

MAJOR BIBLE DOCTRINES

Part 70: God: the nature of God (3)

Communicable attributes are perfections of God, of which a resemblance is communicated to man, as God's image.¹ "The communicable attributes are those which are possessed in a finite degree, more or less, by men and angels" (Shedd).

The communicable attributes are perfections which belong to the essence of God. They are therefore, God Himself, just as the incommunicable attributes. Not one attribute, as it is in God, can be communicated to the creature—if it could, then man would be deified. God does not share even one of His attributes, but has placed some small likeness of them in man who was created in His image—G.H. Kersten [*Reformed Dogmatics*, vol.1, 60]

I. The Nature of God

A. His communicable attributes²

1. *Holiness*. The key idea of holiness is *separation*. God is separate from all creation, and from moral evil. He "dwells in unapproachable (transcendent) light (purity)" (1Tim.6:16). [1] God is separate from all else. In this sense, everything associated with God is holy, or separated from all else (i.e. temple utensils were holy, Ex.30:29). God is holy because He is separate and exalted above all else. "Primarily, God's holiness refers to His greatness and His transcendence, to the fact that he is above and beyond anything in the universe. In that regard, the holiness of God is incommunicable. He alone in His being transcends all created things" (Sproul). "The holiness of God, in its original sense, denotes that He is absolutely distinct from all His creatures, and is exalted above them in infinite majesty" (Berkhof). "For You, LORD, are most high above all the earth; You are exalted far above all gods" (Ps.97:9). "Thus says the High and Lofty One, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place" (Isa.57:15). "I am God and not man – the Holy One among you" (Hos.11:9). [2] God is morally pure and righteous. "Secondly, the word *holy*, as it is applied to God, refers to His purity, His absolute moral and ethical excellence. This is what God has in mind when He commands holiness from His creatures: 'Be holy, for I am holy' (Lev.11:44)" (Sproul). "By the holiness of God is meant God's absolute internal moral purity" (VanTil). "The holiness of God is that essential perfection of his nature, which lies in perfect freedom from, and hatred of all sin, and in perfect love to every thing holy and pure" (Brown). "Are You not from everlasting, O LORD my God, my Holy One...You are of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on wickedness" (Hab.1:12-13).

(1) Ex.15:11; Job 15:14-16; Isa.6:3; 1Jn.1:5; Rev.15:3-4

2. *Goodness*. "Scripture speaks of the goodness of God in a twofold sense: with respect to God Himself, and with respect to the creatures" (Kersten). With respect to Himself, He is morally and eternally good. "Good and upright is the LORD" (Ps.25:8). "No one is good except God alone" (Mk.10:18). With respect to His creation, this refers to His benevolence, kindness, and goodwill. "You are good, and do good" (Ps.119:68). "The LORD is good to all, and His tender mercies are over all His works" (Ps.145:9). His goodness is general, "The earth is full of the goodness of the LORD" (Ps.33:5), and special, "Truly God is good to Israel, to such as are pure in spirit" (Ps.73:1), "The LORD is good to them that wait for Him, to the soul that seeks Him" (Lam.3:25). This goodness is

¹ Though this image was largely lost in the fall, it's radically restored in regeneration (Eph.4:24; Col.3:10; 2Pet.1:4), increased through sanctification (Eph.5:1; 1Tim.4:7; 1Pet.1:15-16), and fully experienced at glorification.

² Communicable attributes can be viewed essentially (as they are in God), and relationally (as they relate to man and creation). For example, God is love (essentially), and loving (relationally).

manifested in His love, grace, and mercy,³ each having general and special aspects. "Goodness, in the Scriptural sense of the term, includes...love, mercy, and grace" (Hodge). [1] Love. Love is God's goodness to His rational creation. "When the goodness of God is exercised towards His rational creatures, it assumes the higher character of love" (Berkhof). [a] Love of benevolence. This refers to God blessing man with temporal and eternal gifts. "God's love consists in his unselfish disposition of goodwill toward men, which moves him to benevolently to supply their needs" (Nichols). "Love your enemies and do good...and you shall be sons of the Most High: for He is kind to the unthankful and evil" (Lk.6:36). "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn.3:16). [b] Love of complacency. This refers to a love of delight and satisfaction. "The love of God's delight has the elect as its object as they are viewed in Christ, being clothed with His satisfaction and holiness, perfect and complete in Him (Col.2:10)" (Brakel). "The LORD your God in your midst, the Mighty One, will save; He will take great delight in you, He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing" (Zeph.3:17). "The LORD takes pleasure in those who fear Him" (Ps.147:11). "The LORD takes pleasure in His people" (Ps.149:4). "I will rejoice over them to do them good" (Jer.32:41; Isa.62:5; 65:19). [2] Grace. Grace is God's goodness to the guilty. It's His kindness to ill-deserving, or hell-deserving sinners. "Ascribed to God, grace is the voluntary, unrestrained, and unmerited favor that he shows to sinners and that, instead of the verdict of death, brings them righteousness and life" (Bavinck). "The LORD your God is gracious and merciful" (2Chron.30:9). "May the God of all grace...perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you" (1Pet.5:10). [3] Mercy. Mercy is God's goodness to the miserable. "As grace exercises itself about man as a sinner (granting the pardon of his sin) so mercy is exercised about man as miserable (relieving his misery)" (Turretin). "The mercy of God is that perfection of God whereby He bestows goodness to the *miserable sinner*. Thus its recipients are the miserable, and in this respect it differs from grace whose recipients are the *guilty*" (Kersten). "All blessings bestowed upon the natural man are mercy, in so far as they succor his distress, and grace, so far as they are bestowed upon the undeserving" (Shedd). Closely related to mercy is compassion. "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion" (Rom.9:15). "Mercy is the benevolent compassion of God towards man as a sinner" (Shedd).

(1) Ps.145:8-9; Ps.116:5; Joel 2:12-13

3. *Power*. Scripture describes God's power as His sovereignty and strength. [1] Sovereignty. "*Power* in its primary meaning is to have a just claim upon someone, authority, and supreme jurisdiction" (Brakel). "This perfection indicates His absolute dominion, which he received from no one, but which belongs to Him as God, and by which he can do whatever He pleases" (Kersten). "But our God is in heaven; He does whatever He pleases" (Ps.115:3). "Whatever the LORD pleases He does, in heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deep places" (Ps.135:6). [2] Strength.⁴ "The power of God in its second meaning...refers to the power and strength of God whereby He is able to execute and accomplish everything which is in agreement with His character and His truth – also to create whatever is conceivable and to do whatever He wishes to do" (Brakel). "Great is our Lord, and

³ I will cause all My goodness to pass in from of you, and I will proclaim My name...The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth—Exodus 33:19—34:6

⁴ The power of God is that ability and strength whereby He can bring to past whatsoever He pleases, whatsoever His infinite wisdom may direct, and whatsoever the infinite purity of His will may resolve...As holiness is the beauty of all God's attributes, so power is that which gives life and action to all the perfections of the Divine nature. How vain would be the eternal counsels, if power did not step in to execute them. Without power His mercy would be but feeble pity, His promises an empty sound, His threatenings a mere scare-crow. God's power is like Himself: infinite, eternal, incomprehensible; it can neither be checked, restrained, nor frustrated by the creature—Stephen Charnock [*Existence and Attributes*, vol.2, 13-15]

mighty in power" (Ps.147:5). "Behold, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh. Is there anything too hard for Me" (Jer.32:27).⁵

(1) Ps.62:11-12; Jer.32:17-19; Rev.4:8-11

4. *Patience*. This attribute is illustrated by various terms, slow to anger (wide nostrils), patience (wait-long), long-suffering and forbearance (long-tolerance). "The LORD is slow to anger and great in power" (Neh.1:3). God's patience is evidenced in: [1] delaying judgment upon the wicked. "This is an essential attribute of God whereby He refrains Himself from initially pouring out His full wrath upon the sinner, thus postponing his punishment – meanwhile bestowing benefits upon him" (Brakel). "Return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness" (Joel 2:13). "Therefore the LORD waits to be gracious to you" (Isa.30:18). [2] Overlooking the sins of His OT elect. "In His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed" (Rom.3:25). [3] Forbearing with the unconverted elect. "God is long-suffering towards the elect prior to their conversion. 'The Lord...is long-suffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance' (2Pet.3:9)" (Brakel). "For this reason I obtained mercy, that in my first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life" (1Tim.1:16). [4] Enduring with weak and needy saints. God is slow to Fatherly anger. "O LORD, do not rebuke me in Your anger, nor chasten me in Your wrath. Be gracious to Me, O LORD" (Ps.6:1-3).

(1) Lk.13:6-9; Rom.2:4

5. *Truth (faithfulness)*. [1] God is truth. He is the true God. "In Him the idea of the Godhead is perfectly realized; he is all that He as God should be, and as such is distinguished from all so-called gods, which are called vanity and lies" (Berkhof). "The LORD is the true God; He is the living God and the everlasting King" (Jer.10:10). "You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (1Thess.1:9). [2] God is truthful. All that He says and does is reliable. "God is not a man, that he should lie" (Num.23:19). "The truth of the LORD is everlasting" (Ps.117:2). "And now, O Lord GOD, You are God, and Your words are true" (2Sam.7:28). "There always has been, is now, and always will be a precise equivalency between what he thinks and what he says—what he says inerrantly reflects what he thinks and what he thinks is infallibly reflected in what he says: his Word is truth and therefore it is reliable" (Reymond). [3] God is faithful (trustworthy). "As such a God of truth and faithfulness, he keeps covenant (Duet.4:31; 7:9; Ps.40:11; Hos.11:1) and is a completely trustworthy refuge for all his people (Ps.31:5-6; 36:5ff.;43:2; 54:7; 57:3; 71:22; 96:13; 143:1; 146:6)" (Bavinck). "Know therefore that the LORD your God, He is God, the faithful God, who keeps His covenant" (Deut.7:9). "All the paths of the LORD are mercy and truth, to such as keep His covenant and His testimonies" (Ps.25:10). "If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself" (2Tim.2:13). "The Truth or veracity of God, is that attribute of his nature by virtue of which he performs what he has said" (Shedd). "O LORD God Almighty, who is like You? You are mighty, O LORD and Your faithfulness surrounds You" (Ps.89:8).

(1) Deut.32:3-4; 2Thess.5:23-24; Tit.1:1-3

6. *Justice (righteousness)*. God is just and righteous in Himself (absolute), and in all His ways (relative). "Righteous are You, O Lord, and upright are Your judgments" (Ps.119:137). "There is no

⁵ God cannot do anything inconsistent with the perfection of the Divine nature. Under this category, fall the instances mentioned in Heb.6:18, 'It is impossible for God to lie.' and 2 Tim.2:13, 'He cannot deny himself;' and James 1:13, 'God cannot be tempted.'...But God cannot see anything more desirable than what he already has; and his understanding is infallible, so that he cannot mistake an apparent for a real good...God is not able to die, to see corruption (Acts 2:27), to become non-existent. This would be finite weakness, not almighty power—G.T Shedd [*Reformed Dogmatics*, vol.1, 360]

unrighteousness in Him" (Ps.92:15). "He is the Rock, His work is perfect; for all His ways are justice, a God of truth and without injustice; righteous and upright is He" (Deut.32:4). "A distinction is generally made between the *absolute* and the *relative* justice of God. The former is that rectitude of the divine nature, in virtue of which God is infinitely righteous in Himself, while the latter is that perfection of God by which He maintains Himself over against every violation of His holiness, and shows in every respect that He is the Holy One" (Berkhof). God's relative justice is distinguished between His remunerative and retributive justice. "The righteousness or justice of God consists in giving each his worthy due, either by reward or punishment" (Brakel). [1] Remunerative (rewarding). "For the LORD is righteous; He loves righteousness" (Ex.34:7). The Lord is just to reward the righteous for their deeds. "For God *is* not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, *in that* you have ministered to the saints, and do minister" (Heb.6:10). "There is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will reward me on that day" (2Tim.4:8). [2] Retributive (punishing). "The punishment of the wicked is often ascribed to God's righteousness (Ex.6:5; 7:4; Ps.7:11; 9:4-8; 28:4; 62:12; 73; 96:10-13; 2Chron.12:5-7; Heb.9:33; Lam.1:18; Isa.5;16; 10:22; Dan.9:14; Rom.2:5; 2Thess.1:5-10)" (Bavinck). "God is jealous, and the LORD avenges; the LORD avenges and is furious. The LORD avenges and is furious. The LORD will take vengeance on His adversaries, and He reserves wrath for His enemies" (Neh.1:2). God's righteous anger, hatred, and wrath are all manifestations of God's retributive justice. "God is a just judge, and God is angry with the wicked every day" (Ps.7:11).

(1) Ps.94:1-3; Ps.96:11-13

7. *Knowledge and wisdom*. "God is said to have a mind and understanding (Rom.11:34; Isa.40:28), to which may be referred, the attributes of *knowledge* and *wisdom*, which go together" (Gill). [1] Knowledge. "The knowledge of God may be defined as that perfection of God whereby He, in an entirely unique manner, knows Himself and all things possible and actual in one eternal and most simple act" (Berkhof). "His understanding is infinite" (Ps.147:5). "His understanding is unsearchable" (Isa.40:28). "He is perfect in knowledge" (Job 37:16). "The knowledge of God is comprehensive: nothing escapes it; nothing is hidden from his all-seeing eyes. Past, present, and future; even the minutest detail and the most hidden things—everything is '*open and laid bare in the eyes of him with whom we have to do*' (Heb.4:13)" (Bavinck). "God knows in a most perfect manner His own Being. For Him nothing in Himself is darkness, neither His Being, nor His attributes, nor His persons (1Cor.2:11). God knows all things; all that shall not, as well as all that shall come to pass, all that has happened, all that happens, and all that shall be, in heaven as well as on earth" (Kersten). "The eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth" (2Chron.16:9). "God knows all things in and of and by himself. For that reason his knowledge is undivided, simple, unchangeable, eternal. He knows all things instantaneously, simultaneously, from eternity; all things are eternally present to his mind's eye" (Bavinck). "Known to God from eternity are all His works" (Acts 15:18). [2] Wisdom. "The wisdom of God may be regarded as a particular aspect of His knowledge. It is God's intelligence as manifested in the adaptation of means to ends" (Berkhof). "Wisdom is that attribute of God whereby He produces the best possible results with the best possible means" (Smith). "Wisdom is that perfection of God whereby He applies His knowledge to the attainment of His ends in a way which glorifies Him most" (Berkhof). "For wisdom and might are His" (Dan.2:20). "O LORD, how manifold are Your works! In wisdom You have made them all" (Ps.104:24).

(1) 1Sam.3:2; Job 12:13; Ps.94:8-11; Ps.147:2-6; Isa.40:27-28; Rom.11:33-35