

Systematic Theology: Theology Proper

The Attributes of God, Part 2

What does GCBC teach?

We teach that there is but one living and true God, an infinite, all-knowing Spirit, **perfect in all His attributes.**

What are we talking about?

Jeremiah 9:23-24: “Thus says the Lord, “Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; **but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me**, that I am the Lord who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,” declares the Lord.”

The **communicable** and **incommunicable** attributes of God refer to sets of God’s attributes that He either shares with His image-bearers or He does not share with them.

What has the Church throughout history taught?

The goodness of God demonstrated to His people “a greater goodness to us, than was for a time manifested to Christ himself. ... [God the Father] He was desirous to hear him groaning, and see him bleeding, that we might not groan under his frowns, and bleed under his wrath; he spared not him, that he might spare us; refused not to strike him, that he might be well pleased with us; drenched his sword in the blood of his Son, that it might not for ever be wet with ours, but that his goodness might forever triumph in our salvation; he was willing to have his Son made man, and die, rather than man should perish, who had delighted to ruin himself; he seemed to degrade him for a time from what he was.”¹

What does the *Bible* say?

We will consider 3 communicable attributes of God today: His goodness, His mercy, and His love.

The Goodness of God

A definition of the goodness of God: “The goodness of God means that God is the final standard of good, and that all that God is and does is worthy of approval.”²

Psalm 34:8—Taste and see that the Lord is good!

Psalm 106:1—Give thanks to the Lord for He is good.

What is “good”? If God says that He Himself is good, then we have an inherent definition of what good is: It is whatever God approves. Why is what God approves good? Because if there was another standard to measure against, then there is a standard higher than He. Grudem says, “There is no higher standard of goodness than God’s own character and his approval of whatever is consistent with that character.”³

¹Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, quoted by Joel Beeke in *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 79-80.

²Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 197.

³Ibid.

This attribute is “communicable” in different ways. Particularly, to the extent that we approve of things as good in the same way that God does, we are reflecting His goodness.

Genesis 1:31—everything was *very good*. Everything God does is good.

James 1:17—God is the giver of all good gifts.

Romans 8:28—God works all circumstances for our good.

Matthew 7:11—God gives good to His children when they ask.

Psalms 136:1—The goodness of God never ends

How do we imitate?

Galatians 6:10—to the household of God

Romans 16:19—be wise in what is good

How does God’s infinity apply to His goodness? “It is impossible for God to be anything and not be completely, infinitely what He is. It is possible for the sun to be bright, but not infinitely bright because it doesn’t have all the light there is. It is possible for a mountain to be large but not infinitely large. ... When I say that God is good, that God has a kind heart, I mean that He has a heart infinitely kind and that there is no boundary to it.”⁴

James 1:17 reminds us of God’s good gifts. Take a couple minutes to list some of the good gifts you have seen from God’s hand in your life.

The Mercy of God

A definition of the mercy of God: “God’s mercy means God’s goodness toward those in misery and distress.”⁵ This attribute is a component of God’s goodness.

Mercy presupposes sin.⁶ Whether it’s the effects of sin in our lives or in this world, distress comes from sin. In the garden of Eden there was no distress. Yet there was grace—unmerited favor shown to mankind. Similarly, the angels who have not fallen have not sinned. God has never shown them mercy. But yet He has shown them favor in His sovereign will by choosing them to not fall. (1 Tim 5:21, Rev 12:4).

Over all creatures. Psalm 145:9.

Israel in Egypt. Exodus 2:23-25; 34:6.

David. 2 Samuel 24:1, 14. (Legal context: Exodus 30:11-12)

Blind men. Matthew 9:27.

In our sin. Titus 3:5-6.

Our own time of need. Hebrews 4:16.

In what ways can you testify to God’s mercy in your life?

⁴A.W. Tozer, *The Attributes of God, Volume 1: A Journey Into the Father’s Heart* (Chicago: WingSpread Publishers, 1997), 43.

⁵Ibid, 200.

⁶Arthur W Pink, *The Attributes of God* (Blacksburg, VA: Wilder Publications, 2008), 72.

The Love of God

While the love of God in one sense is an attribute of God in the way He acts, in another sense it is actually part of His very nature. When we talk about God's attributes, we talk about ways to describe His characteristics, we talk about ways that God acts, *and we also talk about* what makes up God's essence.

Let me use an example. If I talked about salt, we could describe it in terms of its shape and density and longevity. This would be to describe characteristics of the element. We could also describe salt in terms of the way it behaves under certain conditions. For example, it is soluble, it can crystallize, and it can evaporate out of water. This is to describe how it *acts*. But another way to describe salt would be to talk about what makes up the essence of salt. What is it that truly makes up salt? Salt is actually sodium chloride. And, if you have one molecule of sodium chloride, you have a one-to-one ratio of sodium and chloride ions. That is to start talking about its essence.

So when we talk about the attributes of God, we could be talking about His characteristics. To say that "God is infinite" or "God is eternal" or "God is holy" is to talk about the characteristics or attributes of His nature. But in talking about His attributes, we could be talking about the way God acts. For example, to say "God is kind" or "God is faithful" or "God is patient" is to describe *how God behaves*. This is still talking about His nature, but specifically the nature of God in His acts. Finally, we could be talking about His essence itself. What He is made up of, if you will.

A. W. Pink observes that the Bible describes the essence of God's nature in three components. I haven't dug in to see if there are more than this, but these three are true at least. There are three statements where the Bible says something like "God is _____" and is describing His very essence. Pastor Dan talked two weeks ago about one of these statements: "God is spirit." It doesn't say, "God is a spirit" (John 4:24). It says "God *is* spirit." Another statement made by the Apostle John is, "God is light" (1 John 1:5).

So I say all this because if you think about it, to talk about the love of God is an insurmountable task because it takes on all three of these aspects of talking about God's attributes: God is loving—that can describe His characteristic, God loves—that can describe His behavior, and God is love. This is the third statement by the Apostle John that describes God's nature. 1 John 4:8 says "God is love." Pink says it this way, "It is not simply that God 'loves,' but that He is love itself. Love is not merely one of His attributes, but His very nature."⁷

A definition of the love of God: "God's love means that God eternally gives of Himself to others."⁸

5 Aspects of the Love of God⁹

The love of God is uninfluenced. Deuteronomy 7:7-8; 2 Timothy 1:9

The love of God is eternal. Jeremiah 31:3; Ephesians 1:4-5.

The love of God is infinite. Ephesians 2:4, 3:17-19.

The love of God is immutable. James 1:17; Romans 8:35-39.

The love of God is holy. 1 John 1:5; Hebrews 12:6.

"The better we are acquainted with His love—its character, fullness, blessedness—the more will our hearts be drawn out in love to Him."¹⁰

⁷Pink, 77.

⁸Grudem, 198.

⁹Pink, 78-80.

¹⁰Pink, 77.

What does this mean?

“God’s knowledge, wisdom, and power are inseparable from his goodness, love, and mercy. God is independent in his goodness and love and thus is free to be good to all he has made and to love even his enemies. We can never pit God’s love against his other attributes, idolizing “love” in a way that marginalizes God’s sovereignty or goodness (including his righteousness, holiness, and so on). The clearest witness to the complete consistency between all God’s attributes is the cross. If God’s love could trump his other moral attributes, the cross represents the cruelest waste. Rather, what makes God’s love so comforting is that it is unconditioned by anything in us, expressed out of satisfied abundance rather than lack or fear. While God is not free to be unmerciful, he is free to decide whether he will have mercy on some rather than others—this is, after all, the opposite of every sinner’s just deserts. Indeed, grace is not something (else) that God gives but God’s own redeeming favor shown to the undeserving on account of Christ.”¹¹

How does this doctrine relate to the Gospel?

What difference does it make?

How should we respond?

A hymn of praise should be on our lips! This is “When All Thy Mercies, O My God” by Joseph Addison”

When all Thy mercies, O my God,
My rising soul surveys,
Transported with the view, I’m lost
In wonder, love and praise.

When in the slippery paths of youth
With heedless steps I ran,
Thine arm unseen conveyed me safe,
And led me up to man.

Ten thousand thousand precious gifts
My daily thanks employ;
Nor is the last a cheerful heart
That tastes those gifts with joy.

Thy Providence my life sustained,
And all my wants redressed,
While in the silent womb I lay,
And hung upon the breast.

Through hidden dangers, toils, and deaths,
It gently cleared my way;
And through the pleasing snares of vice,
More to be feared than they.

When worn with sickness, oft hast Thou
With health renewed my face;
And, when in sins and sorrows sunk,
Revived my soul with grace.

To all my weak complaints and cries
Thy mercy lent an ear,
Ere yet my feeble thoughts had learned
To form themselves in prayer.

O how shall words with equal warmth
The gratitude declare,
That glows within my ravished heart?
But thou canst read it there.

Through every period of my life
Thy goodness I’ll pursue
And after death, in distant worlds,
The glorious theme renew.

Unnumbered comforts to my soul
Thy tender care bestowed,
Before my infant heart conceived
From Whom those comforts flowed.

Thy bounteous hand with worldly bliss
Hath made my cup run o’er;
And, in a kind and faithful Friend,
Hath doubled all my store.

When nature fails, and day and night
Divide Thy works no more,
My ever grateful heart, O Lord,
Thy mercy shall adore.

Through all eternity to Thee
A joyful song I’ll raise;
For, oh, eternity’s too short
To utter all Thy praise!

¹¹Michael M. Dewalt, “A Summary of the Communicable Attributes of God”, Gospel-Centered Musings, Online: <http://gospelcenteredmusings.com/2015/02/10/a-summary-of-the-communicable-attributes-of-god/>