

EQTH105 Basic Bible Doctrine

Unit 1a Attributes Defined and Categorized

Presented by the



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Hello and welcome to this first unit in our study of God entitled “The Attributes of God.” Here we will explore the answer to questions such as “What is God like? What can he do? What does he do?” In short, what can we know about the character of God? In this first lesson, we will look at two questions. First, how can we know about God’s attributes? Second, how might these attributes be categorized? An attribute of God can be defined as an essential and permanent characteristic of his nature. Attributes are also called God’s perfections. Individual attributes may be studied by themselves and then studied together to consider how they relate to the overall character of God.

So let’s start by asking the question, “How can we know God’s attributes?” One way we are able to know certain things about God’s attributes is from nature, from looking at the created world, the world around us, we can glean certain things about the creator of that world. In Psalm 50:6, we read, “And the heavens proclaim his righteousness, for he is a God of justice.” And in Psalm 19:1, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.” As we think on these verses, we can reason several things. First, when the heavens declare the glory of God, they also proclaim that there is a God. So one of the attributes of God that we can learn from nature is simply his existence. And if the skies proclaim the work of his hands, by extension, that must mean that he is a creator God. But nature also describes some of his characteristics. He is glorious. He is righteous. He is just.

However, more specific knowledge of the attributes of the God of the Bible are only found in the Bible. We are able to discern some general attributes of God on our own, but it is only in Scripture that God’s character is specifically revealed to us. Many things about God’s nature, such as the doctrine of the Trinity, the nature and extent of God’s knowledge, and God’s intimate involvement with humanity can only be known from Scripture. While nature gives us some general insight into God’s character, it is only the revelation of Scripture that explains who he really is and what he is like. Consequently, we do not attribute these characteristics to him. He reveals them to us. Therefore, apart from divine revelation, we would know next to nothing about the character of God.

So if we really want to know what God is like, we turn to the Bible where God has told us about himself. Because God has told us what he is like, we are not ignorant of his character. Without God’s revelation of himself to humanity, mankind would stumble around in darkness. In Ephesians, we read, “This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart.” [Eph 4:17-18] What this means is that human reason alone is not an adequate way to understand the character of God. When left to our own ideas about God, each of us goes our own way. The Bible informs us that through philosophical reasoning, humanity cannot understand God.

Paul writes, “For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe.” [1Co 1:21] What this verse says is that we cannot know God through wisdom. That means we cannot learn about God on our own. We need an outside source of knowledge about God to more fully know God.

Unaided, human reason ends up making God into the image that we think he should be. But divine revelation informs us of who he truly is. And it is important to know the difference. If we have an incorrect image of God, we end up creating a false god. And God was very specific to warn mankind not to worship false gods. In the second commandment, God tells us, “You shall have no other gods beside me.” [Exo 20:3] So it is important to have correct ideas about God and his nature, so that we can know about and worship the correct one true God.

As we work through this study, there are a number of points that need to be remembered as we explore these attributes of the God of the Bible. So let’s think through some of the implications of what this study means. First, and simply, we need to know who God is. Studying what God is like will obviously help us understand who he is. When we examine the various parts of his character, we will have a better overall understanding of God. The attributes of God speak to his essential being. God would not be God, for example, unless he were righteous, holy, infinite, and all-knowing. Second, the attributes are true for each member of the Trinity. Now, we will be exploring the doctrine of the Trinity in a future lesson. But for now, as we study the attributes of God, we need to note that these attributes equally describe the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Therefore, if God the Father is holy, then so is the Son, and so is the Holy Spirit. If the Son is merciful, then so is the Father, and so is the Holy Spirit, and so on.

Third, because the Trinity of God is united, that means we cannot divide God’s perfections into pieces. Although it is helpful to look at each of the individual attributes of God that Scripture has revealed, we cannot divide God up into a number of different parts. That’s not what the Trinity means. He is a unified being. We should not think of his attributes as separate parts of his being. God’s entire being is holy, righteousness, all-knowing, everywhere present, and so on. At times, God may display one particular quality. But no one quality is independent of the others, and neither is any quality preeminent over the others. For example, when God judges sin, he is a holy God. When he displays his love, his holiness is still part of his character.

Fourth, the attributes are closely related to each other. By studying each of the attributes separately, we could begin to grasp the essential nature of his characteristics. But it’s only when we study them together that we can begin to comprehend the greatness of God. It is also important not to pit one of God’s attributes against another. The Bible says that God is love, but his love does not come at the expense of his holiness or his justice. Our fifth point is that we do not know how many attributes there are. Even with all of the information in the Bible, we simply do not have full knowledge of God. And so we don’t know how many attributes that God has. The only ones that we know of are those that are revealed to us in Scripture. There are many more, I’m sure. But we are finite creatures and he is an infinite God. God does not reveal to humanity everything about himself. Indeed, he probably can’t reveal to humanity everything about himself because we would not understand it. Therefore, we cannot fully describe God as if we know all of his attributes. Our understanding of his character is limited because of our finite nature.

And on that note, we come to point number six, and that is, the limitation of human language in speaking about God. God is eternal, infinite, and invisible, and we are simply unable to perceive him with our senses. Yet human language can only relate to what we perceive with our senses.

So when we speak about God, we can't speak from firsthand experience, so we have to speak by analogy. For example, when we talk of God being a father or a shepherd, we are using analogies. But those analogies only partially explain his nature. God is not a father in the same sense that we understand these words. And the same holds true for any word or words that we use to describe him. We can use the relationship between the terms as we learn about God, and the way that we use these terms on a human level helps us to understand, but only on human level. This is because God created humankind in his image.

By the way, we will cover that idea in another study where we will explore the nature of man. But for now, we reflect on the words of God. "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'" [Gen 1:26] So God created man, and he created humanity in such a way that meaningful communication is possible. Because of that, we can have some understanding, however imperfect, of his character and being. And we are capable of proclaiming that understanding to each other, however imperfectly, through the spoken and written word.

So let's pause here and sum this up into three points. First, studying the attributes or the characteristics of God is important. And although nature tells us something about his character, it is only divine revelation that informs us of what he is really like. His knowledge, care, and plan for humanity can only be known through what he has revealed to us. Second, it is important to note that God is a unity. We cannot divide him into a number of separate parts. And again, this will be covered more fully as we explore the Trinity. And finally, it must be remembered that we talk about God by analogy. He is not a father or a shepherd in the same sense that we understand the word. And therefore, our understanding of him, while true, will not be complete.

Now, as mankind struggles to study and learn about the nature of God, we try and organize these studies into some sort of order that makes sense to us. This is a course on systematic theology. And obviously, the foundation of systematic is system. But it's important to understand that this system is a human construct. God himself does not categorize his character. But for convenience's sake, Bible scholars through the ages have divided the attributes of God into a number of categories. As we explore these categories, please understand that there is no agreement among Bible believers as to how the various attributes of God should be divided. There is no "Thus sayeth the Lord" in Scripture about this. There's no clear set way in which to list his characteristics. So challenge number one in studying these attributes is that there's no divine way to categorize them. This is simply a man-made construct.

So, let's look at one of these man-made categories to divide up the attributes of God. Theologians use a term called communicable and incommunicable attributes. I know it's a mouthful, but the division into communicable and incommunicable is simply a way of looking at God's attributes. Communicable attributes are those that God shares with humans, although in a limited way. This would include justice and love. Because we are made in his image, we share a love of justice, of truth, of mercy, and so on. These are not called communicable because God has communicated them to humanity, but rather because they are common to God and his highest creation, humanity.

As we explore the attributes of God, remember they are not the same as human attributes. Indeed, one of the lessons that we can learn in studying the attributes of God is the realization that they are not the same as human attributes. Humans can love. God can love. Humans can hate. God can hate. However, these attributes are not exactly the same. God's love is perfect, and so is his hatred of sin. Our love is not perfect.

The incommunicable attributes are those things that belong to God and to him alone. This includes such things as eternity and infinity. Indeed, not only do we not share these attributes of God, we have a great deal of difficulty even understanding them. How can a finite human being understand infinity or eternity? So as we study his attributes, remember there's no consensus as to how many exist or how we should divide them. In the next lesson, we will continue this exploration of God's attributes by looking at the God of knowledge. One of God's incommunicable attributes is omniscience, that is, his ability to know everything. So, see you then.