



The Attributes of God

by Jeremy Cagle

Every person is known by his / her personality traits. For example, when you think of Mr. Rogers, you think *caring* and *warm*. When you think of Bill Cosby, you think *funny* and *entertaining*. When you think of Steven Spielberg, you think *creative* and *ingenuitive*. In a similar fashion, the God of the Bible is known by His personality traits – His “attributes.” This article will provide a brief description of those attributes.¹

I. DEFINITION OF THE ATTRIBUTES

Charles Ryrie, in his book *Basic Theology*, writes that “Attributes are qualities that are inherent to a subject. They identify, distinguish, or analyze that subject.”² Another author, writing in a similar vein, writes that the attributes of God are “The characteristics or qualities of God that constitute him as what he is.”³

In any study of God’s attributes, it is important to realize that His “characteristics or qualities” do not function in the same way that man’s does. One distinction between man’s attributes and God’s attributes is that, whereas man has characteristics added or subtracted from Him, God does not. A man can be joyful as a child and sorrowful as an adult. A man can be faithful as an employee and unfaithful as a husband. God, on the other hand, never loses or gains any attribute of His person.

“[The attributes] should not be thought of as something attributed to or predicated of [God], as if something could be added to his nature. Rather, they are inseparable from his being.”⁴ The Bible describes God as love (1 Jn 4:16), truth (Jn 14:6), life (Jn 14:6), and spirit (Jn 4:24). He is not just lovely, truthful, full of life, and spiritual; He *is* love, truth, life and spirit.

A second distinction between the attributes of God and those of man is that the attributes of God never eliminate each other. His love towards His creatures never eliminates His faithfulness towards them (Rom 8:28). His justice in punishing sin never gets in the way of His grace towards human beings (Rom 3:21–26). In contradistinction to God, a man can lose one attribute of his person when another one reveals itself. If a man

is offended or feels wronged, his sense of justice might quickly replace his sense of graciousness. If he is honored or rewarded for doing a good deed, his anger might be replaced by gratitude. God does not function that way.

The various perfections of God are not component parts of God. Each describes His total being. Love, for example, is not a part of God’s nature; God in His total being is love. Although God may display one quality or another at a given time, no quality is independent of or preeminent over any of the others. Whenever God displays His wrath, He is still love. When He shows His love, He does not abandon His holiness.⁵

A third difference between the attributes of God and those of man is found in the wholeness of God’s attributes. Just as God’s attributes do not eliminate one another, they are also inseparable from each other. In order for God to be all-powerful (Jer 32:17), He must be all-knowing (Ps 139:1-6). In order for God to be all-knowing, He must be ever-present (Prov 15:3). In order for God to be ever-present, He must be all-powerful. Each attribute perfectly compliments the other attributes.

The attributes of man do not function this way. Man’s attributes can function independently of each other and can limit each other or even cancel out each other. Because of his absence of knowledge, a man may be lacking in compassion. A wealthy individual may think less of a poorer man and be less inclined to help him because he thinks, “If only that man worked harder, he would not be where he is.” Yet, if the wealthy man knew the poorer man’s circumstances – orphaned at a young age, never went to school, etc. – he might realize that the poorer

man is hard working and has just had a hard life. This new-found knowledge might lead to compassion. Yet due to the lack in the one attribute, there is a lack of any expression or existence of another.

God does not operate that way. In the words of A. W. Tozer,

To have a correct understanding of the attributes it is necessary that we see them all as one. We can think of them separately but they cannot be separated . . . In studying any attribute, the essential oneness of all the attributes soon becomes apparent. We see, for instance, that if God is self-existent He must be also self-sufficient; and if He has power He, being infinite, must have all power. If He possesses knowledge, His infinitude assures us that He possesses all knowledge . . . Any failure within the divine character would argue imperfection and, since God is perfect, it could not occur. Thus the attributes explain each other and prove that they are but glimpses the mind enjoys of the absolutely perfect Godhead.⁶

II. CATEGORIZATION OF THE ATTRIBUTES

Theologians have come to place God's attributes into two main categories: communicable and incommunicable. Wayne Grudem defines these two terms in the following way,

The *incommunicable attributes* of God [are] those attributes that God does not share or "communicate" to others and the *communicable attributes* of God [are] those God shares or "communicates" with us.⁷

Another author goes on to write,

The communicable attributes are those qualities of God for which at least a partial counterpart can be found in his human creations . . . The incommunicable attributes, on the other hand, are those unique qualities for which no counterpart can be found in humans.⁸

For the purposes of this article, communicable attributes will be defined as "those attributes which human beings possess to some degree." Incommunicable attributes will be defined as "those attributes which human beings do not possess to any degree." While this definition is limiting, it is helpful to mention that *any discussion* of God's attributes is limiting as well. As Wayne Grudem illustrates,

However, upon reflection we realize that this distinction, although helpful, is not perfect. That is because there is no attribute of God that is *completely* communicable, and there is no attribute of God that is *completely* incommunicable.⁹

An example of a communicable attribute of God is mercy. A. W. Pink defines God's mercy as the attribute "which denotes the ready inclination of God to relieve the misery of fallen creatures."¹⁰ This mercy is seen numerous times in the Bible. In Exodus 33:19, the Lord tells Moses that He reserves the right to reveal His mercy to whomever He pleases,

I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of the Lord before you; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion.

Psalm 145:8-9 offers a praise to the Lord for His mercy:

The Lord is gracious and merciful;
Slow to anger and great in lovingkindness.
The Lord is good to all,
And His mercies are over all His works.

Titus 3:5 goes so far as to say that every Christian's salvation is completely a result of God's mercy,

He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit.

Yet this mercy is an attribute that human beings, on some level, can relate to. While our mercy can never ultimately lead to someone's eternal salvation, it can lead to acts of compassion and kindness that benefit our fellow man. Our evangelism may be the tool the Lord uses to bring a sinner to a saving knowledge of Jesus' work on the cross. Our volunteer efforts at a homeless shelter or food drive can bring food to impoverished people. On some level, we can exhibit a "ready inclination . . . to relieve the misery of fallen creatures."

An example of an incommunicable attribute of God is immutability. God's immutability can be defined with the following description, "God is perpetually the same: subject to no change in His being, attributes, or determinations."¹¹ Like His mercy, God's immutability is

also discussed in numerous passages of Scripture. Psalm 33:11 reads, “The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart from generation to generation.” Psalm 100:5 echoes Psalm 33 and states, “For the Lord is good; His lovingkindness is everlasting and His faithfulness to all generations.”

James 1:17 says,

Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.

For these reasons, in Deuteronomy 32:4, Moses calls the Lord “The Rock!”

This is an attribute that no earthly creature can relate to. No human being is “perpetually the same: subject to no change in . . . being, attributes, or determinations.” Every living thing changes with time. We morph and alter and transform into something different every day. Even the best of men were not always the best of men and will not remain the best of men forever. To be human is to be mutable. As A. W. Pink writes,

Here we may perceive the infinite distance which separates the highest creature from the Creator. Creaturehood and mutability are correlative terms. If the creature was not mutable by nature, it would not be a creature; it would be God.¹²

Because of this, the immutability of God is an attribute to which we cannot relate. In the words of the theologians, it is incommunicable.

III. TABULATION OF THE ATTRIBUTES

To keep this article brief, the following is a listing¹³ of the attributes of God in their categories. A concise definition¹⁴ and some corresponding Bible verses will follow each definition.

Communicable Attributes

Holy – moral blamelessness; the characteristic of being separated from sin (Ex 15:11; Is 6:3; Ps 99:9)¹⁵

Faithful – God will always do what He has said and fulfill what He has promised (Num 23:19; Deut 7:9; Heb 10:23)

True – God is the true God and all His knowledge and words are both true and the final standard of truth (Ps 31:5; Jn 14:6; Jn 17:17)

Gracious – “love exercised towards the unworthy. The love of a holy God to sinners is the most mysterious attribute of the divine nature” (Jn 1:17; Rom 5:15, 17, 21; Eph 2:8–9)¹⁶

Merciful – “kindness exercised towards the miserable, and includes pity, compassion, forbearance, and gentleness, which the Scriptures so abundantly ascribe to God” (Ps 119:156; 130:3–4; 145:8–9)¹⁷

Good – “There is such an absolute perfection in God’s nature and being that nothing is wanting to it or defective in it; nothing can be added to it to make it better” (Ps 33:5; 52:1; Nah 1:7)¹⁸

Just – God always acts in accordance with what is right and He is Himself the final standard of what is right (Ex 9:27; Ps 89:14; 119:137)

Loving – God eternally gives of Himself to others (Jn 3:16; Rom 5:8; 1 Jn 4:16)

Patient – God’s goodness in withholding punishment toward those who sin over a period of time (Ex 34:6; Num 14:18; Nah 1:3)

Wrathful – God intensely hates all sin (Ps 5:5; 7:11; Rom 2:5)

Incommunicable Attributes

Sovereign – “the supremacy of God, the kingship of God, the godhood of God. To say that God is sovereign is to declare that God is God. To say that God is sovereign is to declare that He is the Most High” (Is 45:23; 46:9–10; Eph 1:11)¹⁹

Immutable – “God is unchangeable and thus unchanging” (Deut 32:4; Mal 3:6; Js 1:17)²⁰

Eternal²¹ – God has no beginning, no end, or succession of moments in His own being, and He sees all time

equally vividly (Deut 33:27; Is 43:13; 44:6)

Independent²² – God does not need us or the rest of creation for anything (Gen 1:1; Job 35:7–8; Rom 11:34–35)

Omnipotent – God has all power. “The power of God is that ability and strength, whereby he can bring to pass whatsoever he please; whatsoever his infinite wisdom can direct, and whatsoever the infinite purity of his will can resolve” (Job 38:4–6; Jer 32:17; Dan 4:35)²³

Omnipresent – God does not have size or spatial dimensions and is present at every point of space with His whole being, yet God acts differently in different places (Ps 46:1; 139:7–12; Prov 15:3)

Omniscient – God fully knows Himself and all things actual and possible in one simple and eternal act (Job 34:21; Ps 139:1–6; Ez 11:5)

Foreknowledge – “God purposed in Himself to elect a certain people, not because of anything good in them or from them, either actual or foreseen, but solely out of His own pleasure” (Acts 2:23; 13:48; Rom 8:29–30)²⁴

IV. CONCLUSION

To be a Christian and not think of God is tantamount to being a philosopher and not thinking – to being a preacher and not preaching – to being a runner and not running. It is unthinkable that any true believer would not think reverently and constantly of the God Who brought salvation to his soul. As one author writes,

The thought of God should be the Christian’s panacea. It should cure all his ills at a stroke. And what an infinity there is in the thought of God! Nothing can approach in beauty to the idea of the true and living God. That there exists a Being who is infinite in power, knowledge and goodness, that the Being cares for me with a perfect love . . . that he loved me before I was born and created me to enjoy him eternally and that he sent his Son to suffer the agony of the cross to secure my eternal happiness – that, surely, must be a thought to end all sorrow. It ought to be and often it is.²⁵

Yet, many professing Christians today know little-to-nothing of the God Whom they claim to live for. It is my prayer that, if this is you, this article would have helped remedy that problem.

End Notes

¹ For more information regarding the attributes of God, the following books are recommended to the reader: A. W. Pink’s *The Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1975); Stephen Charnock’s *The Existence and Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005 ed.); and A. W. Tozer’s *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1961).

² *Basic Theology* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1999 ed.) 39.

³ Millard J. Erickson, *The Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2001 ed.) 18.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ryrie, 39.

⁶ Tozer, 78–79.

⁷ *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000) 156.

⁸ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998) 292–293.

⁹ Grudem, 156.

¹⁰ *The Nature of God* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999) 86.

¹¹ Ibid., 43.

¹² Ibid., 45.

¹³ This is not meant to be a comprehensive listing.

¹⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all definitions will come from the glossary in Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*, 1235–1257.

¹⁵ The concept of this definition is taken from Jerry Bridge's *The Pursuit of Holiness* (Colorado Springs, Col.: NavPress, 2006). Here is a short quotation from this book defining holiness, "To be holy is to be morally blameless. It is to be separated from sin" (15).

¹⁶ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003 ed.) 427.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Pink, 69.

¹⁹ A. W. Pink, *The Sovereignty of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007 ed.) 19.

²⁰ Ryrie, 43.

²¹ This attribute could also be listed as "infinite."

²² This attribute could also be listed as "self-existent" or "self-sustaining."

²³ Charnock, ii, 13.

²⁴ *The Nature of God*, 31.

²⁵ Maurice Roberts, *The Thought of God* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2001 ed.) 5.