Systematic Theology Study
Session 3B
Who is God and what's He like?

In the last session we began to explore who God is and what He is like. We looked at His attributes of His greatness or magnificence. We saw five different, broad ways His magnificence has been revealed to us: His spirituality, His personality, His life, His infiniteness, and His constancy. If these were the only characteristics of God we knew about, then that would lead to the possibility that God could be a cruel or vengeful. However, that is not the case as in this session we are going to examine another group of God's characteristics that are commonly grouped under God's goodness. The God of the Bible has revealed Himself as a good God, One who loves us greatly and can be loved and trusted. Like the attributes we studied that dealt with God's greatness, these attributes that deal with His goodness are actually His essential nature, they are who God is at the core of His being. He has always had them and they cannot ever change.

The attributes that comprise God's goodness fall into two categories. The first we'll look at those which deal with God's moral qualities or His moral uprightness. These are: holiness, righteousness, and justice. Then there are the attributes that deal with God's integrity. These are: genuineness, truthfulness, faithfulness, and love. As you might could imagine, the quality of God's love is extensive and is characterized by His benevolence, grace, mercy and persistence.

I. Moral Qualities: holiness, righteousness, and justice

Q: When you hear the word "holy" or "holiness" what thoughts come to your mind?

1. Holiness

The word "holy" means to be "marked off", "withdrawn from common use", or "separate". When the Bible speaks of God's holiness, it always means two things at the same time - the literal definition plus the application of the word applied to God.

a) Holy first describes God's uniqueness. He is separate from all creation. He is not common in any way and is different in nature and behavior from everything else.

[Exodus 15:11]

[Psalm 99:3]

[Isaiah 6:1-4]

In Hebrews, the repeating of a word means it is to be taken in the superlative form. It's the equivalent of us putting "est" on the end of a adjective. Thus, God is the holiest of all beings. There is nothing or no one more unique than God.

b) Holy, this separateness or sharp distinction from humanity and the rest of creation, then implies that God is absolutely pure and good without any sin or inclination towards evil whatsoever. He alone is untouched and unstained by evil and the world.

[Habakkuk 1:12-13]

[James 1:13]

[Mark 1:40-42]

Q: What does this passage in Mark teach us about the holiness of God? *(It is greater/more powerful than the sin and weaknesses of mankind. The Law stated that is a person touched a leper, that person was then unclean and had to go through the rituals of withdrawing from Jewish life until they were cleansed. Jesus, however, touched the leper and remained clean. His holiness was greater than the leper's uncleanliness.)*

[Leviticus 11:44-45]

Q: What implications does God's holiness have for His people? *(We are to be holy (separate, living in a way that does not incur further moral stain or corruption) because God is holy. Our lives should appear different than the lives of those who don't know God in a good way. God's holiness is to be the standard for our moral character and the motivation for our religious activities.)*

[Matthew 5:48]

In this verse, Jesus uses the word "perfect" which translates a word that means "complete" or "end goal" as an adult is the complete maturation of a human as opposed to a child. While keeping the Law is completely impossible, living in the completeness of Christ is the expected norm for the Christian. We were made complete by coming to Christ and receiving His grace and now can live in that completeness to the extent that we have come to know the truth. We grow in this maturity and perfection of God one truth at a time, as He reveals them to us.

2. Righteousness

The word righteousness is God's holiness applied to His relationships to others. The righteousness of God means, first, that the law of God, being a true expression of His nature, is as perfect as He is. Second, the righteousness of God means that His actions are always in accord with the law which He Himself has established.

[Psalm 19:7-9]

[Jeremiah 9:23-24]

Q: Based upon this, what makes an action right? *(A right action is never an arbitrary action but rather follows an objective standard which is God Himself. An action is right if it follows God's own nature. It is also good because He would do it Himself. The reality He uses for determining the rightness of an action is His own nature and thus it should be our unwavering standard as well.)*

One question brought up by atheists often is asking, "Is God selfish?" They say that God's apparent highest goal is His own glory yet He has identified self-centeredness as a sin in His own law. So, is this not an instance of the self-centeredness which God forbids and condemns in others being present in Himself?

Q: How would you answer that question?

To fully answer it, we need to look more closely at the sin of self-centeredness and what God has actually revealed in His Word as well as the true nature of God. The essence of sin doesn't lie in the preferring of ourselves to others but in preferring something finite to God. Sin happens when we place something of limited value in the place of God, who is of supreme value. The first and greatest commandment of God is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength (Luke 10:27). The second greatest commandment is to love your neighbor as yourself. To put that commandment above the first commandment is sinful. For God to make His own glory the supreme objective is not in conflict with His command against self-centeredness. Making His glory the supreme objective of life actually fulfils the command. As the highest value in the universe, the source from which everything else comes from, God must choose His own glory ahead of everything else as everything else is below His glory. To put something else in that place would be to commit idolatry. The problem of the question arises because the person asking the question doesn't understand the true nature of God. A being of His infinite glory and holiness is actually seeking the best for all others by having them seek for His glory. This is opposed to when a human acts selfishly, they seek their own glory - a lesser, finite glory than God's.

3. Justice

Justice means that God administrates His kingdom in accordance with His laws. He not only adheres to the laws but requires others to conform to it as well. The righteousness we just examined dealt with God's personal righteousness while justice is His official righteousness or said another way, His requirement that His other moral beings adhere to the same moral standards as well. In this capacity, God is the Supreme Judge who fairly and fully administers the same law, applying to all equally. Sin has definite consequences. These consequences must come to pass eventually as God is just and omnipotent and omniscient. To put it another way, God is perfectly holy and righteous. Thus, any break of His law, not matter how tiny in our view, must incur God's justice. Due to His unchanging nature and omnipotence and knowing everything, He has to administer justice fairly to all sin all the time. God's justice defends His righteousness and His righteousness defends His justice.

[Genesis 2:16-17]

Q: What would happen on the day Adam ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil? *(v.17 - He would surly die)*

Q: Did Adam physically die on the day he ate the fruit off that tree? *(Genesis 3 - no)*

Q: So in what way did Adam die the day he ate the forbidden fruit? *(He died spiritually. He lost His connection to God and His life. His spirit died.)*

[Psalm 58:10-11]

[Romans 12:19]

Q: Whose role is it to repay for the offense suffered by believers in this life? *(God's role as the righteous judge. He alone knows the truth of the situation and is in the position to judge accurately and fairly.)*

[James 2:1-10]

Q: Why is showing favoritism or partiality a sin? *(Because God never shows it. It is not in His nature to do so and it violates His law of equal respect and love for all people.)*

If anything is mentioned in Scripture as a sin, it is a sin because it is not part of God's essential nature, it goes against an attribute of His and thus is living below the level of God's best for the individual.

[Romans 3:23] - This verse brings out the nature of sin being that which is missing the mark, it is aiming and hitting a target that is below God's glory - who God truly is.

There are times when God does not appear to be just. There are times when evil prospers and good suffer oppression. Sometimes evil is not punished swiftly (at lest on our timetables) and good is not rewarded swiftly (at least on our timetables). While we have the motto: "Crime doesn't pay", there seems to be times when it actually does pay and pay quite well.

Q: How can God assert that He is just when evil not only survives but thrives? *(Psalm 73 deals with this question. Those who would make the charge that God is not a just judge are only looking at the temporary instead of eternity. Those who look at the plight of the wicked in light of eternity see that any gains they make in this life will be swept away permanently in the next.)*

[Psalm 73:1-3, 12-19, 26-28]

One of the reasons God delays His judgment is due to His strong desire for the sinner to repent. During this time, God may bless the wicked, not for their wickedness, but rather for them to see Him as a good and merciful God who loves them and desires them to come to Him for life, instead of their wicked, fleshly ways.

[Romans 2:4]

[II Peter 3:9]

Since God judges fairly we, His followers, are to do likewise. We are to adopt as our standards of conduct His law. We are to imitate His justice by treating other fairly and equally because this is what God does.

The following is a verse that I find comforting and reassuring when things are not going "my way" and don't appear to be going in a way I'd expect God to be going. This is just a pastor's input rather than part of this study.

[Psalm 27:13-14]

II. God's qualities relating to integrity: genuineness, truthfulness, faithfulness, and love

These attributes of God are those we cluster together and deal with truth. As noted, there are four large areas where we see God's attributes dealing with the truth: genuineness, truthfulness, faithfulness, and love.

1. Genuineness

Genuineness means that God is a "real" God and not a figment of our imagination or just product of human imagination. His nature is to be real and living as a being.

Q: I once had a man refuse to put his faith in Christ because He believed that God was merely a product of human imagination and everything associated with him was merely a by-product of human psychology. In other words, God was just in our heads and was not real? How would you answer this man's assertion?

[John 17:3]

The Greek word that describes God and is translate "true" means "real". It is the same word used throughout the New Testament to describe God as the genuine article.

[I John 5:19-21]

Again, when you see the word "true" associated with God in the New Testament, the meaning is "genuine" or "real". Every other supposed god is a made up by human imagination but not our Lord. Notice that after stating the God was real, John warned believers in that I John 5 passage we just read to guard themselves from idols - gods who were not real. What this means is that God does not merely appear to embody the qualities of greatness and goodness but rather He actually is those attributes. He, His very nature, is the definition of those attributes.

Q: What are some ways in which God has shown Himself real to you?

2. Truthfulness

The second dimension of God's goodness is His truthfulness. God always represents things as they truly are. Whether He is speaking of Himself or His creation, what God says is the way things truly are.

[I Samuel 15:27-29]

Q: According to this passage, what two things does God never do? *(v.29 - He does not lie or ever repent (change His mind).)*

[Hebrews 6:16-18]

It is important to note that these passages teach us more than God does not lie. He cannot lie due to His very nature. Lying is contrary to His nature.

Q: While God cannot outright lie, would it be possible for Him to unknowingly say something that is an untruth and thus what He says be in error? *(No, it is impossible for an all-knowing God to not know something. Thus, He is never in error when He speaks.)*

[Deuteronomy 25:13-15]

Q: Why do you think God would care if you have two differing sets of weights or measures in your possession? *(It is important that it was a common Middle-Eastern tactic of traders and merchants to have two sets of measures and weights for a scale so that they could be honest or misrepresent the truth of the weight or quantity of what they were selling or buying. So because God is thoroughly honest, He expects His people to be completely honest as well. God never misrepresents Himself and so His people are not be dishonest in their presentation of themselves or in their business or personal dealings.)*

[II Corinthians 4:1-2]

3. Faithfulness

God's faithfulness builds upon the last two attributes of God. Since God is real and since God always tells the truth about everything, then God always keeps His Word, His promises. God is always proved true. Since He has unlimited power and knowledge, God could not ever commit Himself to do anything which He would eventually unable to do.

In this following passage, the King of Moab, Balak, is paying off Balaam, a prophet, to curse Israel so that they will not destroy them in battle. Balaam knows better than to do this but due to the great pay from Balak, he's going to try to do this even though he knows that he is not allowed to say anything other than what God tells him to say. Instead of cursing Israel, Balaam ends up blessing them and cursing Moab. This is part of the exchange between the two.

[Numbers 23:19-20]

[I Thessalonians 5:24]

Throughout the pages of Scripture, God proves Himself to be a faithful God who always fulfils what He promises.

Q: What are some of the promises God made in the Bible and kept? *(He kept all of them but in specific, some examples might be promising Abraham a child through Sarah and then Isaac was born, the promise to make David king of Israel despite all the attempts on his life by Saul and the Philistines, the promise to take the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and have them take over Canaan as a permanent home, the promise made the Adam and Eve after the fall of God bringing a redeemer to save them, the promise to have Jesus come to earth to redeem mankind and for Jesus to die and then raise from the dead on the third day, the list goes on and on.)*

As with the rest of His moral qualities, God's nature is to be the example for our lives as believers. We are to always keep our word when we give it. If we can't expect to fulfill that word, we are not to make the promise in the first place. This applies to promises we make to God as well as to our fellow man.

[Ecclesiastes 5:4-5]

[Joshua 9:15-23]

What is interesting in the Joshua account is that the promise or covenant of peace was actually made under false conditions. The people Joshua swore not to kill were those who actually lived in the Promised Land and had lied to Joshua saying they were travelers in that area, just passing through. Despite this deceit, Joshua and Israel knew they had to keep the covenant of peace they had made because that's what God would expect. Had they consulted God before the covenant was made, He would have told them not to do it but they didn't ask God. There is another lesson in there that goes beyond this current study.

The Bible clearly reveals God's goodness in these three areas we discussed this week: genuineness, truthfulness, and faithfulness. As we continue this exploration of who God is and what He's like in our next session, we'll see that He is also loving and all that entails.

Q: Do you have any questions, comments, rebukes or rebuttals?