

Studying God and His Attributes

This series has been an invitation to seek God more diligently through studying His attributes.

Ps 34:8

Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.

We have only looked at 7 attributes of God, but there are many more, so I encourage you to dig deep by yourself or in groups, to study this wonderful God. To truly know someone, it is important to be curious about them. The secret to someone's greatness is hidden in their daily routine. Don't settle for the headlines but dig deep and then become that which you behold. Emulate that which you see, particularly with God's moral attributes. I remember dealing with a team and asking whether the team members had ever been exposed to excellence. Had they ever seen what that high standard looked like. Many believers are trying to live out a Christian life that has not been exposed to a comprehensive study of the nature and character of God. In fact their exposure has been to authority figures that displayed the opposite of God's heart.

Eph 3:10

His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms..

The reality is that God has many dimensions to Him altogether in one unit, God. Knowing a list of His attributes does not mean we know Him, but studying these multi-coloured dimensions of God gives Him more to work with when it comes to revealing His nature to us. Each attribute of God reveals a dimension of God He desires to release and activate into our lives.

If an attribute is something true of God, it is also something that we can conceive as being true of Him. God, being infinite, must possess attributes about which we can know. An attribute, as we can know it, is a mental concept, an intellectual response to God's self-revelation. It is an answer to a question, the reply God makes to our interrogation concerning himself. What is God like? What kind of God is He? How may we expect Him to act toward us and toward all created things? Such questions are not merely academic. They touch the far-in reaches of the human spirit, and their answers affect life and character and destiny. (AW Tozer, Knowledge of the Holy, 16)

We are accountable for the light of revelation that we have been granted. "To openly defy Him who is clothed with omnipotence, who can rend us in pieces or cast us into Hell any moment He pleases, is the very height of insanity." — Arthur W. Pink, The Attributes of God

After having studied the attributes of God, we are called to respond to the Word beyond a mere intellectual exercise. It is time for man to come back to the place of admitting and yielding to the fact that he comes from God. The manual for living life has been given to us by our creator. The starting point of this higher life begins in a true study of our creator. He is our Father and He is where we come from. Often an estranged father is sought after by his child who is experiencing an identity crisis because he doesn't know where he comes from. In the same way, in order for mankind to grow and develop, a study of the one from whom we originate is necessary.

"We can never know who or what we are till we know at least something of what God is."— A. W. Tozer

In an introduction to his sermon on Immutability, Charles Haddon Spurgeon (January 7, 1855) stated *"It has been said by someone that 'the proper study of mankind is man.' I will not oppose the idea, but I believe it is equally true that the proper study of God's elect is God; the proper study of a Christian is the Godhead. The highest science, the loftiest speculation, the mightiest philosophy, which can ever engage the attention of a child of God, is the name, the nature, the person, the work, the doings, and the existence of the great God whom he calls his Father. There is something exceedingly improving to the mind in a contemplation of the Divinity. It is a subject so vast, that all our thoughts are lost in its immensity; so deep, that our pride is drowned in its infinity. Other subjects we can compass and grapple with; in them we feel a kind of self-content, and go our way with the thought, 'Behold I am wise.' But when we come to this master-science, finding that our plumb-line cannot sound its depth, and that our eagle eye cannot see its height, we turn away with the thought, that vain man would be wise, but he is like a wild ass's colt; and with the solemn exclamation, 'I am but of yesterday, and know nothing.' No subject of contemplation will tend more to humble the mind, than thoughts of God. We shall be obliged to feel —*

"Great God, how infinite art thou, What worthless worms are we!"

But while the subject humbles the mind it also expands it. He who often thinks of God, will have a larger mind than the man who simply plods around this narrow globe. He may be a naturalist, boasting of his ability to dissect a beetle, anatomize a fly, or arrange insects and animals in classes with well nigh unutterable names; he may be a geologist, able to discourse of the megatherium and the plesiosaurus, and all kinds of extinct animals; he may imagine that his science, whatever it is, ennobles and enlarges his mind. I dare say it does, but after all, the most excellent study for expanding the soul, is the science of Christ, and him crucified, and the knowledge of the Godhead in the glorious Trinity. Nothing will so enlarge the intellect, nothing so magnify the whole soul of man, as a devout, earnest, continued investigation of the great subject of the Deity. And, whilst humbling and expanding, this subject is eminently consolatory. Oh, there is, in contemplating Christ, a balm for every wound; in musing on the Father, there is a quietus for every grief; and in the influence of the Holy Ghost, there is a balsam for every sore. Would you lose your sorrows? Would you drown your cares? Then go, plunge yourself in the Godhead's deepest sea; be lost in his immensity; and you shall come forth as from a couch of rest, refreshed and invigorated. I know nothing which can so comfort the soul; so calm the swelling billows of grief and sorrow; so speak peace to the winds of trial, as a devout musing upon the subject of the Godhead. It is to that subject that I invite you this morning.

Jl Packer (1973) in his classic, *Knowing God*, builds from here saying: *But wait a minute," says someone, "tell me this. Is our journey really necessary? In Spurgeon's day, we know, people found theology interesting, but I find it boring. Why need anyone take time off today for the kind of study you propose? Surely a layperson, at any rate, can get on without it? After all, this is the twentieth century, not the nineteenth!"*

A fair question!—but there is, I think, a convincing answer to it. The questioner clearly assumes that a study of the nature and character of God will be impractical and

irrelevant for life. In fact, however, it is the most practical project anyone can engage in. Knowing about God is crucially important for the living of our lives. As it would be cruel to an Amazonian tribesman to fly him to London, put him down without explanation in Trafalgar Square and leave him, as one who knew nothing of English or England, to fend for himself, so we are cruel to ourselves if we try to live in this world without knowing about the God whose world it is and who runs it. The world becomes a strange, mad, painful place, and life in it a disappointing and unpleasant business, for those who do not know about God. Disregard the study of God, and you sentence yourself to stumble and blunder through life blindfolded, as it were, with no sense of direction and no understanding of what surrounds you. This way you can waste your life and lose your soul.

There are a number of reasons why it is important for us to study God's attributes. Your perception of God will influence your morality, faith and prayer life. Where you were struggling to forgive yourself you can now do so. Where you were striving to impress God and working for His approval you now abide in His love.

"What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us." — A.W. Tozer

Your perception of God will influence your morality.

Your theology impacts your morality directly. God says we must be holy as He is Holy. He commands us to love as He has first loved us. We are called to show mercy to others in the same way that He has been merciful to us. These are some of His moral attributes that He requires us to also manifest. People become that which they behold. If you believe God to be a tyrant, you may quite happily become one yourself.

Your perception of God will influence your faith

If I believe that God is a good God and generously wants to bless His children, this will affect the boldness with which I come to Him. This will influence the audacity of my prayer requests. If I know that God is omnipotent, I am not limited in the requests I make, especially knowing that His power is always going to manifest in the context of His love. Remember, it was one thing to be loving, it is another to be both all-loving and all-powerful.

Your perception of God will influence your worship

Studying the holiness of God and in essence, His otherness, has a great impact on how I draw near to Him in worship. It influences my song selection for praise and worship. It impacts the fear of the Lord in my life and my responsiveness to His instructions.

Your perception of God will influence your level of resilience

Knowing that God is merciful (committed to loving me) helps me to bounce back after failing. Knowing that God is immutable reminds me that He is not about to take back the words He has already released over my life. His gifts and callings are irrevocable. This helps me to keep believing in His promise despite the circumstances.

What are some guidelines in studying God's attributes?

1. God relates to us in an anthropomorphic manner

Simply put, He uses language that gets down to our level. Our challenge is that we tend to then all too often, humanize Him. We will always be limited in the language we have to describe His divine nature

How do you describe an infinite God using English words? How do you adequately explain His eternity without dumbing it down to human language and analogies to make your point?

Mark Jones (2017) states it this way: *Almost all that pertains to humans in the Scriptures is also attributed to God. The Bible speaks of God's "face" (Ex 33:20), "eyes" and "eyelids" (Ps. 11:4), "ear" (Isa. 59:1), "nostrils" (Isa. 65:5), "mouth" (Deut. 8:3), "lips" (Isa. 30:27), "tongue" (Isa. 30:27), "finger" (Ex. 8:19), and many others body parts. The Bible is anthropomorphic through and through. God accommodates himself to us in Scripture and sometimes appropriates to himself language that helps us to understand certain truths about him.*

2. We can categorize God's attributes in order to understand them better

Communicable attributes and non-communicable attributes.

Meta-attributes are those that qualify the others. God is simple. Mark Jones (2017) describes God's simple nature this way: God is free from all composition; He is not the sum of his parts. There is not one thing and another in God. Rather, whatever is in God, God is. He is absolute, which means that there are no distinctions within his being. God is also infinite. This means that all His attributes come in infinite doses. The self-sufficiency or aseity of God is also a meta-attribute. This helps us to understand that His power is from Himself. He doesn't have to go to another source for it.

3. Studying God requires time.

"The man who would truly know God must give time to Him." — A. W. Tozer

A powerful exercise to conduct is to do a study of how God describes Himself in the scriptures. What does He say about Himself? This is how He has chosen to reveal Himself to us?

4. Studying God must be done from a place of brokenness

We will never know God if we study Him merely as an intellectual exercise.

"God is only truly known in the soul as we yield ourselves to Him, submit to His authority, and regulate all the details of our lives by His holy precepts and commandments." — Arthur W. Pink, The Attributes of God

5. The attributes of God work in harmony with each other

In other words, they must be understood with the others in mind. It can be dangerous to study His holiness without exploring His love. It can be lethal to try to understand His mercy outside the context of His wrath. He is merciful in the context of the high standards He has set due to His perfection, holiness and justice. God does not sacrifice His justice in order to demonstrate His love. His attributes work in harmony with each other. These scriptures show us how what seems ambiguous or paradoxical can actually be embraced in God.

Romans 11:22

Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off.

John 1:17

For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

Mark Jones (2017) explains this well by stating that there is technically no such thing as attributes (plural) but only God's simple, undivided essence. Why is this important? The simplicity of God helps us to understand that perfect consistency exists in God's attributes.

6. It is important to study and apply God's seemingly negative attributes

Sixbert Sangwa (2020), in a paper, states that while the Bible reveals various good attributes of God, some scholars have struggled to understand whether God can be defined by seemingly negative attributes such as anger, wrath and jealousy that the Bible reveals about him (Chilton 2016, Robertson 2018). I believe that His love includes a type of God-kind of jealousy. This is a holy jealousy coming from a perfect God who lovingly wants us as His own. His mercy can only be fully understood in the context of His wrath. Let's not be too picky about which attributes we choose to study.

Recommended Reading on the Attributes of God

1. Tozer, A. W. The Knowledge of the Holy. New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1961.
2. Packer, J. I. Knowing God. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1973.
3. Pink, Arthur W. The Attributes of God. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1975.
4. Chamock, Stephen. The Existence and Attributes of God. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1958.
5. Bavinck, Herman. Doctrine of God (Students Reformed Theological Library) Hardcover – January 1, 1978