

Essentials of Christianity (pt 6)
3/28/2010

Introduction _____

Good morning! Our teaching today continues on the subject of the **essentials of the Christian faith**. We have covered **Bibliology--the doctrine of the Bible**.

Now we are on the subject of **Theology: the doctrine of God**. Under this subject heading we have discussed **God's existence**.

We are now talking about the **Person of God**. As a part of Theology we will also cover the **attributes of God, the acts of God, and God as Trinity**.

Last week we looked at various components about the person of God. That there is only ONE God. Christianity is monotheistic. This is a non-negotiable distinctive of the Christian faith.

Consequently,

^{NAU} Psalm 96:5 For all the gods of the peoples are idols, But the LORD made the heavens.

The last thing we covered under the heading of the person of God **The names of God**. Because of God's desire to reveal Himself to us, He revealed many things about Himself through the various names He used in the Bible.

Elohim, Yahweh, Adonai, etc...

Before we move on let me reiterate something I said last week: that there is going to be some overlap in these categories; what may be called an attribute by one person maybe labeled something else by another person.

Let's look together at a comment on this, which I think will provide some more clarity on what I said last week.

Many errors have been made in attempts to understand God, some of them opposite in nature. One is an excessive analysis in which God is submitted to a virtual autopsy. The attributes of God are laid out and classified in a fashion similar to the approach taken in an anatomy textbook.

It is possible to make the study of God an excessively speculative matter; and in that case the speculative conclusion itself, becomes the end. This should not be so. Rather, the study of God's nature should be seen as a means to a more accurate understanding of Him and hence a closer relationship with Him.

Then there need not be a negative reaction about inquiry into, and reflection upon, what God is like. And then there will be no temptation to slip into the opposite error: so generalizing the conception of God that our response becomes merely a warm feeling toward a blurred God (God unfocused).

Inquiry into the nature of God, then, should be neither a speculative pressing beyond what God has revealed, nor mystical leap toward a hazy, undefined something.¹

And so, moving on...

C. God is Spirit. Another characteristic of the person of God (some might call this an attribute, and this may be *what* God is versus *who* God is). But the Bible teaches that **God is Spirit**.

¹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology Unabridged (1 Vol. Edition)* (Baker Book House, 1996).

Turn to John 4:24

^{NAU} *John 4:24 "God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."*

This statement is spoken by Jesus in the context of a discussion with the woman at the well in Samaria. The discussion is about the location where people should worship God, and Jesus is telling her that true worship of God does not require that one be present either in Jerusalem or in Samaria (John 4:21), for true worship has to do not with physical location but with one's inner spiritual condition. This is because "God is spirit" and this signifies that God is in no way limited to a spatial location.

Thus, we should not think of God as having size or dimensions even infinite ones. We should not think of God's existence as spirit as meaning that God is infinitely large, for example, for it is not part of God but all of God that is in every point of space. Nor should we think that God's existence as spirit means that God is infinitely small, for no place in the universe can surround him or contain him (see 1 Kings 8:27). Thus, God's being cannot be rightly thought of in terms of space, however we may understand his existence as "spirit."

We also find that God forbids his people to think of his very being as similar to anything else in the physical creation. We read in the Ten Commandments:

You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. (Ex 20:4-6)

The creation language in this commandment is a reminder that God's being, his essential mode of existence, is different from everything that he has created. To think of his being in terms of anything else in the created universe is to misrepresent him, to limit him, to think of him as less than he really is. To make a graven (or "carved" or "sculptured") image of God as a golden calf, for example, may have been an attempt to portray God as a God who is strong and full of life (like a calf), but to say that God was like a calf was a horribly false statement about God's knowledge, wisdom, love, mercy, omnipresence, eternity, independence, holiness, righteousness, justice, and so forth. Indeed, while we must say that God has made all creation so that each part of it reflects something of his own character, we must also now affirm that to picture God as existing in a form or mode of being that is like anything else in creation is to think of God in a horribly misleading and dishonoring way.

This is why God's jealousy is given as the reason for the prohibition against making images of him: "for I the LORD your God am a jealous God..." (Ex 20:5). God is jealous to protect his own honor. He eagerly seeks for people to think of him as he is and to worship him for all his excellence, and he is angered when his glory is diminished or his character is falsely represented (cf. Deut 4:23-24, where God's intense jealousy for his own honor is again given as the reason for a prohibition against making any images of him).

Thus, God does not have a physical body, nor is he made of any kind of matter like much of the rest of creation. Furthermore, God is not merely energy or thought or some other element of creation. He is also not like vapor or steam or air or space, all of which are created things: God's being is not like any of these. God's being is not even exactly like our own spirits, for these are created things that apparently are able to exist only in one place in one time.

Instead of all these ideas of God, we must say that God is spirit. Whatever this means, it is a kind of existence that is unlike anything else in creation. It is a kind of existence that is far superior to all our material existence.

Furthermore, this kind of existence is not less real or less desirable than our own existence. Rather, it is more real and more desirable than the material and immaterial existence of all creation. Before there was any creation, God existed as spirit. His own being is so very real that it was able to cause everything else to come into existence!²

NEXT...

D. God is Invisible: Turn to John 1:18; 1Tim 1:17

^{NAU} John 1:18 No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him.

^{NAU} 1 Timothy 1:17 Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Related to God's spirituality is the fact that God is invisible. God's invisibility can be defined as follows: God's invisibility means that God's total essence, all of his spiritual being, will never be able to be seen by us, yet God still shows himself to us through visible, created things.

Many passages speak of the fact that God is not able to be seen. Jesus says, *"Not that any one has seen the Father except him who is from God; he has seen the Father"* (John 6:46). Paul speaks of God as one *"who alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has ever seen or can see"* (1 Tim 6:16).

But remember that there were events in Scripture where people saw some outward manifestation of God. For example, very early in Scripture we read, *"Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend"* (Ex 33:11). Yet God told Moses, *"You cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live"* (Ex 33:20).

Nevertheless, God caused his glory to pass by Moses while he hid Moses in a cleft of the rock, and then God let Moses see his back after he had passed by, but said, *"my face shall not be seen"* (Ex 33:21-23).

² Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Zondervan Publishing, 1994).

This sequence of verses and others like it in the Old Testament indicate that there was a sense in which God could not be seen at all, but that there was also some outward form or manifestation of God which at least in part was able to be seen by man.

It is right, therefore, to say that although God's total essence cannot be seen by us, nevertheless, God still shows something of himself to us through visible, created things.³

Keep in mind, though.

^{NAU} 1 John 3:1 See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him.

² Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is.

³ And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.

I'll speak more about this subject when we get to the Trinity.

E. God is Living: Turn to Jeremiah 10:10;

1Thessalonians 1:5-10. I'm placing this characteristic in here because of the huge amount scriptural support there is to this aspect of God's person.

We could have added this on to the section of God's existence, since that would assume He is a "Living God."

But, just as well to place it here. It is an essential quality of the person of God.

³ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Zondervan Publishing, 1994).

God is characterized by life. This idea is prominent in the contrast frequently drawn between Him and other Gods. He is depicted as the Living God, as contrasted with inanimate objects of metal and stone.⁴

^{NAU} Jeremiah 10:10 But the LORD is the true God; He is the living God and the everlasting King. At His wrath the earth quakes, And the nations cannot endure His indignation.

^{NAU} 1 Thessalonians 1:5 for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.

⁶ You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit,

⁷ so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

⁸ For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything.

⁹ For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God,

¹⁰ and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come.

F. God is Transcendent: turn to Psalm 113:4-6; Quote Acts 17:24-25; 2Chron 2:6.

The theological term that emphasizes the distinction of God from His creation, and His sovereign exaltation over it. He is not part of the universe. He is not the sum of the parts of the universe. He is not the soul of the universe. He is the eternal, uncreated, absolute, self-

⁴ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology Unabridged (1 Vol. Edition)* (Baker Book House, 1996).

contained, self-existent, Sovereign Creator by whose will and power all things exist. They depend on Him for their being; He depends on none.⁵

A few verses speak of this essential quality:

NAU Psalm 113:4 The LORD is high above all nations; His glory is above the heavens.

⁵ *Who is like the LORD our God, Who is enthroned on high,*

⁶ *Who humbles Himself to behold The things that are in heaven and in the earth?*

NAU Acts 17:24 "The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands;

²⁵ *nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things;*

NAU 2 Chronicles 2:6 "But who is able to build a house for Him, for the heavens and the highest heavens cannot contain Him? So who am I, that I should build a house for Him, except to burn incense before Him?"

Rejection of or rebellion against this essential truth lies at the root of many theological heresies:

Pantheism-- all *is* God and God *is* all.

Panentheism-- God is *in* all things.

Liberalism-- God is whatever you want him to be.⁶

Yet (as I mentioned a couple of weeks ago) God's transcendence doesn't mean that He cannot relate intimately with His creation--namely: US.

⁵ Alan Cairns, *Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Ambassador Emerald Intl., 2002).

⁶ Alan Cairns, *Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Ambassador Emerald Intl., 2002).

Turn to Jer 23:23-24; Deut 4:7 quote.

^{NAU} Jeremiah 23:23 "Am I a God who is near," declares the LORD, "And not a God far off?"

²⁴ "Can a man hide himself in hiding places So I do not see him?" declares the LORD. "Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?" declares the LORD.

^{NAU} Deuteronomy 4:7 "For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as is the LORD our God whenever we call on Him?"

These are essential characteristics of the person of God. The next thing we're going to do is to look at what the Bible teaches as the **Essential Attributes of God**.

There are a number of terms that theologians have historically used to describe the various categories of God's attributes.

I'm going to break them down into the two categories titles that I'm the most familiar with.

Incommunicable attributes of God: those attributes that God does not share or "communicate" to others) and **communicable attributes** of God (those God shares or "communicates" with us).⁷

Put another way

An attribute of God is a perfect quality or characteristic that makes him who he is. His attributes characterize him alone. It is because these qualities truly describe him that he is God. An attribute is incommunicable when it is true in any sense only of God; there are no analogies to human qualities or character. A **communicable** attribute is one in which its qualities and characteristics are true not only of God but in an analogous sense also of human beings. As divine

⁷ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Zondervan Publishing, 1994).

attributes, they are true of God in a perfect and absolute sense. As attributes of redeemed humans they are imperfect.⁸

So this is where we'll pick it up next week (Lord willing)

