleases according to His nature.

This is what we are going to look at for the remaining 4 weeks, knowing God by His attributes (or sometimes called perfections). We want to make sure that we do not slice God up into various parts and lay Him on the table as a collection of His attributes. We also do not want to put so much emphasis on one attribute of God to the ignoring (or denial) of other attributes.

Throughout the history of the church, men have heartily labored over God’s divine attributes in an attempt to learn more about God. The reason being is that our view and understanding of God supplies our whole framework with which we minister, live our lives and construct our theology. A proper view of the attributes of God will keep us in the proper place to worship God for who He is. As Peter says in 1 Peter 2:9 “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nature, a people for God’s own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.” That word for *excellencies* means *any particular moral excellence, virtue or moral goodness.* This is the foundation for knowing the divine attributes, excellencies or perfections of God.

In about 208 AD, Tertullian wrote of God’s supreme Greatness, eternity, power and uniqueness.[[1]](#footnote-1) Augustine, while writing *On the Trinity*, wrote of God “that the Creator both lives in the highest sense, and perceives and understands all things, and that He cannot die, or suffer decay, or be changed; and that His is not a body, but a spirit, of all the most powerful, most righteous, most beautiful, most good, most blessed.”[[2]](#footnote-2) These are some of the earliest records we have of believers recognizing God’s attributes and attempting to record them for future generations.

**The Divine Attributes of God**

1. **What is an attribute?**
   1. When we speak of attributes, we are talking about *those qualities of God that constitute what he is, the very characteristics of his nature.*[[3]](#footnote-3)
   2. This is not in reference to what God is doing, but specifically to who God is in Himself. Of course, we are never going to know all of who God is nor are we going to fully understand all that He has shown us.
      1. But, we are able to know and understand what He has revealed to us through His word.
   3. As Frame points out “an attribute is a concept expressed by an adjective (as eternal) or a noun (as eternity) used to describe a person or thing. The Bible uses many of these terms, such as love, righteousness, holiness, grace, knowledge, truth, and eternity, to describe God, and there are others not specifically mentioned in Scripture (such as simplicity, immensity, aseity, and personality) that can be deduced from the biblical teachings.”[[4]](#footnote-4)
   4. It is important to understand and apply to our own theology and thought about God, His attributes do not (cannot) diminish nor can they (or will they) grow.
      1. God does not become *less* of something because of time, age or how something else acts towards Him. Conversely, He does not become *more* of something either.
      2. ***Everything that God will ever become, He has always been.***
      3. On a personal level, God’s love or kindness is not going to run out on you or someone else. He is never going to forget anything nor is He going to allow someone’s sin to go unpunished. We know that God is *always* just, loving, right, etc. because it is who He is.
2. **The Essence of God and His Attributes: The Unity of God**
   1. God’s essence refers to His nature, comprised of those spiritual qualities that make the divine being that He is.[[5]](#footnote-5)
   2. God’s essence or nature is *who He is*. His attributes are inseparable from God Himself.
   3. Since these make up who God is, we cannot deny them or God ceases to be God.
      1. For example, if all we do is teach God’s love to the dismissal of His wrath, we are not teaching about the God of the Bible.
      2. If we neglect God’s justice for His forgiveness, we have made a god in our own image and started to worship it.
3. **Essential and Non-Essential Attributes[[6]](#footnote-6)** 
   1. Admittedly, this is an area which can be a bit more philosophical and/or subjective.
   2. What we mean by essential and non-essential, are the attributes that God possess simply because He is God. If He did not have these *essential* attributes, He would no longer be God.
   3. A non-essential attribute is not part of His essence and can be either lost, gained or changed without change to who God is as a being.
   4. Take God’s love, knowledge and eternality. Even before the creation of all the worlds, time and space, God was these things.
   5. It is vital to take into consideration God’s essential attributes while discussing His non-essential. One could say that God was not a creator before He actually created. But, we must remember, that God is omniscient (all-knowing) and therefore knew that He was going to create, consequently in His mind it was already done.
4. **Divine Unity/Simplicity** 
   1. We must remember that God is not divided into parts. This is hard for us to comprehend as we are made of parts that are unequal.
      1. For example, our compassion is not the same as our justice which is different than our anger, etc. Not all of us have the same attributes nor are they to the same extent.
   2. For the Lord, though we may see different attributes of God emphasized at different times, He is not divided because He is spirit and not complex (made up of parts).
      1. “God is not the sum total of his attributes but is simultaneously everything that all of the attributes reveal.”[[7]](#footnote-7)
   3. “Scripture never singles out one attribute of God as more important than the rest. There is an assumption that every attribute is completely true of God and is true of all of God’s Character.”
      1. “For example, John can say that “God is light” (1 John 1:5) and then a little later also say that “God is love” (1 John 4:8). There is no suggestion that part of God is light and part of God is love, or that God is partly light and partly love. Nor should we think that God is more light than love or more love than light. Rather it is *God Himself* who is light, and it is *God Himself* who is also love.”[[8]](#footnote-8)
   4. We must fight the temptation to think of God in parts and that those parts are not always operating at the same time. Furthermore, because the Bible talks about Gods wrath operating at a certain time, does not mean that His love (or any other attribute) is not simultaneously operating.
   5. God’s attributes are not additions to His real being.
      1. For example, we must learn contentment (Philippians 4:11) and we must strive for holiness (1 Timothy 4:10), but with God, He is simply these things all the time.
   6. God’s attributes qualify each other.
      1. This means that they need to be viewed in light of each other. All that God does and allows to happen is fully comprised of all of His attributes.
      2. For example, we can look at the cross. One would have to think this would be the place where God would have the most inner conflict.
      3. Here we see God’s justice and mercy, righteous wrath and gracious love, all being displayed together in perfect unity. Where we see the clearest outpouring of the wrath of God (on Christ) we all see His greatest act of love (towards mankind).[[9]](#footnote-9)
      4. God’s wrath and love do not cancel each other out. We read in Romans 3:26 “…for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that *He would be just and the justifier* of the one who has faith in Jesus.”
      5. 2 Corinthians 5:19 “…namely, that *God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself*, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation.”
   7. As stated previously, there is great danger in singling out one of God’s attributes to the exclusion or limiting of His others.
      1. “God is love” sells in the bookstores but “God hates sinners” does not. Though, both are equally true.
      2. We must never, through our own fear or embarrassment, limit God where the Bible has not. God Himself, through His word, never makes excuses for who He is or what He does. We too would be wise to do the same.
5. **Studying and Systematizing the Attributes of God**
   1. God’s works and His attributes are not the same, though we can see His attributes throughout all of His works. His works reflect who He is but do not make Him who He is.
   2. God’s attributes are not just our perceptions of God but who He is revealed in Scripture.
   3. As we study His attributes, it is very helpful to systematically organize and study each one. It is important to remember that just because the Bible does not mention an attribute as often as another, it does not diminish its validity.
      1. ***Context*** allows one to feel the weight of the attribute mentioned. For example, Deuteronomy 9:7-8 “Remember, do not forget how you provoked the LORD your God to wrath in the wilderness; from the day that you left the land of Egypt until you arrived at this place, you have been rebellious against the LORD. Even at Horeb you provoked the LORD to wrath, and the LORD was so angry with you that He would have destroyed you.”
         1. In this passage, we see things like God is provoked to wrath and anger to the exclusion of His love and mercy.
         2. This should not lead us to believe that when God’s wrath is on display His love, mercy, kindness, etc. are somehow subdued.
      2. ***Context*** allows one to see the relationship between differing attributes as manifesting the essence of God. This protests one from pitting one attribute against another.[[10]](#footnote-10)
      3. ***Context***also helps to provide both clarity and parameters when considering an attribute of God.
   4. What are the benefits of studying God’s attributes this way?
      1. Our human minds are limited so when we organize it in a logical way, it is easier for us to understand what God is conveying to us.
      2. We can note progressive revelation as God revealed Himself more and more throughout the history of the world.
      3. We can see ***all*** that God determines we are able to see, without excluding something.
   5. How can we know and/or determine the attributes of God?
      1. “The Biblical method. This is simply the inductive method, applied to the facts with regard to God revealed in the Scriptures. Now that we have proved the Scriptures to be a revelation from God, inspired in every part, we may properly look to them as decisive authority with regard to God’s attributes.”[[11]](#footnote-11)
6. **Classification of God’s Attributes / Perfections** 
   1. There are many, many ways in which theological students have attempted to classify the attributes of God throughout history. It does not matter what you desire to call them as long as you understand that some can be seen in us and some are exclusively God’s.
   2. Relative and Absolute
   3. Natural and Moral
   4. Constitutive and Characterizing
   5. Transitive and Intransitive
   6. Negative and Positive
   7. Metaphysical, Intellectual, Ethical, Emotional, Volitional and Relational
   8. Greatness and Goodness
   9. Communicable and Incommunicable
      1. You will find variants of these in multiple places as people try to describe and defend the attributes of God.
      2. Once again, there is no heresy involved with *how* we necessarily organize them, as long as we do so consistent with a Biblical standard.
   10. For the purpose of this class, I prefer to use *Communicable* and *Incommunicable* attributes.
   11. Lets define these terms before systematizing the following attributes.[[12]](#footnote-12)
       1. *Communicable* 
          1. Those attributes which God shares or communicates with us.
          2. Some of these would be love, knowledge mercy, justice, etc.
       2. *Incommunicable* 
          1. Those attributes which God does not share or communicate with us.
          2. Some of these would be eternity, unchangeableness (immutability), omnipresent, omniscient, etc.
       3. It is important to remember that while this list is helpful, it is not perfect. Meaning, while we certainly experience love (just as God is love), we do not experience love the same what in which God does.
          1. The same would be for mercy, knowledge, wisdom and so on.
          2. We should think that while they are certainly communicable, they are only communicable to a certain extent.
          3. The same would be true for incommunicable attributes as well. While God is immutable and we do change, there are parts of us that never change.

**God’s Incommunicable attributes**:

1. **Independence / Self-Existence / Aseity / Self-Sufficiency** 
   1. “God does not need us or the rest of creation for anything, yet we and the rest of creation can glorify him and bring him joy.”[[13]](#footnote-13)
   2. God is uncaused, He always has been and always will be.
   3. “What is remarkable is that the triune God – self-existing, perfect, and independent – would nevertheless create and enter into covenantal relationships with creatures in freedom and love.”[[14]](#footnote-14)
   4. God is independent and not related with this creation.
      1. This does not mean that God is without relationship to His creation, but that we are dependent upon Him, not Him on us.
   5. Genesis 1:1 “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”
      1. There was nothing when God started creating. He was not from or a part of another creation, but started the entire process.
      2. It is from the fact that God created everything (time, space, physical matter, etc.) that He is not dependent upon it.
   6. One of the commonly used verses to show God’s self-existence is Exodus 3:14 “God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM"; and He said, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'”
      1. As Beeke points out “God’s name reveals that his being is very different from that of other persons. When a human being says, “I Am,” he qualifies it with a predicate[[15]](#footnote-15), often with some relationship to other people that defines his status or role. However, God simply said, “I Am,” asserting that, through he has relationships, he is not defined by any relationship outside of his own being, but exists of himself. God is thus the sovereign Lord.”[[16]](#footnote-16)
      2. This is important to understand because God received nothing from any other source ever to be who He is. If God were to learn something or add something to His existence, He would no longer be God because then He would be part of something created and thus no longer independent.
   7. Psalm 90:2 “Before the mountains were born or You gave birth to the earth and the world, ***even from everlasting to everlasting,*** You are God.”
   8. John 1:1-4 “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. ***All things came into being through Him***, and ***apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being***. In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men.”
   9. John 5:26 “For just as ***the Father has life in Himself***, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself.”
   10. Acts 17:24-25 “The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; ***nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything***, since ***He Himself gives to all people life and breath*** and all things.”
   11. Revelation 4:11 “Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for ***You created all things***, and ***because of Your will they existed, and were created***.”
   12. God *is* life and *has* life in and of Himself.
       1. “His life is different from that of every other living thing.”[[17]](#footnote-17)
       2. If mankind, angels and any other created thing had ever been necessary to God at any given time, they too would have been eternal with God, having no beginning nor end. The simple fact that we are created shows our complete and utter dependence upon Him and His complete and utter independence from us.
       3. 1 Corinthians 8:6 “…yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him.”
       4. Psalm 50:10-12 “For every beast of the forest is Mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird of the mountains, and everything that moves in the field is Mine. If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is Mine, and all it contains.”
       5. ***All creation is dependent upon and exists for God***.
2. **Theological Truths to Keep in Mind:**
   1. God has no need
   2. God is never insecure
   3. God is never unsure
   4. God is not dependent
   5. God always and only does as He wills (not changed by outside influences)
   6. These theological truths will guard our hearts and minds against false statements such as:
      1. “God was lonely and that is why He created man.”
      2. “God was sad so He sent Jesus to reconcile us back to Him.”
      3. “God wanted something to love so made the world.”
   7. All of these statements imply that God was *lacking something*, if there was ever a time that God was lacking and therefore dependent on something, He cannot be God.
   8. We need to hear that God does not need us.
      1. ***This keeps us from having too high of a view of ourselves. God has no need for us in anyway whatsoever, but has chosen to use us for His purposes and glory***.
   9. We need to have a higher view of God so that we put Him and ourselves in the right place.
      1. All right doctrine will come from a high view of God. We never want to be man-centered in anything that we think, do or say.
   10. Just because God is independent of us does not mean that He does not mean that we are meaningless to Him.
       1. “While God is independent in the sense of not needing anything else for his existence, this is not to say that he is aloof, indifferent, or unconcerned. God relates to us, but by his choice, not because he is compelled by some need. That he does so relate to us is therefore so much more the cause for glorifying him.”[[18]](#footnote-18)
       2. Here is where the Reformers really got it right. When you are able to understand the greatness and complete independence of God, you cannot help but break out in praise knowing that He desires a relationship with you.
       3. It is humbling to know that He simply could have created the world and then decided to not be a part of it. There is nothing that makes Him more or less “God (I Am)” as He interacts with His creation.
       4. Knowing this should bring us much comfort. Since God is not part of this creation, He is not subject to the effects of creation.
          1. He is not decaying, losing memory, getting hurt, etc. Our hope is anchored in the God who has always been and always will be.
3. **A being worthy of worship should never be dependent upon that worship**. We do not worship God because He needs it, He is utterly without needs and completely independent of His worshippers.[[19]](#footnote-19)
   1. Listen to Paul in Galatians 4:8-9 “However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those ***which by nature are no gods***. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again?”
      1. What you choose to worship, needs to have a nature that is worthy of worship. Look at what Paul says here *you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods.* False gods are weak and worthless and they depend upon worshippers to resolve their poverty.
   2. Idols and other non-gods only exist because people believe in them. Not so with God, even if the world turns their back on Him, He is still God.
   3. After the Rapture of the church, the world will be empty of Christians, there will not be one believer on the earth, yet God will still exist, He will still act and He will still be.

1. <http://www.tertullian.org/articles/evans_marc/evans_marc_04book1_eng.htm> 09/21/2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [http://www.vatican.va/spirit/documents/spirit\_20021112\_agostino-trinity\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/spirit/documents/spirit_20021112_agostino-trinity_en.html%20) 09/21/2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 236 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. John Frame *Systematic Theology* p. 231 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology.* Vol. 1, p. 203 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Not found in every systematic theology due to the subjectiveness of the study [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Michael Horton (2011) *The Christian Faith,* Zondervan Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI, p. 228 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Wayne Grudem *System Theology* p. 178 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Michael Horton *The Christian Faith* p. 229 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Justin McKitterick from TES Theology I (TH 503) class notes [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. A.H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* p. 247 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Wayne Grudem p. 160-161 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. P. 160 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Michael Horton p. 230 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The predicate in a sentence comes after the verb of being…am, was, were, and renames or states something about the subject. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Joel Beeke pp. 552-553 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Millard Erickson p. 297 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Millard Erickson p. 298 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. John Frame *Systematic Theology*, pp. 410-411 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)