

We Believe in God

Lesson 3

How God Is Like Us

Manuscript



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INTRODUCTION

A story is told of a highly respected mathematics scholar and teacher. His books and lectures went far beyond the reach of the average person, and often beyond the reach of his most advanced students. But one day, the reputation of this world-famous professor changed forever. Several international students spent Christmas day with him and his family, and they saw a side of him they'd never imagined. Surrounded by his grandchildren and guests, this erudite professor sat on the floor, happily playing games designed for four- and five-year-olds. The students reported the next day, "It was hard to believe that someone like him could be so much like us."

In many respects, the Scriptures teach this same kind of thing about God. They make it clear that God transcends his creation — he is utterly different. But, they also reveal many similarities between God and creation. As hard as it may be to understand, the Scriptures teach that God is also *like* us.

This is the third lesson in our series, *We Believe in God*, and we've entitled it, "How God Is Like Us." In this lesson, we'll look at what theologians commonly call God's communicable attributes, the ways that God and his creation are similar. Earlier in this series, we defined God's attributes as:

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

You'll recall that evangelical theologians have often categorized God's attributes into two groups. God's incommunicable attributes are the perfections of his essence that make him utterly different from his creation. And God's communicable attributes are the perfections of God's essence that are similar to qualities of his creation. In this lesson, we'll turn our attention to this second class of divine perfections, the communicable attributes of God.

Our exploration of "How God Is Like Us" will divide into two main parts. First, we'll explore the biblical foundations for pursuing this facet of the doctrine of God. And second, we'll explore the theological outlooks of evangelical systematic theologians on God's communicable attributes. Let's begin with the biblical foundations for looking into these matters.

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

Because of our human limitations, we face countless mysteries as we explore what the Scriptures teach about God. And this is certainly true when we deal with God's communicable attributes. We've learned in this series that God is utterly different from

his creation — not just in some of his perfections, but in *all* of them. But at the same time, everyone familiar with the Bible knows that it often describes God and his creation as if they are very similar. Words like “holy,” “just,” “righteous,” “good,” “faithful,” “loving” and “powerful” are applied both to God and to various aspects of creation. So, as difficult as it may be for us to fathom how these two perspectives fit together, biblical faith calls on us to affirm that God is both different from and similar to his creation.

We can summarize the biblical foundations for pursuing the study of God’s communicable attributes in a number of ways. But for our purposes, we’ll look in just two directions. First, we’ll note three basic strategies that biblical authors followed as they dealt with these matters. And second, we’ll consider the Bible’s outlooks on humanity that are crucial to exploring the similarities between God and creation. Let’s begin with the three basic strategies biblical authors used to teach their audiences about God.

BASIC STRATEGIES

In an earlier lesson, we mentioned that medieval Scholastic theologians focused a great deal on natural theology. They sought to learn about God by observing nature without much direct attention to the Scriptures. And they identified three formal strategies for discerning truths about God from nature: “the way of negation” or “*via negationis*” in Latin; “the way of causation,” or “*via causalitatis*,” and “the way of eminence” or “*via eminentiae*.”

Now, throughout the centuries, Protestant theologians have rightly agreed that we can learn a lot about God from nature in these ways. But Protestants have also emphasized that we need the guidance of special revelation in Scripture. Scripture serves, as it were, like eyeglasses that bring clarity to what God has disclosed about himself in general revelation. As John Calvin wrote in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 1, chapter 6, section 1:

Just as those with weak vision ... with the aid of spectacles, will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God.

Natural theology would be what we can learn from nature. That would be the most obvious and simplest way to define what that’s talking about. Special revelation would be talking about how God reveals himself, not in nature, in our own persons, in the world around us, but in Scripture and ultimately in Christ, applied by the work of his Holy Spirit. And so, it seems the Bible will tell us that God’s invisible qualities have been clearly shown in the world around us in creation — Romans 1; Psalm 8... And for those who have eyes to see, that is clear. The trouble is we don’t have eyes to see, so we’re

blind, and so what God has done is, he's revealed himself in a special way, in a particular way, ultimately in Christ at the cross, as witnessed by his Word, Old and New Testament.

— Dr. Josh Moody

General revelation always exists. When you look at the sky, that's general revelation. When you look at moral law, that's general revelation. When you see conscience at work in people, that's general revelation... In the end, the only thing general revelation can give people is a knowledge that God exists, that God is powerful, and that God is eternal. But it's only through special revelation that one can understand this eternally existing, powerful God to be holy, righteous, good, loving, and merciful. Understanding special revelation is like finding the master key, and then using this key to decode general revelation; everything becomes visible and clear after that.

— Rev. Dr. Stephen Tong, translation

To unpack all of this a bit, we'll consider how each of the three basic strategies appears in Scripture. First, we'll touch briefly on the way of negation. Second, we'll look more carefully at the way of causation. And third, we'll note the importance of the way of eminence. Let's begin with the way of negation.

Way of Negation

In brief, the way of negation amounts to inferring truths about God by contrasting him with creation. Biblical authors repeatedly drew attention to contrasts between God and his creation — not simply contrasts with sin and evil, but also with the good qualities that God gave his creation. And they frequently honored God by pointing out that he transcends all comparisons. For this reason, this approach primarily draws our attention towards God's incommunicable attributes. But in doing so, it sets the stage for our focus on the communicable attributes of God. Ultimately, we can't begin to see how God is like us without first realizing how entirely different from us he is. So, although this lesson focuses on God's communicable attributes, the way of negation in Scripture reminds us time and again of the great mystery that, in one way or another, all of God's attributes actually are incommunicable.

Unlike the way of negation, the second basic strategy, the way of causation, primarily points us toward God's communicable attributes.

Way of Causation

In Scripture, the way of causation opens a path for discerning how God is like us by comparing God with the good things he's made. Common experience teaches us that a painting reflects the skills, emotions and thoughts of its artist. And a piece of music reflects the talents and imagination of its composer. And as a result, we can learn a lot about artists and composers by studying what they've made. In many ways, biblical authors did much the same when they drew conclusions about God from their observations of what God had made. Knowing that God is the "First Cause," or Creator, they inferred what must be true about him by noting the good qualities he bestowed on his creation.

The Scriptures make use of the way of causation in two primary ways. For one, they offer direct comparisons between God and what he has made. Listen, for instance, to the way Psalm 94:9 employs this strategy:

Does he who fashioned the ear not hear? Does he who formed the eye not see? (Psalm 94:9).

As we see here, because God "fashioned the ear" and "formed the eye," we can be confident that God himself has the ability to "hear" and "see."

What kind of God creates the beauty of the earth, except God who is himself beautiful? What kind of God creates order, except God who is himself orderly? What kind of God can give life, except the living God? There is no end to the truths we can learn about God by noting the good things God has made.

In addition to direct comparisons, biblical authors also employed the way of causation when they made figurative comparisons between God and his creation. At times, these comparisons involved inanimate objects. For instance, in Isaiah 10:17 we read these words:

The Light of Israel will become a fire, their Holy One a flame; in a single day it will burn and consume (Isaiah 10:17).

As the larger context of this passage indicates, God was going to destroy the empire of Assyria. To explain how this would happen, Isaiah referred to God metaphorically as a "fire" and a "flame" that would "burn and consume." In effect, Isaiah drew upon the similarities between the consuming powers of fire and the consuming power of God.

The same kind of reasoning lies behind other metaphors for God, like those that appear Psalm 18:2, where the psalmist says:

The Lord is my rock, my fortress ... my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge. He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold (Psalm 18:2).

Here we see that the psalmist compared God to several things God had made: a great “rock” or boulder, a “fortress,” a “shield,” a “horn” and a “stronghold.” He did this to express how God had protected him and had secured him against his foes.

The Scriptures also compare God to animals. For example, in Deuteronomy 32:10-11, Moses said:

[God] shielded [Jacob] and cared for him ... like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young (Deuteronomy 32:10-11).

And along these same lines, Psalm 91:4 tells us:

[God] will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge (Psalm 91:4).

As these and many other biblical passages suggest, there are countless ways in which the Bible points toward similarities between God and his creation. And this prominent biblical outlook establishes a foundation for exploring the many ways God is like what he has made.

Figurative comparisons are essential if we are to understand God and his attributes. We cannot comprehend God. God is not just man on a larger scale. God is God. And so, as God condescends to us and reveals himself to us, he doesn't reveal himself to us in ways that we cannot understand and cannot comprehend. But the grace and mercy of God is demonstrated as God reveals himself to us in ways that are connected to the things that we can understand. So, these figurative representations, these examples, these analogies, these metaphors, these similes, are the only way that we can begin to put together the building blocks for an understanding of who God is.

— Dr. Voddie Baucham, Jr.

In addition to the basic strategies of the way of negation and the way of causation, the Scriptures also affirm the value of the third medieval strategy: the way of eminence.

Way of Eminence

The way of eminence means the way of “superiority” or “greatness.” This approach also helps us identify the communicable attributes of God by making comparisons between God and his creation. But this third strategy is based on the biblical outlook that, even when God is similar to his creation, he is always far superior, far greater than anything he has made. As Paul put it in 1 Timothy 6:15-16:

God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever (1 Timothy 6:15-16).

By speaking of God as “Ruler,” “King” and “Lord,” Paul affirmed that God is similar to human rulers, kings and lords in many ways. But notice also how Paul stressed the superiority of God over all others. He is the “*only* Ruler,” the “King of kings” and the “Lord of lords.” Only God is immortal and only he lives in unapproachable light.

Throughout the Scriptures, we find that God has endowed his creation with power, complexity, vastness, goodness, wonder and the like. And in these and many other ways, there are similarities between God and his creation. But, while this is the case, the Scriptures repeatedly make it clear that God’s power, complexity, vastness, goodness, and wonder are far greater, far beyond what exists in creation. And in this sense, the way of eminence in Scripture helps us to remember that God is superior to us, even as he is like us.

So, we see that biblical authors followed all three traditional strategies for discerning truths about God — the way of negation, the way of causation, and the way of eminence. And taken together, these basic strategies establish firm biblical foundations for exploring how God is similar to his creation in systematic theology.

Having considered the three basic strategies that help establish the biblical foundations for pursuing God’s communicable attributes, we should turn to how the Bible’s crucial outlooks on humanity also reveal how God is like his creation.

OUTLOOKS ON HUMANITY

The Scriptures testify that creation in general is like God in many ways. And we can learn a lot about God by carefully studying his creation. But the Scriptures also teach that we can learn even more about God by reflecting especially on human beings. God has granted humanity the honor of being more like him than any other facet of creation. And this resemblance establishes a firm biblical basis for exploring the communicable perfections of God.

Modern science has made us more aware of the vast expanses of the universe. So, it’s easy to underestimate the significance of human beings. We are but tiny specks on our planet. Our planet is little more than a blue dot in our solar system. Our solar system is a miniscule portion of our galaxy. And there are countless, immense galaxies throughout the universe. For this reason, it may seem that human beings are far too insignificant to be considered when we want to learn about God. But as tiny as we are, the Scriptures teach that, in reality, human beings are the crown of God’s creation. As we read in Psalm 8:3-5:

When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor (Psalm 8:3-5).

As this passage tells us, humanity may seem small and insignificant compared to the heavens. But despite appearances, God actually made us just “a little lower than the heavenly beings” and “crowned [us] with glory and honor.”

As the author of Hebrews explained in Hebrews 2:5-9, even humanity’s subordination to angels is only temporary. When Christ returns in glory, human beings who have followed him will be exalted above the greatest spiritual beings. In Genesis 1:26, the Scriptures first acknowledge human beings’ special status when God said:

Let us make man in our image, in our likeness (Genesis 1:26).

As we see here, in distinction from every other creature, human beings are the image and likeness of God.

Now, the full range of this biblical teaching about humanity goes far beyond the scope of this lesson. But for our purposes here, we’ll simply note that the expressions “image” and “likeness” affirm that human beings resemble God more than any other facet of creation. God made human beings like himself so we could serve as his royal and priestly representatives by filling and subduing the earth for his glory. In the beginning, our first parents were without blemish. Later on, sin and rebellion against God corrupted every facet of human existence. But passages like Genesis 9:6 and James 3:9 indicate that even sinful, rebellious human beings continue to be honored as the image and likeness of God. And more than this, God calls and equips men and women whom Christ has redeemed to turn from their sin and be renewed in his likeness. As we read in Ephesians 4:22-24:

You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness (Ephesians 4:22-24).

Because human beings are the image and likeness of God, the Scriptures frequently reveal who God is by comparing him with human beings. To mention just a few examples, passages like Matthew 7:11 refer to God as Father and compare him with human fathers. Passages like Isaiah 5:1-7 and John 15:1 compare God to a gardener. God is described as a king in places like Numbers 23:21 and 1 Timothy 1:17. And God is compared to a shepherd in places like Genesis 48:15 and Hebrews 13:20. God is likened to a husband in passages like Isaiah 54:5; the list goes on and on. Of course, the way of eminence reminds us that God is superior to any human father, gardener, king, shepherd or husband. But these and countless other comparisons demonstrate that we can learn a lot about God through our understanding of human beings.

The question is raised as to whether or not we can have awareness of God and his attributes without gaining at least some awareness of ourselves in the process. And the answer is that those two, in fact, always go together. John Calvin makes this point integral to the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. At the beginning you have the knowledge of God and the knowledge of self. Without the knowledge

of God, there is no knowledge of self... We were made to be drawn to him, and so the knowledge of him draws us to a knowledge of ourselves. And then a true knowledge of ourselves is integral to knowing him as well.

— Dr. Richard Phillips

Throughout the history of the church, Christian theologians have articulated a variety of ways in which human beings are like God. But by and large, they've concentrated on three main human characteristics. We'll spend more time on these traits later in this lesson, so for now we'll simply provide an overview of these three human characteristics.

In the first place, theologians have emphasized what the Scriptures teach about the intellectual character of human beings. Even though our fall into sin has corrupted our minds, we are still intellectually superior to other earthly creatures. To be sure, the mind of God is far greater than the human mind, but our creaturely intellectual abilities still make us similar to God. As the Bible tells us, in many ways, God thinks, plans and reasons, much like we do.

In the second place, theologians have often stressed the volitional character of human beings, the fact that God has endowed us with human will. Again, sin has corrupted the human will, but unlike a rock or some other inanimate object, God has endowed us with the ability to make choices. We know, of course, that God's will is far superior to the human will, but our ability to exercise our will still makes us like God.

In the third place, theologians have emphasized the moral character of human beings as another way we are like God. Unlike any other physical creature, our thoughts and choices have moral qualities. Now, God's moral character is utterly perfect and, thus, far above anything we could ever achieve. But still, along with angels and demons, human beings are held responsible for the moral qualities of the choices they make.

Later in this lesson, we'll see how the Bible's emphasis on these three human characteristics has provided direction for systematic theologians to explore God's communicable attributes. What the Scriptures say about the intellectual, volitional and moral qualities of human existence has held center stage in formal discussions of how God is like his creation.

Now that we've touched on the biblical foundations for exploring how God is like us, we can move to our second main topic: the theological outlooks on this subject that have developed in formal systematic theology.

THEOLOGICAL OUTLOOKS

It's one thing to recognize the various ways the Scriptures teach that God is like his creation. But, as we're about to see, it's quite another thing to grasp how systematic theologians have built on these biblical foundations. Traditional Christian theologians have sought to determine as precisely as possible how God's perfections — his infinite,

eternal and unchangeable perfections — are communicable. And to do this, they've asked a number of crucial questions. For instance, what are these attributes? How are they reflected in creation, especially in human beings? And what is the best way to formulate coherent outlooks on this facet of theology proper?

There are many ways to describe these theological outlooks on God's communicable attributes. But, we'll touch on just four issues. First, we'll summarize two processes traditional systematic theologians have followed as they've approached this subject. Second, we'll focus on several historical documents that represent the mainstream of Protestant outlooks on these divine perfections. Third, we'll explore the organization of God's communicable attributes in traditional systematic theology. And fourth, we'll touch on several implications of these formal outlooks. Let's begin with the processes that systematic theologians have followed.

PROCESSES

As we said in an earlier lesson, one of the greatest challenges facing systematic theologians is that biblical teachings on God's attributes are scattered throughout Scripture. The Bible never gives us a complete, authoritative list of God's attributes, and it never methodically defines or explains them. So, to fulfill their task, systematic theologians have had to discern these various shapes and colors, and synthesize them into composite portraits, or stained-glass windows, as it were. These "windows," then, give us coherent insights into God's communicable attributes. To create these syntheses, systematic theologians have employed a number of processes.

In the interest of time, we'll touch on just two of the many processes systematic theologians have followed. First, we'll review how they've used technical terms. And second, we'll consider how they've formulated theological propositions. Let's look at their use of technical terms.

Technical Terms

The Scriptures use a wide range of vocabulary to signify God's communicable perfections. In fact, biblical authors often used different expressions to signify the same concepts. And they also used the same terms in various passages to signify different concepts.

So, to create faithful syntheses of biblical teachings about God's attributes, theologians have adopted technical terms. In other words, they've chosen to use certain expressions and assigned these expressions special meanings. Now, if every systematic theologian used the same technical terms in precisely the same ways, formal discussions of God's communicable attributes would be much simpler. But they don't. For instance, some theologians have spoken of God's "wisdom" as a broad category that includes God's "knowledge." But other theologians have insisted on distinguishing sharply between God's "wisdom" and "knowledge." In a similar way, some theologians have referred to the "goodness" of God as a broad category. They've included what the

Scriptures teach about God’s “grace” “mercy,” “love” and related terms as expressions of his goodness. Other theologians, however, have defined God’s goodness, grace, mercy and love in very specific ways.

For these and similar reasons, it’s always important not to worry too much about the particular words that systematic theologians choose to use. The goal of evangelical systematic theology is to create faithful summaries of the *concepts* of Scripture, not to mimic the diverse vocabulary of Scripture. And biblical concepts about God can be expressed in a variety of technical terms.

Theologians have characterized, or I might say, organized God's attributes in many different ways. And really, all of it is a way of just better understanding who God is. And so, when we speak of God's communicable attributes... Things like love, for example, things like truth, for example. And there's a number of others we could list. Some people's lists are small; some people's are large. In all those different ways, again, the simplest way to think about it is, what are things that human beings are meant to be like, meant to do, that God is like and God does?

— Rev. Vermon Pierre

In addition to the process of employing technical terms in various ways, we should also highlight how systematic theologians have used theological propositions to explain how God is like us.

Theological Propositions

Theological propositions are the basic building blocks of every facet of systematic theology. Broadly speaking, a theological proposition is a sentence that asserts as directly as possible at least one factual theological claim. Now, this straightforward approach to God’s communicable attributes seems simple enough; but the Scriptures reveal God’s communicable attributes in many different genres: narrative, poetry, law, prophecy, epistles, and so on. And each of these genres has different ways of expressing truths about God. So, to create logically coherent presentations of these biblical teachings, systematic theologians have had to infer theological propositions from every biblical genre.

This process of inferring theological propositions is easier with some biblical passages than with others. For instance, the Scriptures contain many claims that are already in the form of propositions about the perfections of God. David’s poetic song in Psalm 34:8 tells us, “the Lord is good.” In the epistle of 1 John 4:8, we read that “God is love.” These kinds of biblical propositions fit easily into formal theological discussions about God’s communicable attributes.

Other Scriptures offer what amount to rather straightforward descriptions of God. For example, in the prophetic book of Isaiah, in 1:4, we find that God is described as “the Holy One.” It’s not difficult to see how systematic theologians have transformed this

description into the simple proposition: “God is holy.” And in the genre of law in Deuteronomy 7:9, God is described as “the faithful God.” In other words, “God is faithful.”

But not all biblical passages fit so easily into formal systematic theology. When dealing with biblical narratives, we can often infer many different propositional statements from the same story. For instance, the account of creation in Genesis 2 illustrates that “God is powerful,” that “God is wise” and that “God is good.” The story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 illustrates that “God is holy,” “God is merciful” and “God is just.” Every biblical narrative has given systematic theologians opportunities to infer a variety of propositions about the communicable attributes of God.

We also see God’s communicable attributes in places where the Bible relies heavily on figures of speech like metaphors, similes and analogies. This is especially apparent in biblical poetry. For example, poetic passages like Psalm 89:26, and prophetic passages like Isaiah 64:8, speak of God as “father” — a metaphor that tells us many different things about God. But instead of using the multifaceted imagery of God as “father,” systematic theologians have been more inclined to straightforward propositions like, “God is good.”

Poetic passages like Psalm 24:8 and Exodus 15:3, and narrative passages like Joshua 23:10 portray God as a warrior. But systematic theologians have typically narrowed their focus to a proposition like “God is powerful.” And on the basis of poetic passages like Psalm 118:27 and the epistle of 1 John 1:5, we could say that “God is light.” But systematic theologians have been more inclined to translate this metaphor into a proposition like, “God is morally pure.”

We can see that figures of comparison like these reveal that God is like his creation. And in many ways, employing figurative language enriches our discussions of God’s communicable attributes. But, systematic theologians have been more focused on presenting these same truths about God in the form of straightforward theological propositions. And by doing so, they’ve been able to create logically coherent teachings on the communicable attributes of God.

The question of theological method focuses on Scripture because Scripture is the primary source and the absolute authority, or norm, for all of our theology. And so, when we go to Scripture, we’re always trying to ask the question, the theological question of Scripture: What is it that’s being taught to us here? Now, when we do so, as we’re driven into Scripture, what we immediately encounter is that Scripture is not a manual of systematic theology or anything like it. Scripture has an overarching narrative structure, and of course, much of Scripture is narrative in a more strict or proper sense. And we also have the Psalms, and we also have parables and many other genres that we encounter in Scripture. And so, we are faced with significant exegetical questions about, how do we move from understanding the text as it’s given to us, to the kinds of doctrine, drawing the teaching out of that text in such a way that it can become useful for theological formulation and argument? And there are, of course, statements in Scripture that are very, very direct about God...

But then there's... a lot of the theology that we're given in Scripture is, actually, requires working to those kinds of conclusions based upon what's been written... We have to employ certain basic exegetical principles in order to understand the text rightly on its own terms. And when we have done so, we're going to have insight into who God is.

— Dr. Bruce Baugus

Having considered some of the processes that have shaped theological outlooks on God's communicable attributes, it will help to consider some historical documents that represent how evangelicals have summarized this facet of theology proper.

HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS

If we were to survey the works of leading evangelical theologians, it would quickly become evident that their views on God's communicable attributes are usually very similar. We could refer to any number of lists Christians have used throughout church history to express how God is like us. But for the sake of simplicity, we'll consider the three historical documents that we've mentioned several times in this series. These documents represent common ways evangelicals have developed formal summaries of God's communicable perfections.

We'll review these historical documents by first looking at the *Augsburg Confession* written in 1530. Then we'll examine the *Belgic Confession* of 1561. And lastly, we'll survey the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* written in 1647. Let's begin with the Lutheran *Augsburg Confession*.

Augsburg Confession

You'll recall that the first article of the *Augsburg Confession* summarizes the attributes of God in this way:

There is one Divine Essence which is called and which is God: eternal, without body, without parts, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness.

This article first mentions elements that have commonly been identified as God's *incommunicable* attributes — how he is *different* from his creation. But the *Confession* also mentions God's power, wisdom, and goodness. These three attributes are commonly identified as communicable attributes, or ways in which God is like his creation, and especially like human beings.

God has endowed creation with each of these perfections, but on a smaller scale. Passages like Psalm 68:34, 35 teach that God possesses power, and that he has endowed his creation with a similar, although lesser, power. Passages like Daniel 2:20, 21 reveal that God possesses wisdom and that he has granted a degree of wisdom to human beings.

And passages like Psalm 119:68 and 2 Peter 1:3-5 indicate not only that God is good, but also that he has placed goodness in his creation. So, based on the teachings of Scripture, we can rightly say that God's power, his wisdom and his goodness are all communicable attributes.

With the list of God's communicable attributes from the *Augsburg Confession* in mind, let's turn to our second historical document, the *Belgic Confession*, and recall how it presents God's attributes.

Belgic Confession

In the first article of the *Belgic Confession* we read these words:

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.

This article of the *Belgic Confession* summarizes the attributes of God with ten terms. The first six are commonly associated with God's incommunicable attributes. The remaining attributes — almighty, perfectly wise, just and good — are commonly identified with God's communicable attributes.

Like the *Augsburg Confession*, the *Belgic Confession* mentions that God is almighty or that God has power; that he is wise and that he is good. But it also adds one more attribute when it says that God is just, or "righteous," as it may be translated. In support of this communicable attribute, the Scriptures frequently speak of God as just or righteous in places like Psalm 7:9. And passages like Hosea 12:6 and 2 Timothy 3:16 teach that human beings can be "just" or "righteous" on a creaturely scale. So, in addition to power, wisdom and goodness, it's certainly appropriate to count justice as a communicable attribute of God.

This brings us to our third representative historical document. Like the *Augsburg Confession* and the *Belgic Confession*, the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* also lists God's communicable attributes.

Westminster Shorter Catechism

To the fourth question in the *Shorter Catechism*, "What is God?" the catechism answers:

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

The last seven of these divine perfections are communicable: God's being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.

Like the *Augsburg Confession* and the *Belgic Confession*, the *Shorter Catechism* mentions wisdom, power and goodness. It also reflects the *Belgic Confession* by including justice. But the Catechism adds the being or existence of God, the holiness of God, and the truth or faithfulness of God as well. Passages like Genesis 1:1 and John 1:3 make it clear that the being or existence of creation is secondary and dependent on God's being. But we still exist in ways that are similar to God. According to Ephesians 4:24, holiness is a quality of God that is reflected in various aspects of creation, including human beings. And in Scriptures like Psalm 25:5, truth or faithfulness is not only a perfection of God, but it is also granted to human beings.

God can communicate to us certain attributes of his being, his love, his compassion, his holiness, his justice ... and probably the simplest description of this is in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*. "What is God? God is Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable" — those are the three non-communicable or incommunicable attributes — "in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth." Those are the communicable attributes of God. So, we can participate with him in those latter attributes, but being infinite, eternal or unchangeable is not ours to have. And of course, we glorify him for his infinite, eternal and unchangeable greatness in which we do not participate, just as we glorify him for allowing us to participate in his character when it comes to his being, his wisdom, his power, his holiness, his justice, his goodness, and his truth.

— Dr. Sanders L. Willson

These lists are representative of Protestant evangelical outlooks on these matters. Still, we should add that these documents don't contain every communicable attribute that theologians have assigned to God. Individual theologians have often referred to other communicable attributes as well. For instance, as we mentioned earlier, it's common to see God's knowledge listed as a communicable attribute. And in passages like Colossians 1:10, we find that both God and human beings exhibit knowledge. The mercy of God is often counted in this class of divine perfections because the Scriptures make it clear, in places like Luke 6:36, that both God and human beings are merciful. And of course, the Scriptures also stress the love of God as a communicable attribute in passages like Deuteronomy 7:9.

Having looked at the processes that theologians follow and several representative historical documents, let's turn to a third facet of the theological outlooks on God's communicable attributes: the organization of these matters in systematic theology.

ORGANIZATION

As we've seen, different representative historical documents and leading theologians have listed God's communicable attributes in different ways. Unfortunately, this variety often leads inexperienced students to struggle over which list of these divine attributes is correct. But in reality, there's an underlying organization to the communicable attributes of God. And this logical organization helps us see that there is actually a great deal of unity among evangelicals on how God is like us.

Earlier in this lesson, we saw that human beings have the privilege of being like God more than any other creature. And for this reason, the Scriptures often describe God in terms of human characteristics. In many respects, this biblical focus on the similarities between God and humanity has been crucial to organizing the communicable attributes of God in systematic theology.

Systematic theologians throughout the centuries and creeds and confessions and the like have organized the communicable attributes of God in many different ways... But by and large, when you take a look, and you start asking questions about, why is this taken first, and this taken second, and this third, the main principle that you see appearing again and again in different ways is that people organize the communicable attributes of God according to the ways they understand who people are. And the reason for this is because we are the image and the likeness of God, and God's communicable attributes are the ways he is like us... I mean, the fact is, the Bible doesn't give us a list of the communicable attributes of God. We infer them from the Scriptures, and so when you're using the connection or the similarity between God and people as your way of thinking about these attributes of God, then what you think about people affects the organization of what you do.

— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

We all know that modern sciences like biology, anthropology, psychology and sociology have offered many different ways of understanding what it means to be human. Some of these modern perspectives have much to offer; others misconstrue the true nature of humanity. But, as we mentioned earlier, traditional systematic theology has concentrated on three main ways that human beings are uniquely like God: our intellectual abilities, our volitional capacities, and our moral character. This threefold assessment of what it means to be made in the image of God has deeply influenced how systematic theologians have organized the communicable attributes of God.

In general, all of God's communicable perfections can be grouped into three broad categories of divine attributes that correspond to the ways humanity is like God: God's intellectual attributes, his volitional attributes and his moral attributes.

We can easily see how God's wisdom, power, and goodness mentioned in the first article of the *Augsburg Confession* align with these three broad categories. Wisdom deals with the mind of God and represents God's intellectual attributes. Power deals with the will of God and represents God's volitional attributes. And goodness deals with God's moral attributes.

Much the same can be said of the four communicable attributes listed in the *Belgic Confession*. The term wise falls into the category of God's intellectual attributes. Mighty represents God's volitional attributes. And the terms just, or righteous, and good represent God's moral attributes.

In a similar way, the fourth answer of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* follows a similar pattern. After the somewhat unusual category of God's being or existence, wisdom represents the intellectual attributes of God. Power represents God's volitional attributes. And the moral attributes of God include his holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.

These observations illustrate that, although these historical documents aren't exactly the same, they don't represent significantly different points of view. Despite their variety, they all focus on God's communicable perfections based on three main characteristics shared by God and human beings as the image of God.

This threefold organization also helps us assess variations introduced by individual theologians. For instance, adding God's knowledge to the wisdom of God is simply a way of distinguishing two facets of his intellectual attributes. Adding the term sovereignty alongside the more traditional term power distinguishes two aspects of God's volitional attributes. And adding terms like mercy and love distinguishes various moral attributes of God.

In this light, we can say with confidence that there is remarkable unity in evangelical systematic theology over what should be considered a communicable attribute of God. Although it's always possible to expound upon these perfections in different ways, with rare exception, God's communicable attributes tend to fall into the same broad categories of God's intellectual, volitional and moral attributes.

Now that we've considered various theological outlooks on God's communicable attributes by looking at the processes systematic theologians have employed, several representative historical documents, and the logical organization of this aspect of theology proper, we should turn to a fourth consideration — some of the practical implications of these theological perspectives.

IMPLICATIONS

There are many ways we could explore the practical implications of God's communicable attributes. But for the sake of simplicity, let's look in just two directions. First, we'll touch on our expectations about God. And second, we'll mention our imitation of God. Let's begin with the kinds of expectations that we should have about God when considering the communicable attributes of God.

Expectations of God

Unfortunately, when many well-meaning followers of Christ learn about the communicable attributes of God, they often misinterpret how God acted in biblical times, and they create false expectations for how God acts in their own lives today. God's attributes are always true of him. They don't turn on and off. They never change. But this doesn't mean that all of God's communicable attributes are obvious to everyone every moment of every day. As countless biblical examples demonstrate, God himself doesn't change, and what he does in our lives never contradicts who he is. But at the same time, we can't predict precisely how God will act in any moment in history because he displays his attributes in many different ways.

To have biblical expectations of God, we need to keep in mind a distinction that we've mentioned a number of times in this series — the distinction between God's attributes and his historical manifestations.

As we've seen, all of God's attributes, including his communicable attributes, are without limits, unbound by time and free of all variation. But as God engages his finite, temporal and changing creation, he manifests his attributes in different ways at different times. Some of these manifestations extend over significant periods of time. Some occur only here and there, now and then. But general revelation and the record of biblical history clearly reveal that God displays his attributes in ways that are never entirely predictable.

Think of how this is true of all three traditional categories of communicable attributes. God's intellectual attributes are always true of him. He is always all-knowing and wise. But sometimes, God manifests his knowledge and wisdom plainly in biblical history and in our lives today; at other times he doesn't. This is why some biblical figures acknowledged with joy what God had revealed to them, while others longed for more understanding of the mind of God.

In much the same way, God's volitional attributes never vary. He is always powerful. But throughout biblical history, and in our own lives as well, God sometimes displays great measures of his power, and other times he doesn't. This is why biblical characters sometimes lifted their voices in praise for God's mighty deeds, but at other times they cried out for God to reveal his power as they suffered under the tyranny of their foes.

And the same can be said of God's unchanging moral attributes. God is always good, holy, just, true, loving, merciful, and gracious. But biblical history and our own human experience leave little doubt that God plainly displays these moral attributes in different ways. At times, his goodness is plain for all to see. But at other times, his goodness is difficult to discern. This is why so many biblical characters offered thanksgiving for the blessings they received, while others lamented over the troubles and trials they endured.

As these variations demonstrate, distinguishing God's communicable attributes from the ways he manifests these attributes in history is crucial to having the right expectations about God.

Well, I think that the issue of being able to see God's wisdom, love, power, these kinds of things in creation, in general is more a problem of human perspective than it is of God himself. One of my much needed reminders from Scripture comes in Psalms 73 where the psalmist begins with a lament about the prosperity of the rich and wicked and that sort of thing, and "I'm trying to live for you, and yet I'm being chastened all the time," but then there's the, you know, the turning point about half way through the psalm where it says, "And these things were perplexing until I entered the sanctuary of God, and then I perceived their end." Augustine can talk about, for example, the need for the healing of the soul, that sin has done such a number on us that we think, we process, we understand things awry because our souls are in need of God's healing, and it's only when God does a work that we really can perceive and interpret properly. So, the issue is not with God, it's with our perception. And I can only say that as a person draws nearer to God ... you simply begin to see more clearly how these ideal attributes and God's workings then unfold. But it's not God's problem; it's ours.

— Dr. Bruce L. Fields

The practical implications of God's communicable attributes not only touch on our expectations about God. They also point to the importance of our imitation of God.

Imitation of God

The Scriptures never call people to try to imitate or resemble the incommunicable attributes of God. They don't exhort us to be infinite, eternal or unchangeable. On the contrary, the Scriptures call for us to humble ourselves in worship and adoration of God because he's so wondrously different from us in these ways. But the practical implications of God's communicable attributes go in a different direction. Of course, we're to adore God for these perfections. But time and again, the Scriptures call on us to imitate the communicable attributes of God.

For example, in Luke 6:36, Jesus said:

Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful (Luke 6:36).

Here, Jesus told his disciples to imitate the mercy of God. And he set the standard for what human mercy should be. It should be like the moral attribute of God's mercy.

Paul also gave similar instructions in Ephesians 4:32 when he wrote:

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you (Ephesians 4:32).

Imitating the goodness of God in his kindness and compassion is the standard of goodness for all who follow Christ. In a similar way, 1 Peter 1:15-16 tells us:

Just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy” (1 Peter 1:15-16).

Here the author interpreted the frequent call to holiness found in the book of Leviticus as a call to be like God.

The Scripture is clear that God is holy, and in 1 Peter we are called to be holy because he is holy... I had a pastor tell me that we are the only people on the planet who can reflect this nature of God's character, which is his holiness. And so, when we are being holy, when we're walking in holiness, when we're turning from sin, being separate from the world in that aspect, not only are we doing what God's called us to do, not only are we turning from sin because he called us to and asked us to, but we're actually reflecting a vital characteristic of God to other people. And so, the world can look at us; they see our holiness, they see that we're set apart, and they're seeing that most important characteristic of God's nature. And so, I think, scripturally speaking, we are to be holy because he's holy, and we do that not only to please the Lord but to reflect his character.

— Dr. Matt Carter

In both the Old and the New Testament, God calls his people to be holy as he is holy, and so the holiness of God is something that has tremendous practical importance to God's people in every age. And holiness involves at least two things. It means on the one hand to be “separate from” something, and in this case, it means to be separate from sin, so as God's people we are called not to have anything to do with sin. But then positively it means to be conformed to God morally, to be like him as much as any creature can be like God. And so, we strive in all that we do, wherever God places us, in the whole range of our relationships and employments and activities, to be like God, his character, in all that we say and do.

— Dr. Guy Waters

In terms of the three main categories of God's communicable attributes, we're to conform our minds to the mind of God. We're to conform our wills to the will of God. Our moral character is to be conformed to the moral character of God. But we have to be careful here. As we've seen, God manifests his intellectual, volitional and moral attributes in different ways as he engages his creation. And in many respects, the same should be true for everyone who seeks to imitate God. To think God's thoughts after him

means different things in different circumstances. To exercise our wills as God would have it, we must act in different ways at various times. To reflect the moral character of God requires us to live in the right ways at the right times.

For this reason, God's faithful people must learn to imitate God in the light of all that he has commanded in Scripture. The Scriptures provide us with countless instructions to guide us as we live our daily lives. We learn how to display the wisdom of God in various circumstances by applying *all* that the Bible teaches. We learn how to imitate the power of God in different circumstances by studying the *many* ways we're called to exercise our will in obedience to God. And we learn how to imitate the goodness of God in different situations by taking account of *all* the moral instructions of Scripture.

We submit ourselves to the various teachings of Scripture with the full confidence that the Holy Spirit is at work in our lives, preparing us for the day when we will be fully conformed to Christ. As we read in 1 John 3:2-3:

We know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure (1 John 3:2-3).

CONCLUSION

In this lesson, we've explored how God is like us by examining the communicable attributes of God. We've seen the biblical foundations for this endeavor in the ways biblical authors compared God with his creation, especially with human beings made in his image. And beyond this, we've also investigated how systematic theologians have developed a number of formal theological outlooks on these divine attributes. We've noted the processes they use, representative lists in historical documents, their logical organization of God's communicable attributes, and some of the practical implications of these theological perspectives for followers of Christ.

As difficult as it may be to understand, God is very different from every aspect of his creation. But as we've seen in this lesson, he is also like us in many ways. And what we've seen in this lesson about God's communicable attributes is much more than mere theory. As we grasp this facet of the doctrine of God, we understand more deeply who God is. And we also understand more fully the kind of people God wants us to be every day of our lives.

CONTRIBUTORS

Rev. Dr. Thurman Williams (Host) is Associate Pastor at Grace and Peace Fellowship in St. Louis, Missouri. Dr. Williams earned his M.Div. at Chesapeake Theological Seminary and his D.Min. at Covenant Theological Seminary. Before joining Grace and Peace Fellowship, Dr. Williams was Senior Pastor of New Song Community Church in Baltimore, MD. He also served as Minister of Outreach and Youth at Faith Christian Fellowship Church and was Co-Area Director with Young Life.

Dr. Voddie Baucham, Jr. is Dean of Seminary at Africa Christian University in Zambia.

Dr. Bruce Baugus is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary.

Dr. Matt Carter is the Pastor of Preaching and Vision at The Austin Stone Community Church in Austin, TX.

Dr. Bruce L. Fields is Chair of the Biblical and Systematic Theology Department and Associate Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

Dr. Josh Moody is Senior Pastor at College Church in Wheaton, IL.

Dr. Richard Phillips is Senior Minister of Second Presbyterian Church in Greenville, S.C. and Chairman of the Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology.

Rev. Vernon Pierre is Lead Pastor for Preaching and Mission at Roosevelt Community Church in Phoenix, AZ.

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr. is President of Third Millennium Ministries and Adjunct Professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando Campus.

Rev. Dr. Stephen Tong is a renowned Chinese evangelist and theologian, promoter of Reformed Evangelistic Movement, and the founder of the Stephen Tong Evangelistic Ministries International (STEMI), Reformed Evangelical Church and Seminary in Indonesia.

Dr. Guy Waters is Professor of New Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary.

Dr. Sanders L. Willson is Senior Minister at Second Presbyterian Church in Memphis, TN and serves on the boards of The Gospel Coalition, Union University and Reformed Theological Seminary.

GLOSSARY

Augsburg Confession – The foremost confession of faith of the Lutheran church written by German Reformer Philipp Melancthon; first presented on June 25, 1530 at the Diet of Augsburg

Belgic Confession – Confession of faith written by Reformer Guido de Brès in 1561 in the Netherlands; one of the doctrinal standards of the Reformed Church

Calvin, John – (1509-1564) French theologian and key Protestant Reformer who wrote *Institutes of the Christian Religion*

communicable attributes – Characteristics of God that can be communicated to his creation in some measure (e.g., wisdom, power, goodness)

divine attributes – The perfections of God's essence revealed through a variety of historical manifestations; attributes that only God can possess

First Cause – Theological term for God as the Creator and ultimate cause behind everything that happens in history

historical manifestations – The ways God involved himself with the unfolding of biblical history

incommunicable attributes – The characteristics of God that cannot be communicated to man (e.g., omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, eternity)

sovereignty – Theological term that refers to God's continuing rule and complete authority over all creation

theological proposition – An indicative sentence that asserts as directly as possible at least one factual theological claim

via causalitatis – Latin phrase for "way of causation," meaning to learn about God by observing the good things he has created; part of the three-fold strategy developed by medieval Scholastic theologians for pursuing natural theology

via eminentiae – Latin phrase for "the way of eminence," meaning to learn about God by noting how God is greater than his creation; part of the three-fold strategy developed by medieval Scholastic theologians for pursuing natural theology

via negationis – Latin phrase for "the way of negation," meaning to learn about God by contrasting him with his creation; part of the three-fold strategy developed by medieval Scholastic theologians for pursuing natural theology

Westminster Shorter Catechism – A traditional Protestant summary of Christian teaching, originally published in 1647