

# UNIT 1: The Attributes of God

## Section 7: God's Simplicity

*Assigned Reading:*  
A. W. Pink – *The Attributes of God*  
No Assigned Reading

### Introduction:

- Q1:** What do we mean by “an attribute of God?”  
**Q2:** What is the best way to classify or group God's Attributes?  
**Q3:** What is the “relationship” between God's Attributes?

### *Great Illustration from Robert Culver:*

We shall introduce this important subject by a simple mental exercise. Let us go back to Junior High School science class for a few moments. The teacher brings a beaker three-fourths full of an unknown substance to the desk. He holds it up so that all in the room can see. It is seen to be a liquid, a clear liquid. Does it taste like any known clear liquid? No, it is tasteless as well as odorless. Further testing over the Bunsen burner shows that it boils at +212°F, and it is said, by the teacher, to turn to the solid state at +32°F. The teacher also tells the class that it has been shown to be composed, by weight, of 11.188% hydrogen and 88.812% oxygen and nothing more. By now, every child in the class knows for sure what the substance is: water. How is water defined? By its attributes (characteristics).

This is our intention: to *define* “God” as the Bible describes Him! When we read the Bible, God explains to us who He is and what He is like. We receive thousands of descriptions of Him – gracious, merciful, compassionate, just, holy, angry, faithful, etc. Our task is to arrange them in some sort of systematic way so that something meaningful can be communicated about God, and when we think about God, that our thoughts are in line with who God really is!

### Outline:

## **I. Defining an Attribute of God**

### *A. Our Pursuit*

1. Our desire is to KNOW GOD... While we know that we cannot know God exhaustively or completely, we can know Him truly...
2. We are not attempting to “define” God in such a way as to say that we have articulated God's essential nature (for we are incapable of such an act – beyond us)
3. Rather, we are attempting to know what God has revealed about Himself in the Bible, and describe that revelation as accurately as possible...
4. We will do this by:
  - (1) Stating characteristics of God found in the Scriptures
  - (2) Analyzing the characteristics of God presented us in the Scriptures
  - (3) Explaining the terms used to describe God in the Scriptures
  - (4) Distinguishing how God *is* from how everything else *is*

5. See **The Westminster Confession**: **2.1** There is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions; immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute, working all things according to the counsel of His own immutable and most righteous will, for His own glory; most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him; and withal, most just, and terrible in His judgments; hating all sin, and who will by no means clear the guilty. **2.2** God hath all life, glory, goodness, blessedness, in and of Himself; and is alone in and unto Himself all-sufficient, not standing in need of any creatures which He hath made, not deriving any glory from them, but only manifesting His own glory in, by, unto, and upon them: He is the alone fountain of all being, of whom, through whom, and to whom are all things, and hath most sovereign dominion over them, to do by them, for them, or upon them whatsoever Himself pleaseth. In His sight all things are open and manifest; His knowledge is infinite, infallible, and independent upon the creature, so as nothing is to Him contingent, or uncertain. He is most holy in all His counsels, in all His works, and in all His commands. To Him is due from angels and men, and every other creature, whatsoever worship, service, or obedience He is pleased to require of them. **2.3** In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity; God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. The Father is of none, neither begotten, nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son.

### *B. Defining Attribute*

1. **Ryrie**, “Attributes are qualities that are inherent to a subject. They identify, distinguish, or analyze the subject.”
2. In this discussion, we are not so much discussing God’s actions, as characteristics of His nature. These are permanent and intrinsic qualities, which cannot be gained or lost!
3. Also, it is good to note, that we are not saying that we “attribute these things to God” but instead we are attempting to state what God has revealed of Himself to us!
4. **Tozer**, “An attribute of God is whatever God has in any way revealed as being true of Himself.... It is not a part of God, it is *how* or *what* (if we can use the term) God is. The divine attributes are simply how God is as He has revealed Himself.”

## **II. Classifying the Attributes of God**

### *A. Why Classify At All?*

1. No matter what we cannot escape some “organization,” for our limitations as humans necessitate that we contemplate different elements of God separately... and therefore focused thought needs to be organized in some sort of way for learning to occur.
2. In other words, this issue is “inescapable”
3. Whenever we speak of “God” we have an idea in mind... This is the process which we go through to ensure that our “idea” is correspondence with the truth (who God really is)!
4. Individual attributes have meaning, but only insofar as they are rightly related to all the rest of the attributes! They ought not be utterly isolated from each other. HARMONY!

## *B. Some Common Classifications*

1. **Positive and Negative Attributes**
  - a. By positive attributes we mean things that can be said to be true of God by way of affirmation – God is intelligent, wise, merciful, etc.
  - b. By negative attributes we mean things that can be said to be true of God by way of negation – God is immense (without measure), infinite (without limit), immutable (without change), etc.
2. **Immanent and Emanent Attributes**
  - a. Immanent attributes remain within God’s own nature, such as spirituality
  - b. Emanent attributes go forth from and operate outside of God’s nature, affecting the creation, such as mercy, which requires an object.
  - c. **Note:** Is there such a hard and fast line between these? Does God cease to be merciful if there is not a Creation?
3. **Absolute and Relative Attributes**
  - a. Absolute attributes are those that belong to the essence of God considered in Himself (eternity, infinity)
  - b. Relative attributes refer to the essence of God considered in relation to His Creation (like omniscience)
  - c. **Note:** This distinction is “artificial” in that all of God’s attributes relate to His Creation...
4. **Incommunicable and Communicable Attributes**
  - a. Incommunicable attributes are those that God does not share or “communicate” to others; i.e. eternity, unchangeableness, omnipresence, etc.
  - b. Communicable attributes are those that God shares or “communicates” with us; i.e. love, knowledge, mercy, justice, etc.
  - c. **Note:** While this distinction is helpful, it is far from perfect... No attribute of God can be said to be completely communicable, nor completely incommunicable... While we understand wisdom, we will never be infinitely wise as God is. While God does not change, and admit up front that we are continually changing, there are elements in which we can see elements of “unchanging/steadfastness.”
  - d. Better said then, incommunicable attributes are those “less shared by us” and communicable attributes are those “more shared with us”
5. **Nonmoral (or Natural) and Moral Attributes**
  - a. Nonmoral attributes belong to the “constitution of God” – like aseity & infinity
  - b. Moral attributes belong to the “will of God” – like justice and love
  - c. **Note:** All of the nonmoral qualities arise from the most moral Being in the Universe, and the moral attributes arise from the nature of God...
  - d. **Erickson & Culver** use this w/slight alterations: God’s Greatness & God’s Goodness

## **III. The Simplicity of God**

### *A. Definition*

1. When we speak of the Simplicity of God, we do not mean, that He is “easy to understand” or “unintelligent.” This word has historically been used to describe God’s nature as being “not complex” or otherwise stated “not composed of parts.” For many, due to the typical understanding of “simple” today, this “attribute” of God is spoken of as “God’s Unity.” In other words, God is not divided into parts, and He is not a composite

- or amalgam of various pieces glued/forged together. Also, none of God's attributes ought to be held as "more important" than any of the others!
2. God's being is NOT a collection of attributes added together. God's attributes are NOT additions to His real being, either. **Grudem** explains, "Instead each attribute is simply a way of describing one aspect of God's total character or being. God Himself is a unity, a unified and completely integrated whole person who is infinitely perfect in all of these attributes." Because we are limited, and only able to thoroughly contemplate one thing at a time, we examine God from these "different perspectives or angles," but this is not to say that any "perspective" is in opposition to another "perspective."
  3. *Pictorial Representations:* (1) many circles glued together, (2) circles added to big circle, (3) circle with intersecting, internal lines
  4. **Ryrie**, "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. **Erickson**, "It is better to conceive of the attributes of God as his nature, not a collection of fragmentary parts or an addition to his essence. Thus, God is His love, holiness, and power. These are but different ways of viewing the unified being, God."
  6. **Culver**, "The attributes, of course, are each the whole, undivided divine essence viewed in a particular way or in relation to different objects."
  7. **Tozer**, "The harmony of [God's] being is the result not of a perfect balance of parts but of the absence of parts. Between His attributes no contradiction can exist. He need not suspend one to exercise another, for in Him all His attributes are one. All of God does all that God does; He does not divide Himself to perform a work, but works in the total unity of His being."

### B. Scriptural Basis

1. A good example found in 1<sup>st</sup> John. **1 John 1:5** explains that "God is light." Meanwhile, **1 John 4:8** explains that "God is love." There is no suggestion in these references, though, that part of God is light and part love, or that God is partly light and partly love. Nor should we contemplate God as being more light than love or more love than light. Instead, it is God Himself who is light and God Himself who is also love. (**Grudem**) **Tozer**, "Love is not something God has and which may grow or diminish or cease to be. His love is the way God is, and when He loves He is simply being Himself."
2. **See Exodus 34:6-7**, Then the LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; <sup>7</sup> who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave *the guilty* unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations." – *None of these characteristics of God are to be heightened above the rest, nor are any attributes present in contradiction to any others.*
3. **1 Timothy 1:17** Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, *be* honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. **6:15-16** which He will bring about at the proper time-- He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, <sup>16</sup> who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see. To Him *be* honor and eternal dominion! Amen.
4. Example Scriptures of "negative attributes" – **James 1:17, Heb 6:18, I Tim 6:16**

### C. Application

1. This is directly at odds with the belief put forward that the OT God was a God of justice and wrath, whereas the NT God is a God of love and mercy. God is the same throughout eternity. He has always been and will always be infinitely just and loving and everything the OT and NT presents us is consistent with this understanding! God's justice and love are on display in both Testaments, and they are not at odds with one another!
2. Understanding God's Simplicity prevents people from describing God's nature/character as one would approach a buffet... picking and choosing those attributes that seem tasteful and passing on those seeming unpalatable. This practice (commonly followed today) amounts to idolatry – substituting the genuine God for a god of the imagination!
  - a. *Prime example today:* God's Love
  - b. In his book: Loved by God, RC Sproul expresses doubt that there is “another attribute of God more fraught with peril of idolatry than [love]. It is the attribute most often selected at our theological smorgasbord.”
  - c. Love must be defined as God does. And all of God's attributes shed light upon the rest. For it is not so much that God “has” attributes but rather that He “is” His attributes!
  - d. **Sproul**, “For example, when we say God is immutable, we are also saying that His immutability is an eternal immutability, an omnipotent immutability, a holy immutability, a loving immutability, etc. By the same token His love is an immutable love, an eternal love, an omnipotent love, a holy love, etc.”
3. This also stands against attempts to “single out” an attribute as “primary” in the sense of “more important” than the rest. Many today emphasize the “love of God” to the neglect of “the justice of God.” We spoke a few weeks ago as “holiness” being “primary.” But this holds only insofar as we defined “holiness” to be virtually synonymous with “godliness” – to be “holy” is to be “godly.” We saw “holiness” as a term used to “sum up all that God is.”