

God Is

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. (1 Thessalonians 4:13 ESV)

So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter. (2 Thessalonians 2:15 ESV)

God Is Triune
December 6th, 2020
Various Texts
Rev. Levi denBok

Introduction:

Good morning!

One of the things that I most appreciate about Christmas is that it forces us to stop and to focus in on one of the most amazing things about our God. He is the God who is near. That's what the word "Emmanuel" means – God with us.

We often taken for granted just how amazing that truly is. We worship the God who has drawn near. Just think about that for a moment. He didn't need to draw near. Did you know that? God doesn't need us. He has everything He needs within Himself and He always has.

So, why then would He come to us? Why would He clothe Himself in our frailty and suffer and die on our behalf? Would you die to save an anthill in your backyard? Worse than that – we're not simply small and inconsequential compared to God... We are active rebels. We insult and reject God. We're not ants. We're like bedbugs. Would you die for bedbugs? Would you become a bedbug, so as to save the bedbugs? Obviously, that is a flawed analogy because we are God's creation and we are made in His image, but sometimes I suspect we think more highly of ourselves than we ought, and we wind up missing the GLORIOUS SCANDAL that Christmas represents.

Take a moment and really think about that this morning: God knows us completely. He hears every evil thought, sees behind every ulterior motive and understands the parts of you that lie in the deepest, darkest

recesses of your heart. While you may present well to the world, and you may have some charming, lovable moments in your life that you can point back to, when you TRULY look at yourself for all of who you are, isn't it a confounding mystery that a perfect, holy, all-knowing God would take such great pains to draw near to you?

But He did. Come behold the wondrous mystery! He came! He drew near!

This December, my desire for us is that we would be freshly overwhelmed by the wonder and the mystery of God with us. And to that end, if we're going to marvel at God's presence with us, we first need to gain a greater understanding and appreciation of who our God is.

One of the fair criticisms of modern worship music – and of course, there are some wonderful exceptions to the rule – is that modern worship music has shifted the primary focus off of God and onto self. So rather than singing about who God is, we sing about what He has done *for us*. Instead of singing about His character, we sing about *our feelings* about His character. And, to be clear, it is right and appropriate to celebrate what God does and how we feel in response to Him – we see that all over the Psalms – but it is DANGEROUS when that becomes our PRIMARY focus.

Imagine you met a man who was absolutely enamoured with his spouse and you asked him to describe her for you. What would you think if he replied, "Oh yes! I love my wife and I'd be happy to tell you about her. Let's see... Well, she brings me sandwiches! And she cleans the house! What else can I tell you about her... Well, I feel REALLY good whenever I think about her! And she loves me! So, there you have it! That's my wife."

Obviously, that was a ridiculous analogy, but I think it hits closer to home than some of us would like to admit. Listen: We need to know more about God than simply how He makes us *feel* and what He *does* for us. Who is He, Christian? Do you know Him? Are you ready to answer your friend who says, "I've heard about the Muslim god and I've heard about the Greek gods, but tell me about the God of the Bible"?

This morning, I want to spend our time unpacking the single most critical and distinct doctrine in the Christian faith. I want to help you to see, understand and DELIGHT in the fact that GOD IS TRIUNE. This is Christianity 101. This is FUNDAMENTAL. And yet, I imagine that if I were to take a poll of this room, this is the LAST thing that you would want to discuss with your unbelieving friend. I hope and pray that that will

begin to change in all of our hearts – including my own. The Trinity is not a theological puzzle reserved for the seminaries. The Trinity is not an embarrassing glitch in our theology. It is the heart of the heart of our faith! In my study for this sermon, I read this short, accessible book by Michael Reeves called *Delighting in the Trinity* and I can't recommend it to you enough. He notes:

It is only when you grasp what it means for God to be a Trinity that you really sense the beauty, the overflowing kindness, the heart-grabbing loveliness of God.¹

I can testify that this is absolutely true. My prayer life, my devotional life, and my understanding of EVERY aspect of the Christian faith has been enriched as I've slowed down to really contemplate who our God is.

This is an enormous topic and we will barely scratch the surface this morning. And that's okay. We will come back to this, I promise, but this morning I want to begin our time revisiting the basics.

Revisiting the Basics

In order to do so, we're going to be doing some systematic theology together. In our usual practice, we select one passage and then we spend our time understanding and applying it. This morning, however, we are going to focus in on a topic – the Trinity – and we are going to consider a variety of passages that will help us to systemize and understand what the Bible as a whole would teach us about the Triune nature of God. Wayne Grudem in his systematic theology gives this succinct definition of the Trinity. He writes:

God eternally exists as three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and each person is fully God, and there is one God.²

Every word in that sentence is of critical importance so let's pull it apart and consider it closely. First:

1. God eternally exists as three persons

We see this in a number of passages. Take, for example, Mark 1:9-11 where we read:

¹ Micheal Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 9.

² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 226.

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." (Mark 1:9-11 ESV)

In this breathtaking scene, we see all three persons of the Trinity acting distinctly but also in perfect unity. The Son is baptized, the Holy Spirit hovers over him like a dove, and the Father proclaims from heaven "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." God exists as three persons.

Let's stop here and spend a little time thinking about some of the unhelpful analogies for the Trinity that often get thrown around. Perhaps you have heard the old analogy that the Trinity is like water: It can exist in the solid state, the liquid state, and the gas state, but in every state, it is still water. In the same way, this bad analogy explains, God in his coldest stage exists as ice, and if you warm Him up, he exists as Son, and he can even float around as Spirit! But this analogy is dangerously unhelpful! This analogy is actually the ancient heresy that we call modalism. We hear this heresy in another popular analogy. Maybe you've heard this one. A man rolls out of bed and makes breakfast for his kids as their father, but then that same man hops into his car and pulls into work as an employee, and then, on his way home, he stops to pay his taxes as a citizen. The same man was father, employee, and citizen! And so it is with God! But again, that analogy is dangerously unhelpful. That is modalism. Modalism teaches that God is one but that He presents Himself differently at different times as the need arises.

But look again at Mark 1. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are all in the same scene at the same time! God cannot simply be one Being who takes different modes at different times because we see all three of His Persons here at the same time! God exists as three persons.

And He always has.

In John's Gospel, he begins with these powerful words:

In the beginning was the Word, and **the Word was with God**, and **the Word was God**. ² **He was in the beginning with God**.³ All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. (John 1:1-3 ESV)

John teaches us here that in the beginning the Word was *with* God and the Word was God. It is not as if God originally existed as One but that He decided to take an ordinary man and deify him so as to have company.

The Son was with the Father at the very beginning. In fact, all things were made through the Son. The Holy Spirit – the third Person of the Trinity – was there too! We see that in Genesis 1:

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.² The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. **And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.** (Genesis 1:1-2 ESV)

In the first two verses of the Bible, we see the Father creating through the Son as the Spirit hovers over the waters. Then, we are invited to listen in on this amazing conversation within the Godhead:

Then God said, “Let **us make man in our image, after our likeness.** And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

²⁷ So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:26-27 ESV)

Do you hear that? God doesn't say, “Let me make man in my image.” He says, “Let US make man in OUR image.” Here on page one of our Bibles, God describes Himself as “us.” Here, on page one, we have our first indication that there is more to our God than at first meets the eye. He is the God who eternally exists in three persons. That's lesson number one in the basics of Trinitarian theology. Second, we learn that:

2. Each Person of the Trinity is truly God

The Father is truly God. This, of course, is not a point that any would debate. All of Scripture clearly and undeniably describes the Father as God. It is in the other two persons of the Trinity where people have historically made grave errors.

The Son is truly God. Many ancient and modern heresies revolve around a denial of this claim. In the second century, a heresy called “adoptionism” crept onto the scene that taught that Jesus was simply a man who pleased God and was then given supernatural powers. He BECAME God through his obedience. A similar heresy exists today in the form of Mormonism. Mormonism teaches that Jesus was a man that earned divine status. In the same way, they claim, through righteous living we TOO can become divine. If we are righteous enough, when we die, we will become gods of our own planets just like Jesus is god of this planet.

In the 4th century, a heresy called “Arianism” rose to prominence. It denied Jesus’ eternal divinity and taught instead that Jesus was a created being. We see a very similar heresy today in the cult of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. They teach the same thing – that Jesus is not God but that he is merely a created being.

But is that what the Bible says? Once again, we read in John 1:

In the beginning was the Word, and **the Word was with God**, and **the Word was God**. ² **He was in the beginning with God.** (John 1:1-2 ESV)

Jesus is, was, and has ALWAYS been God! That is the clear testimony of Scripture. And, just so you are not caught unprepared, you should know that your Jehovah’s Witness friend will likely reply: “Well, in the Greek, the text says that the Word was A God.” That can feel intimidating because you likely don’t read Greek. But they don’t either, so don’t fret! I’m not going to bog you down with an explanation of Colwell’s Rule and the need for articles in predicate clauses but let me just assure you that their argument is wrong. In fact, contrary to their argument, the Greek word order in this verse is actually meant to *heighten* our understanding of Jesus’ divinity! D. A. Carson notes here:

Indeed, the effect of ordering the words this way is to emphasize ‘God’, as if John were saying, ‘and the word was *God!*’³

Even without being able to read Greek, the context undermines their argument. Keep reading and listen to John describe Jesus as the one through whom God created the world – the light who casts out the darkness! Flip forward to John 20 where doubting Thomas beheld the resurrected Christ and proclaimed:

“My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28b ESV)

Jesus IS truly God!

And the Holy Spirit is truly God. In the fourth century, perhaps the best named heresy, pneumatomachianism, taught that the Holy Spirit was a creation of the Son and that the Spirit was merely a servant of the Father and the Son. But that is simply not what we see in the Bible.

³ D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John (PNTC)*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 117.

We see this very clearly in the story of Ananias and Saphira that we find in Acts 5:3-4. Do you remember that story? In the early church, people were so filled with love for their fellow believers that they were selling their homes and their possessions in order to support their brothers and sisters in need. No one was forcing them to do this. It was a natural overflow of their understanding of the Gospel and their love for one another. Ananias and Saphira saw this and they decided that they wanted the church to take notice of their generosity as well. So they sold a piece of their property. But then they decided that they would keep back some of the proceeds for themselves. They were entitled to do so, by the way. It was their property, after all, and no one was compelling them to sell it. But then they conspired together to deceive the church into believing that they were giving away the FULL amount of the sale. We pick up the story at verse 3:

But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to **lie to the Holy Spirit** and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? ⁴While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? **You have not lied to man but to God.**" (Acts 5:3-4 ESV)

There is much that could be said of the wickedness of Ananias and his motives in this story, but for our purposes I want you to see the clear proclamation of the Holy Spirit's divinity in this passage. Peter says, "You have lied to the Holy Spirit... You have not lied to man but to GOD." Therefore, any theology that would deny the divinity of the Holy Spirit is an outright heresy. Clearly, Jesus understood the Holy Spirit to be fully God. Do you remember what He taught us to say whenever we baptize new believers?

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them **in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit** (Matthew 28:19 ESV)

To be a Christian is to be baptized in the name of the Triune God. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are each truly God. That is our second lesson in the basic of Trinitarian theology. Our third and final basic lesson is that:

3. There is one God

This is where our minds begin to break out into a cold sweat. We have been learning this morning that God exists in three persons and we see that clearly described in the Scriptures. However, those same Scriptures are careful to clarify that God is one. Listen to the way that God has revealed Himself to us:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, **the Lord is one**. (Deuteronomy 6:4 ESV)

The Lord is one. We find this same proclamation in the New Testament. In James 2, the Apostle wrote to challenge those in the church who had good theology but no life change. In verse 19 he argues:

You believe that God is one; **you do well**. Even the demons believe—and shudder! (James 2:19 ESV)

“You do well!” James says. He goes on to say that their correct theology is no good if it is not also accompanied with works, but for our purposes this morning, we need to see that even in the ministry of the Apostles who were fully persuaded of the divinity of both the Son and the Holy Spirit, they still held that God is ONE.

The Triune God is a perfect unity. In theological terms, we would say that God is three in *persons* and one in *essence*.

This is where we see the shortcomings of other popular illustrations of the Trinity that get thrown around. Some have said that the Trinity is like a three-leaf clover. Each leaf is distinct, and yet they together make up the clover. Or you’ve probably heard that the Trinity is like an egg. An egg is made up of egg yolk, egg white and eggshell – three parts in one egg! Both of these analogies are dangerous, however, because they don’t represent the *unity* of God. The Trinity is not like three pieces of a puzzle. The Father is not a PART of God. The Father IS God. As is the Son. As is the Spirit.

The Lord our God, the Lord is ONE. Three persons in one essence. And this leads us well into our next step as we consider the doctrine of the Trinity. Having revisited the basics, I think it would be helpful and appropriate before we go any further to stop and acknowledge our limitations.

Acknowledging Our Limitations

I confess, one of my favorite things about being a pastor is explaining complicated things in such a way that they become clear. I work hard at that, and it fills me with joy when someone comes to me after the service and says, “I didn’t understand that before, but now I see it clearly.” That’s just one of the things that makes me tick.

And for that reason, I have always struggled with texts that describe the attributes or the nature or the essence of God. He is, by His very nature, INDESCRIBABLE.

Therefore, as we have already seen, every analogy will fall flat. When we attempt to understand God on our own terms, we inevitably stumble into heresy. All too often, as Christians attempt to wrap their minds around this mystery, they become frustrated.

We get frustrated because we don't like things that don't fit into our neat and tidy systems. We want a God that we can describe with perfect precision to our unbelieving friends. Have you ever tried to describe God's Triune nature to an unbeliever? We want a God that our finite minds can contain.

But can I tell you something? It is an incredible blessing that God has not given us minds that are capable of fully comprehending Him. It is simply marvelous that the deeper we dive into understanding the nature of God, the more we come to realize that we are lowly creatures, and He is the glorious Creator! The fact that we often find this to be a frustration simply reveals that we think more highly of ourselves than we ought. Who are you, o man, to expect a God who you can dissect and explain like a science project? He is the Author of the universe! He is the eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, holy, majestic, awesome, glorious, mighty, impassible, infallible, everlasting GOD and you are a thirty-one-year-old creature that often can't remember where he left the car keys! And yet you are frustrated that God is bigger than your mind can handle? I think Millard Erickson hits the nail on the head in his systematic theology. He writes:

In the final analysis, the Trinity is incomprehensible. We cannot fully understand its mystery... One cannot explain a mystery, but only acknowledge its presence.⁴

It's not your job, Christian, to invent the perfect analogy for explaining the divine mystery of the Trinity. And it is CERTAINLY not your job to apologize for the fact that God is bigger than our feeble minds! It's your job to acknowledge the mystery. It's your job to surrender to and embrace the mystery. Further, and this is where I want to conclude this morning, it's your job to DELIGHT in the mystery! God has revealed Himself to us as the Triune God. Therefore, instead of treating Him like a puzzle that we need to solve, I think the appropriate response this morning is to fall on our knees and to delight in the Triune God.

Delighting In The Trinity

⁴ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology Third Edition*, (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerAcademic, 2013), 310,312.

When we look to the manger this Christmas, we will see Jesus Christ – the second person of the Trinity – the eternal God who is one with the Father and one with the Spirit – wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger! The Word who was with God at the beginning – the Word who WAS God and through whom all things were created – humbled Himself to walk in our shoes.

What kind of a God would do such a thing?! Who is this God that He would condescend down so as to lift us up?

Answer: He is the TRIUNE God! He is the God who is eternally three in one – the blessed Trinity. Let me point out two reasons why we ought to delight in the Trinity this morning. First, let's delight in the Trinity because:

1. God is, at His very essence, a relational God

This is one the fundamental differences between Christianity and Islam. In fact, the doctrine of the Trinity is the aspect of our faith that is most offensive and ridiculous to most Muslims.

Islam teaches that Allah is one. Islam also teaches that Allah is love. But that presents a very difficult problem. I'm going to read a lengthy quote from Michael Reeves who fleshes this out:

Traditionally, Allah is said to have ninety-nine names, titles which describe him as he is in himself in eternity. One of them is "The Loving." But how could Allah be loving in eternity? Before he created there was nothing else in existence that he could love (and the title does not refer to self-centred love but love for others)... that in itself raises an enormous problem: if Allah needs his creation to be who he is in himself ("loving"), then Allah is dependent on his own creation, and one of the cardinal beliefs of Islam is that Allah is dependent on nothing.⁵

Too many Christians are intimidated by and perhaps even embarrassed about the doctrine of the Trinity. But this doctrine is the fundamental core which ties everything else together! If God were not triune, then He never could have known love without us. He could never be Father without us. If God was alone and void of relationship before the foundation of the world then He would have learned love from US.

⁵ Micheal Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 40.

But that's not who the God of the Bible is. Before the foundation of the world, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit lived in perfect unity. Before the foundation of the world, there was love. There was relationship.

That's why loneliness and isolation feel so terrible. There's something at your very core that tells you that you were made for relationship because you were made in the image of the Triune God who ever lives in relationship.

And that eternal, life-giving, love-outpouring relationship leads to the second reason why we ought to delight in the Trinity this morning:

2. God is, at His very essence, a giving God

Let's end where we began. Why did God make you? Why did God draw near?

Was He lonely?

Was He lacking in some way? Lacking in fulfilment? Lacking in relationship? Lacking in service?

In John 17, Jesus pulls back the veil and provides us with a brief glimpse into life before creation. He prays:

Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because **you loved me before the foundation of the world.** (John 17:24 ESV)

Do you see that? He wasn't lonely! Before the foundation of the world, there was fatherly love! I really appreciate the way that Michael Reeves unpacks this. He writes:

Now that insight is like a stick of dynamite in all our thoughts about God. For if, before all things, God was eternally a Father, then this God is an inherently outgoing, life-giving God. He did not give life for the first time when he decided to create; from eternity he has been life giving.⁶

That is hugely significant! God made us and redeemed us and drew near to us because He is fundamentally at his very core a generous, giving, loving Father.

⁶ Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 24.

God could have revealed Himself in any number of ways! He could have revealed Himself as God the Tyrant – forever to be feared! He could have revealed Himself as God the Demanding – forever to be served! But that's not who He is. He is God the Father. And, through the life, death and resurrection of the Son, having been indwelt and sealed by the Holy Spirit, we have mercifully been invited into this eternal, overflowing love so as to enjoy and glorify Him forever. God is, at His very nature, a God who GIVES.

For God so loved the world, that **he gave** his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16 ESV)

In his book *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis writes:

We want cattle who can finally become food; He wants servants who can finally become sons. We want to suck in, He wants to give out. We are empty and would be filled; **He is full and flows over.**⁷

That is why Jesus – the second person of the Trinity – came down into our brokenness. It is because God is a generous, life-giving, OVERFLOWING, Triune God. The 16th century Anglican theologian Richard Sibbes said:

If God had not a communicative, spreading goodness, he would never have created the world. The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost were happy in themselves, and enjoyed one another before the world was. Apart from the fact that God delights to communicate and spread his goodness, there had never been a creation or redemption.⁸

But He does delight to spread and share His goodness. Therefore, He has fashioned us in His image and invited us into His family. Isn't that amazing? Isn't that beautiful? That's who our God is. God, in three persons, blessed Trinity. And this is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Benediction

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. (2 Corinthians 13:14 ESV)

⁷ C.S. Lewis in *The Screwtape Letters* as quoted by Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 45.

⁸ Richard Sibbes as quoted by Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 48.