We Believe in God

Study Guide

LESSON TWO

HOW GOD IS DIFFERENT

THIRD MILLENNIUM MINISTRIES

Biblical Education. For the World. For Free.

For videos, manuscripts, and other resources, visit Third Millennium Ministries at thirdmill.org.

CONTENTS

HOW TO USE THIS LESSON AND STUDY GUIDE 3

NOTES 4

I. INTRODUCTION (0:20) 4

II. IDENTIFICATION (3:18) 4
- A. Biblical Foundation (3:47) 4
- B. Theological Variety (8:13) 5
  - 1. Augsburg Confession (9:13) 5
  - 2. Belgic Confession (10:36) 5
  - 3. Westminster Shorter Catechism (12:07) 6
- C. Biblical Perspectives (19:12) 7
  - 1. Divine Transcendence (20:08) 7
  - 2. Divine Immanence (33:45) 10

III. INTEGRATION (39:44) 11
- A. Biblical Foundation (40:48) 11
- B. Theological Variety (47:12) 12
  - 1. Augsburg Confession (48:03) 12
  - 2. Belgic Confession (49:49) 13
  - 3. Westminster Shorter Catechism (51:26) 13
- C. Biblical Perspectives (53:09) 13
  - 1. Being (54:25) 14
  - 2. Wisdom (58:34) 15
  - 3. Power (1:01:42) 16
  - 4. Holiness (1:05:51) 17
  - 5. Justice (1:09:24) 18
  - 6. Goodness (1:13:05) 19
  - 7. Truth (1:19:04) 20

IV. CONCLUSION (1:23:33) 21

REVIEW QUESTIONS 22

APPLICATION QUESTIONS 25

© 2015 by Third Millennium Ministries www.thirdmill.org

HOW TO USE THIS LESSON AND STUDY GUIDE

This study guide is designed for use in conjunction with the associated video lesson. If you do not have access to the video, the study guide will also work with the audio and/or text versions of the lesson. Additionally, the lesson and study guide are intended to be used in a learning community, but they also can be used for individual study if necessary.

- **Before you watch the lesson**
  - **Prepare** — Complete any recommended readings.
  - **Schedule viewing** — In the Notes section of the study guide, the lesson has been divided into sections that correspond to the video. Using the time codes found in parentheses beside each major division, determine where to begin and end your viewing session. IIIM lessons are densely packed with information, so you may also want to schedule breaks. Breaks should be scheduled at major divisions.
- **While you are watching the lesson**
  - **Take notes** — The Notes section of the study guide contains a basic outline of the lesson, including the time codes for the beginning of each section and key notes to guide you through the information. Many of the main ideas are already summarized, but make sure to supplement these with your own notes. You should also add supporting details that will help you to remember, describe, and defend the main ideas.
  - **Record comments and questions —** As you watch the video, you may have comments and/or questions on what you are learning. Use the margins to record your comments and questions so that you can share these with the group following the viewing session.
  - **Pause/replay portions of the lesson** — You may find it helpful to pause or replay the video at certain points in order to write additional notes, review difficult concepts, or discuss points of interest.
- **After you watch the lesson**
  - **Complete Review Questions** — Review Questions are based on the basic content of the lesson. You should answer Review Questions in the space provided. These questions should be completed individually rather than in a group.
  - **Answer/discuss Application Questions** — Application Questions are questions relating the content of the lesson to Christian living, theology, and ministry. Application questions are appropriate for written assignments or as topics for group discussions. For written assignments, it is recommended that answers not exceed one page in length.

© 2015 by Third Millennium Ministries www.thirdmill.org

Notes

I. Introduction (0:20)

Divine attributes: The perfections of God's essence revealed through a variety of historical manifestations.

God's incommunicable attributes – how God is wondrously different from his creation.

II. Identification (3:18)

A. Biblical Foundation (3:47)

Scripture affirms the fact that God is incomparable — matchless, without equal, supreme (1 Kings 8:23; Psalm 71:19, 86:8, 89:6).

In 2 Samuel 7:22, David revealed that God's incomparability is essential to what makes God, God (also Isaiah 40–46; Job 40–41).

Scripture consistently reveals God's incomparability, calling us to learn all we can about how God is different from his creation.

© 2015 by Third Millennium Ministries www.thirdmill.org

B. Theological Variety (8:13)

Scripture doesn't give a complete, authoritative list of God's incommunicable attributes.

Evangelicals have created different lists of God's incommunicable attributes.

1. Augsburg Confession (9:13)

"*There is one Divine Essence which is called and which is God: eternal, without body, without parts, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness*" (Article 1).

Incommunicable attributes identified in the *Augsburg Confession*:

- eternal
- without body
- without parts
- infinite

2. Belgic Confession (10:36)

"*There is one only simple and spiritual Being, which we call God … he is eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, immutable, infinite, almighty, perfectly wise, just, good, and the overflowing fountain of all good*" (Article 1).

© 2015 by Third Millennium Ministries www.thirdmill.org

Incommunicable attributes identified in the *Belgic Confession*:

- simple (not divided into parts)
- eternal
- incomprehensible (cannot be understood completely)
- invisible
- immutable (unchangeable)
- infinite

3. Westminster Shorter Catechism (12:07)

"*God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth*" (Question 4).

Incommunicable attributes identified in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*:

- infinite
- eternal
- unchangeable

More often than not, differences in our lists of God's incommunicable attributes represent little more than variety in terminology.

© 2015 by Third Millennium Ministries www.thirdmill.org

Because our *concepts* of God aren't significantly different, we should look beyond particular terms and focus on the concepts that they signify.

Other terms for God's attributes commonly referred to by evangelicals:

- omnipresence – God is everywhere.
- omniscience – God knows everything.
- omnipotence – God is all-powerful.
- aseity – God is self-sufficient and independent from his creation.
- sovereignty – God is in total control of creation.

C. Biblical Perspectives (19:12)

We must take into account a broad range of biblical perspectives about God to avoid serious misunderstandings of his incommunicable attributes.

1. Divine Transcendence (20:08)

Divine transcendence – God is above and beyond creation.

© 2015 by Third Millennium Ministries www.thirdmill.org

The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* speaks of divine transcendence by listing three incommunicable perfections:

- **Infinite –** God's perfections are without limits.

  Biblical passages that proclaim God's infinity:

  - 1 Kings 8:27 – God cannot be limited by space.
  - Romans 11:33 – God's knowledge and wisdom can't be measured.
  - Psalm 139:6 – knowledge of God is "too wonderful … too lofty … to attain."

- **Eternal –** God's perfections are not subject to time.

  Biblical passages that proclaim God's eternality:

  - 1 Timothy 1:17 – God is the eternal Ruler.
  - Revelation 4:8 – God is the one "who was, and is, and is to come."
  - 2 Peter 3:8 – God transcends all of history.

- **Unchangeable –** God's perfections cannot change.

  Biblical passages that proclaim that God is unchangeable:

  - Malachi 3:6 – God himself said he is unchangeable.
  - Numbers 23:19 – God does not change his mind.
  - James 1:17 – God "does not change like shifting shadows."

© 2015 by Third Millennium Ministries www.thirdmill.org

Some argue that God's incommunicable attributes form an impenetrable barrier between God and his creation:

- Because God is infinite, he never investigates circumstances.

  But in Genesis 18:20-21, God sent angelic spies to investigate the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah.

- Because God is eternal, he never waits to react to human obedience and disobedience.

  But Deuteronomy 8:2 tells us that God waited to judge Israel until after they had failed their tests of obedience.

- Because God is unchangeable, he never responds to prayers.

  But in Exodus 32:14, God responded to Moses' prayer and refrained from destroying his people.

Scripture is clear that God is fully and genuinely engaged with his finite, temporal and changing creation.

© 2015 by Third Millennium Ministries www.thirdmill.org

2. Divine Immanence (33:45)

Divine immanence – God's involvement with his creation

Scripture reports God's historical manifestations – the ways God involved himself in biblical history – using:

- descriptions
- names and titles
- metaphors and similes
- actions

Some Christians stress divine immanence to such a degree that they reject God's incommunicable attributes:

- God must be finite because he asks questions, expresses frustration, and doesn't immediately overcome evil.
- God is not eternal because he waits to act until after he tests his people, he offers salvation, and he threatens judgment.
- God is changeable because he answers prayer, relents, and revises guiding principles.

But to deny that God is infinite, eternal and unchangeable in these ways is to strike at the heart of biblical faith.

© 2015 by Third Millennium Ministries www.thirdmill.org

The Scriptures call us to embrace both God's transcendence and his immanence (Psalm 115:3):

- Because God is infinite, he can fully enter the realm of the finite as he wishes.
- Because God is eternal, he can participate within time in any way he chooses.
- Because God is unchangeable in all of his perfections, he engages his changing creation as he pleases.

We must embrace the full breadth of biblical teachings on God's transcendence *and* immanence to gain a proper understanding of God's incommunicable attributes.

III. Integration (39:44)

Biblical authors treated all divine attributes as closely interconnected.

A. Biblical Foundation (40:48)

"Simplicity of God" – God's essence is not a composite.

- "without parts" – *Augsburg Confession*
- "one … simple and spiritual Being" – *Belgic Confession*

Scripture supports belief in God's simplicity: "the Lord is one" (Deuteronomy 6:4).

© 2015 by Third Millennium Ministries www.thirdmill.org

Unlike the gods of other nations, God could not be divided into parts between one place and another (James 2:19).

God's perfections are not different parts of God; they are fully unified, interconnected qualities of his one essence.

B. Theological Variety (47:12)

To one degree or another, evangelicals have affirmed the value of integrating God's communicable and incommunicable attributes.

1. Augsburg Confession (48:03)

God is: "*eternal, without body, without parts, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness*."

The Latin text indicates that God is *infinite* ("*immensus"*) in his power, *infinite* in his wisdom, and *infinite* in his goodness.

The *Confession* acknowledges that God's incommunicable attribute of infinity should be fully integrated with his communicable attributes.

© 2015 by Third Millennium Ministries www.thirdmill.org

2. Belgic Confession (49:49)

God is: "*eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, immutable, infinite, almighty, perfectly wise, just, [and] good*."

The original French indicates that God is *perfectly* ("*tout"*) mighty, *perfectly* wise, *perfectly* just, and *perfectly* good.

Like the *Augsburg Confession*, the *Belgic Confession* views God's communicable attributes in the light of his infinity.

3. Westminster Shorter Catechism (51:26)

"*God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth*."

The *Catechism* answers how God is infinite, eternal and unchangeable by looking *through* these attributes to his communicable attributes.

The *Shorter Catechism* provides a systematic way of integrating God's incommunicable and communicable attributes.

C. Biblical Perspectives (53:09)

The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* notes that God is infinite, eternal and unchangeable in *each* of the communicable attributes it identifies:

© 2015 by Third Millennium Ministries www.thirdmill.org

1. Being (54:25)

Our being is finite, temporal and changeable, and God's being is infinite, eternal and unchangeable.

Traditional systematic theology highlights the difference between God's being and creation in two main ways:

- immensity – God's infinite, eternal and unchangeable existence beyond creation.
    - 1 Kings 8:27

God is different from his creation in that his existence is in no way limited to the realm of his creation.

- omnipresence – God's existence everywhere within creation.
    - Jeremiah 23:24
    - Acts 17:28
    - Psalm 139:7-10
    - Isaiah 66:1
    - Acts 7:48-49

Unlike any facet of the finite, time-bound, changeable creation, God's being is in all places.

© 2015 by Third Millennium Ministries www.thirdmill.org

2. Wisdom (58:34)

Two incommunicable dimensions of God's wisdom:

- omniscience – God possesses knowledge of all things.
  - Job 37:16
  - Hebrews 4:13
  - Psalm 33:15
  - Jeremiah 23:24

- incomprehensibility – God's thoughts cannot be fully known.
  - Romans 11:33
  - Job 11:7
  - Psalm 139:1-4, 6
  - 1 Samuel 16:7
  - 1 Chronicles 28:9
  - Jeremiah 17:10

© 2015 by Third Millennium Ministries www.thirdmill.org

3. Power (1:01:42)

Two ways that God's power is incommunicable:

- omnipotence – God is all-powerful.
  - Job 42:2
  - Psalm 115:3
  - Jeremiah 32:17
  - Matthew 19:26

God's power is always true to his other attributes.

God cannot lie, sin, change, nor deny himself (Numbers 23:19; 1 Samuel 15:29; 2 Timothy 2:13; Hebrews 6:18; James 1:13, 17).

- sovereignty – God's absolute control over creation.
  - 2 Chronicles 20:6
  - Job 42:2
  - Daniel 4:35
  - Ephesians 1:11
  - Romans 8:28

© 2015 by Third Millennium Ministries www.thirdmill.org

4. Holiness (1:05:51)

The biblical adjectives (*qadosh* in Hebrew or *hagios* in Greek) translated "holy," "sacred," or "sanctified" mean "separate" or "set apart."

The holiness of creatures is finite, temporal and changeable; God's holiness is infinite, eternal and unchangeable.

Two ways systematic theology approaches God's holiness:

- moral – God is separate from all evil.
    - Psalm 92:15
    - Habakkuk 1:12-13
    - James 1:13

- majestic – God is separate from all creation.
    - Isaiah 6:3
    - Exodus 15:11
    - 1 Samuel 2:2
    - Isaiah 57:15
    - Hosea 11:9

© 2015 by Third Millennium Ministries www.thirdmill.org

5. Justice (1:09:24)

Human justice is limited, temporal and changing, but God's righteousness or justice (from *tsaddiq* in Hebrew or *dikaiosuné* in Greek) is infinite, eternal and unchangeable.

God's justice is most often associated in Scripture with the judgments of his heavenly court.

- 1 Peter 1:17
- Romans 2:5-6
- Romans 9:14
- Deuteronomy 32:4
- John 17:25

Systematic theologians focus on two main areas of God's justice:

- rewards – God grants just rewards for righteousness.
  - Psalm 58:11
  - 2 Timothy 4:8
- punishments – God grants just punishments for evil.
  - 2 Thessalonians 1:6-8
  - Acts 17:31
  - Romans 3:26

© 2015 by Third Millennium Ministries www.thirdmill.org

6. Goodness (1:13:05)

The goodness of creation is limited, temporal and changeable, but God's goodness is infinite, eternal and unchangeable.

Two main categories of God's goodness in systematic theology:

- direct – God's goodness shown in his benevolence, mercy, love and patience toward his creatures.
    - Psalm 34:8
    - Exodus 33:19
    - Psalm 25:7
    - Psalms 23:6; 73:1; 145:9,15-16
    - Mark 10:18

  The most direct display of God's goodness is his eternal love for Christ and for all those who are in Christ (Ephesians 1:4-6).

- indirect – God will bring about good even through troubles and trials.

  Biblical authors insisted that the perfection of God's goodness will cause good to result from evil.

    - James 1:17
    - Romans 8:28

© 2015 by Third Millennium Ministries www.thirdmill.org

7. Truth (1:19:04)

Terms used for the concept of God's truth:

- Hebrew: *aman* (to be sure, confirmed, true) and *chesed* (faithfulness, lovingkindness).
- Greek: *alétheia* and *pistis* (veracity, truthfulness, reliability, faithfulness).

God's creatures can exhibit these qualities, but only God's truth is infinite, eternal and unchangeable (Romans 3:4).

Two ways systematic theologians highlight the truth of God:

- faithful source – God is the faithful source of truth
    - Psalm 119:43,142
    - Psalm 25:5
    - John 8:32
    - John 16:13
    - John 17:17

When God discloses truth, it is fully reliable because it is his very nature to be faithful and true.

© 2015 by Third Millennium Ministries www.thirdmill.org

- faithful to promises – God can be relied upon to fulfill all of his promises.

  Many times, what *appears* to be a promise from God is actually an offer or a threat with implicit conditions.

  If God makes a *promise*, he will fulfill it (Titus 1:2; Numbers 23:19; Psalm 33:4; Hebrews 6:18; Revelation 3:14).

Scripture presents God as infinite, eternal and unchangeable in *every* way. In this sense, *every* attribute of God is an incommunicable attribute.

IV. Conclusion (1:23:33)

© 2015 by Third Millennium Ministries www.thirdmill.org

Review Questions

1. Provide at least two Scripture references that illustrate the biblical foundation for studying God's incommunicable attributes. Clarify how each reference supports the outlook that God is wondrously different from his creation.

2. Evangelicals have created a variety of lists naming God's attributes. Compare and contrast the terms and phrases used for God's incommunicable attributes found in the three historical documents cited in this lesson.

© 2015 by Third Millennium Ministries www.thirdmill.org

3. When studying God's incommunicable attributes, we need to remember that God is both transcendent and immanent. What do these terms mean? How does Scripture support both perspectives?

4. Integrating God's attributes accords with the longstanding Christian doctrine of the simplicity of God. Explain what is meant by God's simplicity.

© 2015 by Third Millennium Ministries www.thirdmill.org

5. The historical documents cited in this lesson all affirm the value of integrating God's attributes. How is this idea distinguished in each of the three documents?

6. Choose three of God's communicable attributes listed in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Question 4. Explain how each can be integrated with God's incommunicable attributes. Cite Scripture texts to support your conclusions.

© 2015 by Third Millennium Ministries www.thirdmill.org

Application Questions

1. God is wondrously different from his creation. How does God's "otherness" produce in you a holy fear of him? How does it give you confidence?

2. God is infinite, eternal and unchangeable. How do these three perfections shape your understanding of God's nature? How might an awareness of these attributes help you to encourage someone who is struggling with their faith?

3. Theologians sometimes focus more heavily on either God's transcendence or his immanence. Do you tend to see God as more distant or more near to his creation? Why must we find a balance between these two ideas?

4. Jesus is the perfect visible manifestation of God's invisible qualities. Choose an event in Jesus' life from one of the Gospels, and describe how this event should inform our understanding of God’s character and attributes.

5. God's sovereignty means he exercises absolute control over his creation. What circumstances might tempt you to doubt God's sovereignty? How can you continue to have faith in God’s sovereignty when it's difficult to see his control over your life and circumstances?

6. What does it mean to "be holy as God is holy"? How can you encourage those in your area of ministry to live lives that are "sacred" and "set apart" in this fallen world?

7. God’s nature is to grant just rewards for righteousness and just punishments for evil. How do his just rewards for those in Christ humble you to live in gratitude? How do his just punishments for sin encourage you to reach those who are not believers in Christ?

8. Reflect for a moment on God’s goodness and the love he displayed toward his Son. How does this shape your understanding of God's love for you? How can you share God’s goodness with those in your sphere of influence?

9. The indirect goodness of God means that he will bring about good even through suffering and trials. Describe a time when God produced good from your trials. How might you use this experience to reassure others who are in the midst of suffering?

10. What is the most significant thing you learned in this lesson?

© 2015 by Third Millennium Ministries www.thirdmill.org