

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

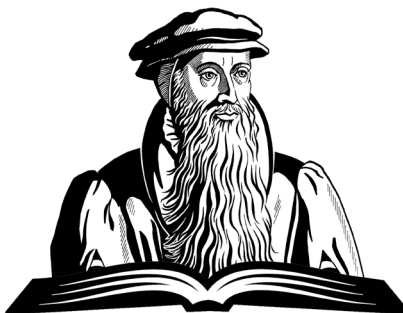
by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 2:

THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

Lecture 7

THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD, Part 3



The John Knox Institute
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Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Module 2 ~ The Doctrine of God

1. Introduction
2. The Nature, Limits, and Means of Knowing God
3. The Names of God
4. God's Being
5. The Attributes of God, Part 1
6. The Attributes of God, Part 2
- 7. The Attributes of God, Part 3**
8. The Trinity
9. God's Decree
10. Predestination
11. Creation
12. Providence

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

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Module 2 ~ Lecture 7

THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD, Part 3

Everyone is attracted to beauty—for example, a gorgeous sunset. People will stop and watch and look at all of the varied colors and beautiful hues that are found as the sun is falling below the horizon. Others will stop and study a flower with all of its beautiful petals and the color and texture that it represents. You see beauty in a newborn baby, or in the masterpiece of a famous artist, looking at the detail of a painting that's hanging in a museum. But some insist that beauty is in the eye of the beholder; that is, that beauty is always and only subjective. Now, while some matters of taste can vary between people, the Bible teaches us that there is an objective beauty; that God Himself is the ultimate source, standard, and superlative display of true beauty. He *is* beauty and defines beauty. For example, in Psalm 29:2, we sing, “Give unto the Lord the glory due unto His name; worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.” You see the same thing in Psalm 96:9, and elsewhere. The angels in heaven are occupied with beholding the beauty of God, and worshiping and adoring Him. In this world, believers behold that beauty by faith; and in glory, of course, their chief joy will be delighting in the sight of God for eternity. God manifests His beauty and glory to creatures. He reveals to us who He is and what He does.

Our study of God's attributes is a study of the beauty of God's glory. Each attribute provides another window for the believing eye to behold God. What a privilege and what a pleasure God extends to such who are so unworthy as ourselves.

This series of lectures in this second module or course on systematic theology is devoted to the study of the doctrine of God, and the purpose is to explore what the Bible teaches about God Himself. In the last couple of lectures, we've been exploring God's divine attributes. In the previous lecture, for example, we learned what it means for God to be everywhere-present, to be all-powerful, and to be all-knowing. In the present lecture, we will briefly survey a select number of some of God's other attributes—we'll consider seven of them. These three lectures together on God's attributes do not serve as an exhaustive list or study; rather, they provide examples that serve to help you in further investigation of God's other attributes revealed in Scripture.

And so we'll begin, first of all, by looking briefly at a passage of Scripture to open up our further consideration of God's revelation of His divine attributes. Turn with me, if you will, to Exodus 34:5–8, where we read these words, “And the LORD descended in the cloud, and stood with him”—that is, Moses—“there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation. And Moses made haste, and bowed his head toward the earth, and worshipped.” Now you'll remember,

perhaps, the context here. This text comes at a time when God was providing the Ten Commandments for the second time. After Moses had broken the first two tables, he brought two more tables back to the mountain. So there's a connection between God giving the law to His people and the revelation of His glory. This disclosure of God that we've just read of takes place in the context of Him giving His word to His people. If you go back to the previous chapter, in Exodus 33:13, there Moses is saying, "Now therefore, I pray thee, if I have found grace in thy sight, shew me now thy way, that I may know thee, that I may find grace in thy sight." And then Moses goes on, in verse 18, "And he said, I beseech thee, shew me thy glory." And the Lord responds by saying, "I will make all my goodness pass before thee, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before thee." Now notice how this ties together what we have seen in our study thus far. First of all, He proclaimed "the name of the LORD" in connection with the manifestation of His attributes. And that's where we began, wasn't it? We began with the study of the names of God, and then moved on from that to a study of God's attributes. But we also have a description of some of those attributes. Some of them are listed by name, others are described. It speaks of God's mercy, and His graciousness, and His long-suffering, and His goodness and truth. Then it describes His faithfulness, and His love, and His holiness, and His justice. God was manifesting His glory and revealing Himself to His believing servant, Moses. God spoke about who He is, and He spoke about what He does. He's the one who is keeping mercy, He's the one forgiving sin, not clearing the guilty, punishing sin, and so on. And so we learn, among other things, the priority of knowing who God is in order to understand what God does.

But we also see something else. The attributes that we have considered so far in this module belong to God's being alone; that is, they are not seen anywhere outside of God. Remember, over the last two lectures, we saw that God is independently self-existent. Well, that's not true of anyone else. We are dependent, angels are dependent, all of creation is. God is eternal, but everything in creation cannot be eternal. God is unchangeable, we are mutable, we are changeable. God is without passions. God is omnipresent—He is everywhere-present. That can't be said of any creature. He is omnipotent, or all-mighty. That, too, can't be said of anyone else. And He's omniscient—He knows absolutely everything comprehensively, and He knows it simultaneously. These cannot be found in any creature, whether the angels in heaven, or men, or anywhere else.

But in this passage here, in Exodus 34, we discover other divine attributes that are in God essentially, but which He sovereignly and analogically communicates to creatures. So, both holy angels and believers are described as good and holy and just, true, faithful, merciful, loving, and so on. Now angels and redeemed men cannot possess these as God does, but they do bear a derived likeness to God in them. In His condescending favor, God is pleased to put the stamp of His own likeness on them, glorifying Himself in them and through them. This ties who God is, and what God does, to who believers become, and what they do in glorifying God. So you see, in these attributes that are described in Exodus 34, attributes found originally in God, but then also finding expression within both angels and believing Christians. Well, the first and highest response to this revelation is seen in Moses, in the passage we read. It says, "And Moses made haste, and bowed his head toward the earth, and worshipped."

Well, in this lecture, we'll focus our attention on seven more divine attributes, along the lines of what we've just described. We will consider God's wisdom, holiness, justice, His veracity, goodness, love, and mercy.

Secondly, let's consider the doctrinal exposition of these seven divine attributes. Notice again that these are included in what is summarized in Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 2, para-

graph 1, as well as, for example, in the Shorter Catechism, question and answer 4. We'll consider each of these seven attributes, one at a time.

First of all, God's divine wisdom. The Bible describes the Lord as the all-wise God, and elsewhere as the "only wise God." For example, you can look at Romans 16:27, or 1 Timothy 1:17, or Jude 25, Revelation 5:12, and others. As with all of God's attributes, we see with regards to His wisdom that He is perfectly, infinitely, eternally, unchangeably, and incomprehensibly wise. Unlike kings, unlike business owners, and other people, God has no counselors to instruct Him. Isaiah 40:13 speaks about this, as does Paul, in Romans 11:34. God does not rely upon any other for His wisdom—He does not seek out input from any other. Wisdom is God's ability to manage and order all things. It's the skillful managing and application of knowledge. This distinction between wisdom and knowledge is important, because it's possible to have much knowledge and little wisdom in creatures. Some people may know a lot but they don't know how to apply that knowledge to circumstances. But in wisdom, God is able to direct all things, and He directs all things to His own glory, and to our good—so you see in Ephesians 1:11, and Romans 8:28. God does everything at the right time, and in the right way—Deuteronomy 32:4, Ecclesiastes 3, and so on. God displays His wisdom in the order and beauty of creation. We sing about this, in Psalm 104, and you see the prophet speaking about it in Jeremiah 10:12. When you look at creation, that's a work of God, and you see in that handiwork the traces of God's divine wisdom. The way in which He has created things and put them together, the way in which they function, the purposes that they serve, the ends that they accomplish—it displays wisdom everywhere you look. God shows His wisdom as well through His sovereign works of providence, in sustaining everything, in controlling everything, in the unfolding of His plan in history. The example of the life of Joseph is an amazing one, isn't it? All of the twists and turns, the surprises, the instances that look like setbacks—but the Lord is ordering, He's orchestrating all of that, in order to bring about an end for God's glory, and the good of His people. God displays His wisdom preeminently in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul makes this point in 1 Corinthians 1, and in Ephesians 3, because, in Christ's cross, the Father honored every divine attribute simultaneously, in a way that glorified God and brought salvation to sinners. God continues to show His wisdom, through the preservation and government of His church throughout all of the ages. So first of all, we see God's divine wisdom.

The second attribute is God's divine holiness. Now, holiness includes two parts, two ideas: the first is the idea of separation, and the second is purity. So God is separate from the rest of creation. This is the Creator/creature distinction that we've talked about before. He is separated from what is common. Now we use the word "holy" in that manner. We're familiar with it. We speak about the Holy Bible because it's a book that is separated from all other books, or we refer to the holy supper—Communion, because it's separated from all other suppers. God's people are a holy people—they're separated from the rest of the world. The Sabbath is a holy day because it's separated from the other six. And so there's this idea of separation. You think, for example, of Isaiah 6, where the angels are saying, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts." Isaiah 6, by the way, is the backdrop for the Trinitarian worship that's described again in Revelation 4 and 5. The second component to holiness is purity—God's ethical or moral purity. God is perfectly pure. He is without any sin or any sinful blemish. He is set apart by His glory, for His glory. John Owen, the seventeenth-century English Puritan, said, "This fiery holiness streams from His throne, Daniel 7:10, and would quickly consume the whole creation as now under the curse and sin, were it not for the interposing of Jesus Christ." So, secondly, we have holiness.

Thirdly, we have God's justice. The Lord is a just God, and a just Judge, and a just Savior.

Justice refers to God's constant will of giving each his due—in other words, people receiving what they deserve. Divine justice demands the punishment of sin, for example. God cannot clear the guilty without denying His divine perfections, as Nahum 1 tells us. God cannot be indifferent to sin—He can't just look the other way. When we think about the wrath of God, the wrath of God actually falls under the heading of this vindictive justice of God. It's an expression, if you will, of God's justice. Paul speaks about this in Romans 1:18, and 32, and in 2 Thessalonians 1:6. Wrath against sinners results unavoidably from God's holiness, and from His knowledge and His wisdom and His immutability and His justice. The nature of the atonement, through the Lord Jesus Christ's death, is a display of justice. We'll come back to this under the practical consideration of this doctrine. But you'll remember, just for right now, Christ and His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, when He's saying, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me." But it wasn't possible for the cup to pass from Him, because God's justice had to be upheld in punishing sin, in order to redeem sinners. If there could have been another way, then there would have been another way, but there wasn't. Romans 3:25 makes that clear. That's God's justice.

Fourthly, we have God's veracity—this speaks of truth. God *is* truth. The true God is the God of truth. This is spoken of everywhere in the Bible. We sing about it in the Psalms (Psalm 31:5); you see it in the prophets (Jeremiah 10); you see it throughout the Gospels, and the Epistles, and so on. God is the foundation and the standard of all truth. The concept of truth is meaningless apart from God. And we know, furthermore, that Jesus Christ is God's truth incarnate. "I am the way, the truth, and the life," Jesus says. God reveals His truth to us through His Word—through the Holy Scriptures: John 17, "Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth." And we know, of course, that it is impossible for God to lie. Hebrew 6 and Titus 1 tell us that. Therefore, God is absolutely trustworthy and the only proper object of our trust, because He is truth in every sense of the term. This relates, by the way, to God's faithfulness. God's faithfulness is tied to His veracity, or His truth, and it's tied to the concept of covenant, in Scripture. Deuteronomy 7:9, Psalm 89:8, and many, many other passages make that clear.

Fifthly, we have God's divine goodness. Once again, God not only does things that are good, but God *is* good. He *is* goodness. In Psalm 119:68, we sing, "Thou art good, and doest good." He both is good, and therefore, He does what is good. It's interesting, because the Book of Psalms seems to focus on divine goodness more than any other attribute. All of the other attributes are there in the Book of Psalms, but this one seems to receive the preeminence. And that's not really surprising to us because of what we saw at the beginning of this lecture, in Exodus 33:18–19. When Moses was beseeching God to show him His glory, the Lord says that He would cause all of His goodness to pass before him. His goodness is His glory. Understanding goodness is important, because the goodness of God issues in the communication of His love, and of His grace, and of His mercy. These are displays of God's goodness. And we see it in a lot of places. You see God's goodness displayed in creation. Remember, in Genesis 1, you get to the end of each day, and we're told, "And God saw that it was good." At the very end, in the end of the sixth day, He looked upon all that He made and He said it was "very good." God's goodness is seen in creation. It's seen in providence (Psalm 145:15–16). And it's seen especially in God's work of redemption.

Sixthly, God is love. The sixth attribute is divine love. "God is love." That's a direct quote—1 John 4:8 and 16 both say, "God is love." Not just what He has, not just what He does, but who He *is*. We cannot talk about love without reference to God Himself. Even the believer's love to God is second to God's love to them. "We love him because He first loved us." So we begin with God, who is the inexhaustible fountain of love, and we note that God loves Himself supremely and

eternally. Places like John 17:26 speak of the Father's love for the Son, from eternity, and there are many passages where there are these references. Within the Godhead, there's a perfect love in the indwelling of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God loves Himself supremely. If He didn't, He wouldn't be God, because if He loved something else more, the thing that He loved more would be God. But He also chose to manifest that love outside of Himself, and what's more, to manifest it and set it upon depraved, ungodly, enemies—the elect, who He came to redeem. The believer's unworthiness of God's love makes God's love all the more lovely to them.

Seventhly, and lastly, we have mercy—God's mercy. Mercy attends the grace of God. Grace regards the sinfulness of men, whereas mercy respects their misery. Sinfulness and misery are often held together, and so grace and mercy should be held together—grace in reference to sin, mercy in reference to misery. God exercised grace toward Adam before the fall, but He did not exercise mercy toward him, because there was no misery at that point. God's mercy, we're told, is free. God exercises both a general and temporal mercy to all men in common. Places like Psalm 104:27 make that clear. But God exercises a special and eternal mercy to His elect by giving them eternal life in Christ. God's mercy is a shelter for the believer, into which they run. But it is not a refuge for the unbelieving and unrepentant.

Thirdly, we need to consider these doctrines polemically, and we'll do this briefly. First of all, in reference to God's justice, there are those who will ask the question, "How can God remain just and declare the guilty, not guilty?" So those who are saved, how can they be declared guilty and not guilty? That seems as if God is setting aside His justice in order to reconcile a sinful people to Himself. So the objection is that there's a disconnect, or there's opposition between God's justice and His redemption. But the answer to the question takes us into the heart of the gospel. God cannot cease being Himself. God cannot not be just—that's impossible, so nothing can be pursued along those lines. And yet Paul says that God is both just and the justifier of the ungodly. How is that so? Well, all sin must be punished, and for those who are unbelieving sons of Adam, they receive that punishment—they receive God's justice in hell for all of eternity. For the elect, God takes His justice, and He provides, in the person of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, a substitute. So Jesus stands in the place of His elect people. The sins of God's people, their transgressions, are credited to His account. And then God actually executes His justice, in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, on behalf of—as a substitute, in the place of—His people, so that His justice is fully vindicated. His wrath is appeased—it is satisfied. It is pacified in the person of His Son, in order that His people might receive pardon, might receive forgiveness. And so there is no contradiction between justice and redemption. Indeed, redemption provides us with one of the most staggering, beautiful displays of God's justice. Here, righteousness and mercy have met and kissed, as we sing in the Psalms.

A second area, in terms of our polemical exposition relates to God's veracity, God's truth. God is truth, so then there is absolute truth. And yet we have in the world around us, those who want to say, "No, truth is relative. Truth is relative, and what is true for you may not be true for me; what is right for you may not be right for me," and so on. In other words, truth is person-relative. It's determined by an individual's own outlook, maybe even their own preferences and inclinations and so on. Well, this flies in the face of what the Bible teaches, and it flies in the face of rationality. Because, if we say, "What is true for you is not true for me," that there's no standard of truth outside of ourselves to which people appeal, then whenever there is a dispute, no one can be wrong. So if a person says, "I paid my bill", and another person says, "No, you didn't pay your bill," normally we would appeal to something outside of ourselves, a third party: Here's the evidence for the fact

that I paid my bill, or the evidence for not having paid a person's bill. But if truth is relative, then you don't have that ability. A person can just say, "No, that may be true for you that I didn't pay my bill, but it's not true for me," right? It leads to utter chaos, it leads to irrationality. And the same is true with regards to morals and ethics. If you went to a person and held up a gun and said, "Give me your wallet," and then took their wallet, they might say, "That's not right! You can't do that, that's unjust, that's not ethical," and so on. And a person can say, "Well, that may be true for you but not for me." The whole world would descend into chaos. No, we have to repudiate, we have to reject this notion of relativism and realize that God is truth, His Word is truth, and it is the basis for all truth. For those who say, "Well, it's arrogant for the Christian to say they have truth when others don't," it's actually the opposite. It's humility to recognize our own ignorance and our own fault, and to rather submit ourselves to the truth as it is in Jesus, to submit ourselves to the Word of God, and to receive that truth from Him. Arrogance is rejecting that for our own finite folly.

A third point of considering this polemically has to do with love. Similar to what we just saw with regards to truth, people will define love in all sorts of squishy ways. "This is what I find loving," and "This is how I want to express love." They'll take things that are immoral and call them love, and that's because love is being defined in terms of pleasing themselves—what they like; whereas love, truly and biblically, is ultimately pleasing God. It is conformity to who God is and what God requires of us. That's why the Lord can tell us in the Gospel of John that if we love Him, we will keep His commandments. The content of love is seen in obedience and subjection to what God has revealed to us and required of us. That's biblical love. And when people attribute love to what is immoral, they're actually doing what is hateful and unloving to another person, to themselves, and in dishonor to God.

Hastening on, fourthly, we can now draw some practical application for ourselves. And we'll do this rather quickly, but in picking up each of the attributes that we've considered. First of all, God's wisdom. We are to exercise much humility and patience in submitting to God's wisdom. You may be tempted at times to say, Why would God allow this? or, Why would God allow that? But the fact is, we could not understand adequately even if He chose to tell us. But rather, we're called upon to trust His character that He is wise. Job 28 brings this out. If God is the source of all wisdom, then let us seek all wisdom from Him. This should give you great encouragement, as a student who's going through this course, and other courses with John Knox Institute. We want to grow in wisdom, we want to avoid the "wisdom of the world," as 1 Corinthians 1 and 2 tell us—wisdom which is "earthly, sensual, and devilish," as James 3:15 says. We want true wisdom, and this drives us to Christ, who is the Wisdom of God, "in whom are found all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." This also sends us to the Word of God. "Sanctify them by thy truth: thy word is truth." We need to study the Holy Scriptures; we need to study the Word of God and what He has shown to us in order that we might find true wisdom. The Lord gives us help in seeking guidance on the decisions that we have to make. How do we find wisdom? In being guided by the study of God's Word.

Secondly, we have holiness. God's twofold holiness—separation and purity, corresponds to our twofold sanctification or growth in Christian maturity. We cannot walk with God unless we walk in holiness. "Without holiness no man shall see the Lord," Hebrews 12 says. God reveals His holiness to us in His law. God's holiness is the ground for our holiness. He says, "Be ye holy, even as I am holy." And Christ's holiness is the pattern for our holiness. God has given to us the Holy Spirit in order to make us conform to God's holiness.

Thirdly, God's justice. Divine justice is necessary to uphold God's moral government of the

world. To receive what we really deserve is to receive justice. Grace is to receive what is undeserved. And so for someone to appeal to God's love as a way of dismissing God's justice is to create a false god. This should be a comfort to the Christian, because all wrongs will be righted. The wicked never win. God will bring all things to account on the last day. We saw that the cross of Christ harmonizes the justice and mercy of God, and the salvation of sinners. God satisfied His justice by punishing our sins, as imputed to the Lord Jesus Christ. And He shows mercy to sinners without clearing the guilty. He is just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Christ.

Fourthly, there is God's veracity. This strengthens our faith in God and in His infallible Word. It's a consolation, for example, in affliction. God gives us, in His word, promises that are sure—they are "yea and amen" in the Lord Jesus Christ. We know God is truth. These promises we can be confident in. We must also see and hate error. We need to hate false doctrine, false worship, because it's not only opposed to God's word, it's opposed to God's being. We need to have zeal for the truth. We need to love it, proclaim it, defend it. We must also desire to see others walking in that truth, as 2 John 4 tells us.

Fifthly, God's goodness. Romans 2:4 tells us that God's goodness leads us to repentance. We're also told in Psalm 34:8 that we are to "taste and see that the Lord is good," that this is something that has to be experienced by the believer, enjoying God's goodness. We're to be assured that God's goodness and mercy shall follow the believer all the days of their life, as Psalm 23 says. Well, this strengthens the believer to live out of God's goodness. So they are not to "grow weary in well doing," as Galatians 6:9–10 tell us, just as the Lord Jesus Christ didn't grow weary in well doing. The believer is to pursue and to bring forth good works—the fruit that comes by God's grace, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Sixthly, we have divine love. It's nice to be loved by another creature. But this pales in comparison to the One who is love. God brings the believer into the realm of the eternal love of the Trinity. This is why God's love for His people is "incomprehensible," Paul says in Ephesians 3:17 and following. And His love for His people is indestructible, as the end of Romans 8 teaches us. Heaven will be an ocean of divine love, unaltered, unending. The Holy Spirit sheds abroad this love of God in the hearts of His people, and enables them to see it and believe it and taste it and enjoy it. Well, this should banish all cold formality in worship, and it should banish halfhearted devotion to God. There's no place in the Christian's life for divided loyalties. Our loyalty is to Him alone. The sum of the law is to love God with our whole being, to love Him for who He is, and what He does. And that, of course, will spill over into loving all that God loves—loving our brethren, loving His law, loving His holiness, loving the Sabbath, loving worship, and so on.

Seventhly, we have God's mercy. The experience of mercy takes place in the context of sin. It's interesting—the Old Testament speaks of mercy four times more often than the New Testament. You should study that. In the Psalms, we sing much of God's mercy, which trains us, then to cry out like the publican, "God be merciful to me a sinner." You see how this strengthens our faith. God's mercies are tender, God's mercies are plenteous. He is rich in mercy, He has abundant mercies, He has everlasting mercies. All of this describes an enduring multitude of mercies. We're warned then about forsaking our mercies or abusing them. God's mercy makes the believer happy and humble at the same time. It fills them with praise and love, and it also motivates the believer to show mercy to others, having received mercy themselves.

Well, in this lecture, we have provided a brief survey of some of the other attributes of God. There are many more that we have not covered, but this provides us with a pattern for how to study what God has revealed to us about Himself, leading us to long for a greater knowledge of Him.

In the next lecture, we will turn our attention to the doctrine of the Trinity, and we'll seek to answer the question, "What does the Bible reveal to us about the one God, who subsists in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost?"