

Theology Proper: What the Bible Says about God Himself
Part 2: His Moral Attributes

Review: Grudem divides the attributes of God into “incommunicable” and “communicable” attributes.¹ Within the “communicable” attributes, he includes the characteristics of God’s personhood. Strong differentiates between the “absolute or immanent attributes” and the “relative or transitive attributes.”² In the interest of over-simplification, one may categorize them as “attributes that make God bigger than us” vs. “attributes that make God better than us”; or “the attributes of God’s greatness” vs. “the attributes of God’s goodness”; or God’s “relative attributes” vs. his “moral attributes.”

God’s Relative Attributes

Tri-unity
 Personhood
 Self-Existence / Self-Sufficiency
 Infinity / Eternality
 Changelessness
 Omnipresence / Omniscience / Omnipotence
 Perfection
 Incomprehensibility

God’s Moral Attributes

Holiness
 Truth
 Love
 Righteousness
 Faithfulness
 Mercy / Grace

The Holiness of God

First and foremost among his moral qualities, we must consider his holiness. As we uncover the true meaning of holiness, the high priority of this virtue, and the practical impact that it has on God and on us, we’re going to be like Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1-5), suddenly exposed to a light that is shocking in its brightness, a light that exposes something in us that we did not realize was there, a light that illuminates and burns and purifies everything that it touches.

1. The meaning of holiness
 - General meaning in Scripture
 - Set apart (Isaiah 57:15)
 - Morally pure (Psalm 89:35)

¹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 156 ff.

² Strong, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 249 ff.

- When applied to the character of God
 - He is absolutely separate from all that is earthly or created (Psalm 99:1-3; 57:12)
 - He is absolutely separate from all that is morally unclean (Psalm 99:4-9; 24:3-4)
- 2. The priority of holiness in the character of God
 - God's very name is holy (Isaiah 57:15)
 - God's leadership is holy (Psalm 47:8)
 - God's basic nature is holy (Isaiah 6:1-3)
- 3. The impact of God's holiness upon himself, on his universe, and on us
 - His holiness exposes our own uncleanness (Isaiah 6:5)
 - His holiness guarantees his promises (Psalm 89:34-36)
 - His holiness demands holiness from his people (Leviticus 11:44; 19:2; 20:7; 1st Peter 1:14-16)

God's Truthfulness

Absolute truth is an attribute of God's character; and God's truth affects both himself and his creatures.

1. Truth and the dictionary
 - Truth is conformity to standard
 - An imperfect standard produces relative truth
 - A perfect standard results in absolute truth
 - God's standard is absolute reality, or what Francis Schaeffer called "true truth."

What is the specific sticking point for our own time? A good case can be made that it is the existence of objective truth, or, more subtly, the ability of human beings to know objective truth, and hence to be held responsible for knowing it and accountable to God for what they do about it. Schaeffer was one of the first to notice the rise of this particular Scandal and speak of it to a popular audience. "The present chasm between the generations has been

brought about almost entirely by a change in the concept of truth....This change in the concept of the way we come to knowledge about truth is the most crucial problem, as I understand it, facing Christianity today” (The God Who is There 13). So important did Schaeffer consider this shift that he coined the awkward phrase “true truth” to make sure he was conveying the idea of a truth that was absolute and not relativistic, that acknowledged the presupposition that “if anything was true, the opposite was false” (Ibid. 14). The Christian needed to be committed to “antithesis” rather than relativism and to understand that the world no longer was. The only thing that has changed since Schaeffer wrote is that now the chasm is no longer between generations (for Schaeffer’s young generation are now grandparents) or between the church and the world, but has come to cut across the Christian movement itself.³

2. Truth and God

- God is the **true** God in that he conforms exactly to what God ought to be (John 17:3)
- God is the **truthful** God because his words conform exactly to reality (John 17:17)
- God is the **God of Truth** because all branches of truth (mathematic truth, scientific truth, moral truth, historical truth, etc.) find their source in him (Psalm 31:5; John 14:6)

3. Truth and God’s other attributes

- Truth affects his kindness (2nd Samuel 2:6)
- Truth affects his righteousness (Jeremiah 4:2)
- Truth affects his peace (Jeremiah 33:6)
- Truth affects his grace (John 1:17)
- Truth affects his gift of life (John 14:6)

4. Truth and God’s people: His truthfulness guarantees ...

- His universe (Psalm 111:7-8; 146:6)
- His response to worship (Psalm 145:18; John 14:6)

³ Williams, Donald T., excerpt, *Reflections from Plato’s Cave: Essays in Evangelical Philosophy* (Lynchburg: Lantern Hollow Press, 2012)

- His promises (Jeremiah 4:1-2)
- His justice (Romans 1:28-2:2)
- His care (Psalm 31:5)

God's Love

1. What is love?

- In Greek literature
 - **Philia**: Natural affection (“filial love” is what brothers and sisters feel toward one another; friendship; companionship (Hebrews 13:1)
 - **Agape**: Self-sacrifice; not so much a way of feeling but of behaving (1st John 4; John 3:16)

- In God's character

Love is that which moves God to give himself and his gifts spontaneously, righteously, and eternally for the good of personal beings, regardless of their merit or response.

2. What kind of love is God's love?

- His love is unselfish (Deuteronomy 7:7-8)
- His love is voluntary (Romans 5:8)
- His love is everlasting (Jeremiah 31:3; Romans 8:38-39)
- His love is active (Ephesians 5:25-27)

3. Who benefits from the love of God?

- God loves his Son (Matthew 3:17; John 3:35)
- God loves those who put their trust in him (John 16:27; 1st John 3:1)
- God loves Israel (Jeremiah 31:3-4)

- God loves the whole world (John 3:16)
4. How does God demonstrate his love?
- By doing good things for all men (Matthew 5:43-45)
 - By giving himself for those he loves (John 3:16; 1st Corinthians 9:7)
 - By dying for those he loves (John 15:13; Romans 5:8)
 - By hating all that is evil (Psalm 45:7)
 - By disciplining his own children (Hebrews 12:5-8)
5. How does God's love affect us?
- It deserves and produces love from us (1st John 4:11,19)
 - It becomes evidence of salvation (1st John 4:7)
 - It prepares us for judgment (1st John 4:17-18)

God's Righteousness

1. Definition of God's righteousness
- Basic meaning of the biblical terms: "straight, upright"
 - Translations in the English Bible: "just, justice, right, righteous, righteousness"
 - Scriptures: Psalm 11:7; 19:8; 45:6; 89:14; 119:137; 145:17; Jeremiah 50:7; Revelation 16:4-7
2. Description of God's righteousness
- It means:
 - His character is unmixed with injustice (Psalm 92:15)
 - His character is above human righteousness (2nd Peter 2:7-8; Romans 3:10)

- It requires:
 - Justice among God's children (Leviticus 19:35-36)
 - Judgment of the unrighteousness (Revelation 16:4-7)
 - Fulfillment of his promises (Psalm 50:5-6)
 - The discipline of God's people (Daniel 9:14)
 - The death of Christ on our behalf (Romans 3:25)
 - His forgiveness of confessed sin (1st John 1:9)
- It guarantees:
 - The righteous character of God's kingdom (Psalm 45:6)
 - The righteous nature of final judgment (Acts 17:31)
 - The eternal security of believers (John 17:24-26)
 - God's remembrance of our good works in Christ (Hebrews 6:10)

God's Faithfulness

All of God's attributes are part of a package. We have seen that he is unchangeable, so we must conclude that he is also faithful.

1. Defining God's faithfulness

- Translation of the biblical terms: "to be *firm, unswerving, unshakable*"
- Explanation: God can be depended upon to keep his promises and warnings (Deuteronomy 7:9-10)
- Illustration: "The Amen...says this..." (Revelation 3:14)
 - "Amen" is a Hebrew word used as *an affirmation of certainty*
 - Our God is the "Amen God"!

2. Describing God's faithfulness:

- It is great (Lamentations 3:23; Psalm 36:5; 119:90)
- It is pure (Psalm 89:33)
- It is an attribute that "ties it all together" (Isaiah 11:5)

3. The guarantees of God's faithfulness:

- It guarantees the stability of the universe (Psalm 89:2; 119:90)
- It guarantees his promises and warnings (2nd Timothy 2:13; Hebrews 10:23)
- It guarantees our salvation (1st Thessalonians 5:23-24; 1st Corinthians 1:9)
- It guarantees our victory over Satan (1st Corinthians 10:13; 2nd Thessalonians 3:3)

4. Decisions we must make based on God's faithfulness:

- We should confess our sins readily (1st John 1:9)
- We can depend on him completely (Psalm 119:75)

God's Mercy⁴

Some people are offended by the necessity of throwing themselves upon the mercy of God. But here are four good reasons why we should do so:

1. God's mercy is an active thing.

- He displays all of these active qualities:
 - Old Testament: compassion -- an active moving of his heart
 - Old Testament: lovingkindness – stooping down to our level
 - New Testament: tender mercies – a gentle, soft touch of his hand

⁴ Mercy and grace are two sides of the same truth: Mercy is God withholding punishment that we deserve; grace is God extending favor that we do not deserve.

- New Testament: grace – unmerited, special attention
- The difference between *mercy* and *love* (see Ephesians 2:4-6):
 - Love describes God's character, what he *is*
 - Mercy describes God's activity, what he *does*
- 2. God's mercy is an infinite thing.
(1st Chronicles 21:13; Psalm 108:4; 119:64; Psalm 136)
- 3. God's mercy is a personal thing.
 - It is universal (Psalm 145:9)
 - It is undeserved (Nehemiah 9:17-21, 27-32)
 - It is you and me (Ephesians 2:4-8)
- 4. God's mercy is a practical thing.
 - A comfort to those who trust him (Psalm 94:18)
 - A plea to use when praying (Daniel 9:18)
 - A standard for Christian conduct (Luke 6:36)

Christ, the Perfect Picture of God's Character

God did more than just tell us about his character; he showed us through his Son.

1. What this perfect Picture shows us:
 - God's glory (John 1:14)
 - God's power (John 11:43-44)
 - God's holiness
 - He hates sin (John 8:11)
 - He hates sacrilege (John 2:13-16)

- He hates hypocrisy (Matthew 23:25, 33)
 - God's compassion (Matthew 9:35-36; 11:28-30)
2. What this perfect Picture does for us:
- It makes God tangible and real.
 - It guards us from wrong notions about God.
 - It assures us that we can really know God.
 - It enables us to be more like him (Matthew 5:48; 1st John 2:6)

Recommended Reading

Packer, J. I. *Knowing God*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973.

Schaeffer, Francis. *The God Who Is There*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1968.

_____. *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1972.

Tozer, A. W. *The Pursuit of God*. Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, 1948.

Assignments for Next Segment ("The Doctrine of Christ")

1. Read Grudem's *Systematic Theology*, chapters 26-29.
2. Answer one or more of the "Questions for Personal Application" at the end of each chapter, and be prepared to share and discuss your answers in class. Or compose a question of your own (which relates to the subject matter in those chapters), research the topic, and be prepared to share your answer with the class.