



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Systematic Theology

“The Attributes of God, part I: Attributes Defined”

TRANSCRIPT

[Prayer] Father we are grateful to Thee for the privilege of the study of the Scriptures. And we thank Thee for the way in which they speak to us for the Lord Our Savior Jesus Christ. We are thankful to Thee for Him. We are thankful to Thee because Thou are our great God and Thou art known to us through the Son and the perfections and glories and virtues of our God we have seen in him. And we pray Lord that as we reflect upon Thy nature, Thy attributes that our thoughts may rise in purity to Thee in such a way that thou art glorified in the things that we think of Thee and in the actions in which we serve Thee. We commit this hour, the succeeding hours to Thee in Jesus name and for his sake. Amen.

[Message] This is the first of our series of studies on the attributes of God. And the subject for tonight is introductory, and it is what can we know about God, or the attributes defined and classified. And I want to read three verses, one from the Old Testament one from the Gospel of John and one from 1 Peter as a basis of some of the things that I want to say tonight. So will you turn with me first of all to Isaiah chapter 40, verse 25. Isaiah chapter 40, verse 25. And Isaiah asks a question in this text which is really the questions we will seek to answer in this series of fifteen or sixteen studies. Verse 25 Isaiah chapter 40, “To whom then will ye liken me, or shall I be equal? saith the

Holy One." The obvious answer to that of course is no one. No one is like God.

Now, let's turn over to John chapter 1, verse 18. John 1:18. And here the Apostle John says in his introduction, the last verse of his prologue, "No man hath seen God at any time, the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him." And John affirms that if we want to know God then we have the perfect revelation of God in Jesus Christ. As I have often said it was absolutely imperative that Jesus Christ be God if he is to truly reveal God. No prophet, no matter how great a prophet he might be, if he were not God can really reveal God, can really give us an assurance that his words are God's words.

Now we listen to the prophets of the Old Testament when we read Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the others, and particularly Moses who is the one to whom our Lord is likened. And we hear what we believe to be the voice of God, but it was absolutely essential that our Lord should come as God and affirm the truthfulness of the Old Testament Scripture, because ultimately God's words can only be authenticated by God and that is why Jesus Christ had to be God, because we must have an authentic word from him. And he is the revelation of the Father. If we wish to know God, we must know Jesus Christ John says.

Now, the final text is 1 Peter chapter 2, verse 9 and it has directly to do with the virtues, the attributes of God. 1 Peter chapter 2, verse 9. 1 Peter 2:9. Peter writes concerning the Christians, "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light," The word praises is the word, excellences or virtues and probably is as close to a biblical term for the attributes of God as we are able to find. The attributes of God is the theological expression for the properties and qualities of God. We will say something about these terms in a little while but the biblical expression is the virtues or the excellencies translated here, "...praises of him who hath

called you out of darkness into his marvelous light," taken together, of course the biblical term is God's glory.

Now, first a few words of introduction, and this is the outline, part of the outline that we will be following tonight. "What can we know about God?" The introduction to a serious study of the attributes of God demands justification in our day, for it suggests a heavy, labored and academic exercise. And I must say that tonight's message is going to be something like that. I am sorry but we have to begin in that way with this topic. It is right to ask God's messenger, as the Quakers used to say, "Speak to the condition of hearer." And that justification for an introduction and study of the attributes of God is seen if we simply point to the loss of the concept of majesty from the popular religious man. If you go into the average evangelical church today, inclusive of Believers Chapel, you will discover that there is an amazing loss of the concept of the majesty of God.

Now we have seen evidences of that in our newspapers just recently. I am not suggesting in any way that it is impossible for someone to dance to the glory of God and I do not want to say any word against dancing per se. I guess in my day I did as much as the average person, maybe a little more, not very well according to my wife, but nevertheless I did. But I never really thought I was dancing to the glory of God, but I do know that David danced apparently to the glory of God and so it is possible.

But I've attended services in recent years in which dancing was carried on supposedly to the glory of God. In Montreat, North Carolina -- last summer or summer before last -- I attend the service on Sunday night in the large auditorium in which there was dancing up and down the aisles, and it was not really very good dancing either. And it was supposed to be to the glory of God, and I do not say that is impossible but I did listen to what was said, and nothing in the service was said that was very strongly scriptural. In other words, there was no real theological backing of the activities that took place in the aisle.

And afterwards as I went out of the auditorium, there were several elderly ladies, thirty-five about, and no really they were, they were older than that. They were about sixty-five. And as they walked out, I walked out by their side listening to what they had to say about it and they didn't know exactly how to respond, I could tell. And one of them said, "What did you think of it." The other said, oh, I've forgotten exactly what she said but it was something like "it was interesting or different." And I was right with them and so I -- since I wanted a good illustration -- I said to one of them, "Well what did you get out of it for yourself?" And then she looked at me and she apparently sensed that I was not looking for any real spiritual benefits derived from it and she gave me a lecture on it was perfectly all right for them to do what they did. But there was nothing really spiritual in the service.

And I know recently here was it Sunday or Saturday we had the same thing here in Perkins Chapel, I say it is possible to dance to the glory of God but if it is dancing to the glory of God we should expect some revelation of the truth of God in that dancing. And as far as I can tell the people who were dancing may have been happy, but they not really happy in the Lord. There was no real communication of truth in their testimony by their feet. A.W. Tozer has said the words "Be still and know that I am God mean next to nothing to the self-confident bustling worshipper in this middle period of the 20th Century." And I think that is true. One of the reasons we do not have a sense of the majesty of God in our meetings and in our personal life is that we have neglected the study of the attributes of God. We do not really know our God. The importance of right thoughts about God cannot, cannot, cannot be over estimated. No nation no individual can ever rise above their idea of God.

Now we know that a nation itself, if it does not have a true idea of God is destined to extinction sooner or later. If we knew what our political leaders really thought about God, we would be able to foretell the history of the church in the United States. If I could really tell what our presidents and leaders thought about spiritual things;

if I absolutely knew their innermost being I could plot out for you what is going to happen to true believers in the United States of America. But of course, this is true of the individual as well. Our daily life is affected by the thoughts we have about God and we cannot possibly rise above our idea of God.

Furthermore, there is scarcely any false doctrine or failure in practice that cannot be traced to imperfect and unworthy thoughts of God. In Isaiah chapter 6, verse 3, Isaiah is given a revelation of God in the temple and he hears the serafin saying, “...Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts...” And then in the next verse or so we hear Isaiah looking at himself and seeing how sinful he is. It is in the light of the knowledge of God that men see their sins and come to know themselves. You know we often say, and I think a lot of preachers say this and you’ve probably heard me say it, that the fundamental doctrine of the Bible is the knowledge of human sin.

Now, I don’t really think that’s true. I think that is important. I do not think anybody can be straight in their theology if they do not understand human depravity. Well, that’s the beginnings so far as theology is concerned in one sense, but even more fundamental than that is the knowledge of God in his holiness or it is the knowledge in God his holiness that leads to the clear apprehension of our sinfulness. It is Peter learning how sinful he is when he sees the holiness and omnipotence of the Son of God in the same boat with him when the miraculous draft of fishes takes place. He suddenly sees that he is in the presence of God and it is then that he says, “Part from me for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” So the knowledge of God provokes within us a revelation of our sinfulness, which is the fundamental doctrine that we need to learn in all of divine truth.

So no nation, no individual can ever rise above his idea of God. I’ve referred to this also, but before when Lyndon Baines Johnson, our former President of United States of America and a great Texan came to be president through the assassination of John F. Kennedy, about a month or so after he entered into office and began to feel his oats a little bit as the new head of this great country he announced, and it was announced by

his public relations office that he was going to erect a “memorial to God.” And I only saw that once in the paper, because it would be obvious to anyone if you’re going to erect a memorial to God you are in effect saying “that God is no longer here in our midst that he is dead and gone.” And apparently someone got quick to the President and said, “Don’t you dare do anything like that because that will surely be fodder for your enemies,” and nothing was ever said about it again, but I remember seeing it in the paper.

And I could just mark down as long as Lyndon Baines Johnson thought as he did there was not going to be any spiritual revival like Ezekiel’s in the days of Johnson’s Presidency, because no nation, no individual is able to rise above his ideas about God. The presence of wrong thoughts about God is not something we can put aside as a minor sin, because you see the presence of wrong thoughts about God is really idolatry and idolatry is one of the fundamentally bad sins. Idolatry as it bottom are libel on the character of God, because it assumes that he is other than he really is. Idolatry is in essence the entertainment of wrong thought about God or thoughts about God that are unworthy of him. Unbelief leads to wrong thoughts about God and wrong thoughts about God leads to the worship of idols. And the worship of idols leads to immorality. That is the picture and that is the progression that is found in the Bible. If you read Romans chapter 1, that’s what you see.

You see unbelief, which leads to wrong thoughts about God and then to the worship of idols and then to the horrible immorality pictured in the last verses of that chapter. In the Psalms the psalmist says in Psalm 115, verse 8 concerning those that make idols, “They that make them are like unto them.” In other words, if you are an idolater you become like your idol and if you are a believer in the true God you become like your God. Your thoughts about God determine what kind of person you are. And if your thoughts are bad or your thoughts are inadequate or your thoughts are unworthy; you will be that kind of person.

But if your thoughts are pure, if your thoughts are right, if your thoughts are scriptural, if your thoughts glorify God then that is going to have its inevitable influence on you also. So how important then is the question of the philosopher, what is God like? The question of the theologian, what is God like? The question of the man of the street, what is God like? And the question of the little child, what is God like? Well that is the fundamental question so when we come to the study of attributes of God we are really trying to answer the question, what is God like? I was not surprised at all too, by the way that God is dead theology arose because the thoughts of contemporary theologians are such that it is no surprise that we should hear them saying that God is dead or really God is dead in their head.

Now, to study the attributes I said that this was a heavy pathetic exercise in the eyes of many and tonight fortunately we are going to have to do a little of that, but it is an introduction and when we consider the other attributes in detail I think you will find it a great deal more inspiring but it is necessary to lay the foundation tonight. So our outline Roman I some preliminary consideration. There are a few questions concerning methodology and validity that are necessary to discuss. And so in the outline, Methodology in the determination of the divine attributes.

1. The wrong way.

How can we determine the attributes of God? Well the scholastics -- and the scholastics were the philosophers and theologians of the Middle Ages -- they spoke of three ways of determining the attributes of God and I have put these on the board as the *via*, the Latin *V*. When I was going through my eight years of Latin was pronounced like a *W* and so I'm pronouncing it that way; *via negationis*, *via imminetia*, *via casualitatis* and these are the three ways by which the scholastics said we can come to know God.

Now, let me explain them. These are the wrong ways as we shall see, but you ought to understand why they are wrong because a lot of people still decide that God is to be known in this

way, by one of these ways. First of all the *via negationus*, now you can tell from that, that means the way of negation; the Latin word *via* means way or road and *negationus* means negation, the way of negation. This is one way we can come to know God, the philosophers and theologians in the Middle Ages said. They meant by this, we remove from our idea of God all imperfections seen in his creatures; anything that we see in man or in creation that is unworthy of God we strip that away from our concept of God and we ascribe to him the opposites the perfections. We remove from him all false images and thus we come to speak of him not as dependent but independent. We speak of him as not finite for we are finite. We are limited beings. We are limited by our environment. We are limited in hundreds of different ways. We are finite.

Well, we eliminate finiteness, and we have an infinite being, and so God is infinite. We are corporeal beings; that is we are spirits that dwell within bodies and our body itself is a finite thing. So we think of God as being incorporeal. We think of God as being immense. We die. We think of God as one who does not die. And so we say of him that he is immortal. We can understand men to some extent but we cannot understand God, and so we strip away the negatives and ascribe to him the positives; that’s the *via negationus*. That was the way that they thought that we could arrive, one of the ways that we could arrive at a proper idea of God.

Now the second way is the *via imminetia* and that is the way of imminence, as you could probably tell from the Latin term. Now this way was, we ascribe to God in the most imminent way the relative perfections of man. If we look around at men and we say “man is mighty” then we would say that God is more than what man is. If we say, “man is mighty” we would say according to the scholastics, “well the angels are mightier and God then is almighty.” So man is mighty. The angels are mightier. God is almighty. So we ascribe to him the perfection of what we see in men positively.

I look at you and I say, “my, he is a wise man.” Well God is all-wise. And if I see another man and I say, “my, he is a good man.” Well God is all good. Now if I see a

virtue in a man and say, "well he is a merciful man." Well God is all-merciful. And so by the *via imminetia* the scholastics ascribed to God in the most imminent way the relative perfections of man. That's the second way.

The third way is the *via causalitatis*, and as you can tell probably this means, the way of cause. We rise from effects in the world to the first cause, from the creation to the almighty creator. We look around and we see all this wonderful creation about us and we say that must have come from someone. And so we say it must have come from God. This is the way the scholastics thought. We look out and we see government by men, moral government. It may be imperfect, but it is nevertheless moral government, and we say well we must affirm of God's government, that which is the cause of this. And so we reason back of effect of cause. So by the three ways, the way of negation, the way of imminence, the way of cause to effect, the scholastics came to an understanding of God.

Now what's wrong with that methodology? The truth of the matter is most people really think that way about God. They look around and they say that God is better than men. Men are pretty good. God is better. That's the general way in which men think of God. They look about at this great creation about us and they say well that tells us there must be a God who is great enough to make the creation, but as you can see if you think for a moment -- and I'm trying to make theologians out of all of you -- that this is a method that begins in man and it makes him the measure of man. In every one of these ways it is ultimately man who is the measure of God. It is as Professor Brunner has said "possibilities of knowing God in a human manner." They are natural, rational theology; the ways of the scholastics. What is the right way?

Now, in the outline this is Arabic 2. We do not come to know God in the way of the scholastics for it is essentially a human way of reasoning about God. We may learn some things about the creation. We may learn some things about looking at men, about God but we can never really know about the perfection of God's being by looking at man or looking at man's works. The right way to know God, the right source of the

knowledge of God, is his divine self-revelation. Now, where is his divine self-revelation? Is it in my pocket? No. Is it in my library? No. Is it in the library down at the theological seminary? No. The divine self-revelation of God is contained in the Scriptures. They are God's revelation of himself.

Now, they contain a record of God's revelation and they also themselves are revelation. They tell us how God revealed himself in the Old Testament days and they tell us how prophets responded to him and how men responded to him and how psalmists responded to him. Preeminently, they tell us how Jesus Christ came as the revelation of God, did the will of God laid the foundation for the completion for the program of God.

And so this divine self-revelation which reached its climax in the coming of Jesus Christ is now encased, not in the sense that it is all within these pages, but this is the only pointer to that divine revelation; the word of God. So self-revelation supplants human discovery. The way of the scholastics is essentially human discovery. The way of the Bible is revelation. Man cannot know God of himself. We would never know God if he had not revealed himself: canst thou by searching find out God? Job said. No we cannot know God. It is just as impossible for us to discover God by human reason then it is for a scientist to discover God in his laboratory by means of his scientific instruments. You can only know God if he is pleased to reveal himself to us. Now

nature may give us light on his power and deity but even then, after we are Christians we cannot really look at nature and adequately see God. The Bible is our spectacles when we look at nature, Calvin said. So even now as Christians who have been renewed; given the Holy Spirit so we can look with the understanding of God and when we look out on God's great creation and see the revelation of his glory there, we have to see that through the Bible. In other words, we have to put on our spectacles, which are the word of God, and look at God's creation through his word, even then to understand God.

Now, B. Validity in the study
of the attributes.

Can we really be sure that the conceptions we have of God, which we see in the Bible, are objectively true? Now, there are two extremes that must be avoided. One extreme is that our conceptions of God are adequate in kind and degree to represent God and his perfections. In other words, we can know God and we can know him completely. We can know everything about him and we can know him completely.

Now, there is more of God than you and I will ever know, ever, not only here but in eternity. There is more of God than you and I will ever know. He is the only eternal God and he is the only eternal God throughout eternity. So when you get to heaven and you think you're going to be gods, forget it. You're not going to be gods. You will always be creatures, and consequently you will be limited so far as God is concerned.

Furthermore, what we do know of him we know imperfectly. We never know him perfectly even though we may say we know him. Now I've used this illustration over and over again. I'll refer to it then use another one. I know my wife. I know; I know my wife. I know, I know, I know her; but there are times when I don't. There are times when I say I don't understand her. And there are times when she tells me the same thing. She says I cannot understand you and I assure you those words are not said in love ordinarily, at least that isn't the tone of voice it seems to me. Now she's here in the audience tonight so I have to be careful. I won't go anymore into that. I'm going to use another illustration.

Let's think of a child who lives next door to an outstanding philosopher. Now, that little child if you were to ask him, "do you know the reverend" -- or let's just say, he's not a preacher, too." Let's say, "Do you know Dr. so-and-so." The little child -- he's ten years of age -- will say, "oh yes he's my neighbor," but the little boy does not really know him. He does know him and he knows him really, but he does not know him in the

depth of knowledge as he could know him. He knows him as a man but he does not know him as a philosopher. That's really what he is.

You know if you were to know Roger Starbauch as simply a next door neighbor and didn't know he played football for the Dallas Cowboys and was the quarterback; even if you knew him and knew him fairly well if you did not know him as a quarterback you did not know him in that which he does best. You wouldn't really know him. If you were to live next to me and you knew me simply as a neighbor and you did not know me as a Christian, as an expositor of the word of God, as a teacher of the Scriptures, as a would be theologian; well you would know me but you wouldn't know me in that part of my being which is most "I," as I see it. So you see it's possible to know God but we don't know him in the degree of deity.

And what we do know of him we know imperfectly, always. So we must not fall into the trap of the extreme in the study of the attributes of say of thinking that our conceptions are adequate in kind and degree of God.

Now, that's one extreme. The other extreme is to say as some men have said -- not Christians -- our knowledge is purely illusory. Now that leads to skepticism if not to dogmatic atheism. If it is true that we cannot really look at the Bible and know God, if you tell me as a theologian that I am so finite and so limited and so utterly unlike God that what I think to be the knowledge of God is not really the knowledge of God that he is the -- now this is a common term of our cotemporary theologians -- that he is the holy other one.

If we were to take that in its absolute literality, if he were the holy other one, then we could not know anything about God. We would have to say that we are either agnostics or atheist skeptics. If our minds taught by the Spirit and the word present us illusory conceptions of what God is then we have no assurance that they give us evidence that he is. In other words, we cannot look at the Bible and say now the Bible is a revelation of men and these are finite and limited and what they give you is not really

true of God. We cannot say that; that is if we want to be theist at all, because this same book is the book that authenticates for us the existence of God. And if we cannot from the word of God understand what he is like then we cannot understand what he is. We could not trust our thoughts and our faculties. Let's move one.

C. The problem of Anthropomorphism.

Isn't that a lovely word? Anthropomorphism. Every theologian ought to understand what Anthropomorphism is. Anthropos -- I have written it out underneath -- that's the Greek word for man, *anthropos*, and *morphe* is the Greek word for form. So an anthropomorphism is speech about God in the language of men. Anthropomorphisms in the Bible are references to God in language that is used of men to give you illustration.

The Bible speaks in Exodus 33, verse 11 and in verse 20 about God's face. Now, God does not have a face. The Father does not have a face. The Spirit does not have a face. Jesus Christ does. The face is an anthropomorphism. In 2 Chronicles chapter 16, verse 9 the Bible speaks about God's eyes. Now, he does not have eyes. He is a spirit so he does not possess eyes, but he sees. That's the point. And so in the language of men God is described. That's an anthropomorphism. In 2 Samuel chapter 22, verse 9 the Bible speaks about God's nostrils. God does not have a nose but the nose was the means of the expression of wrath in the Old Testament and even now it is.

When a man gets angry, you can tell it by looking at his nose. And consequently in the Bible God's nostrils are frequently associated with his wrath. He is angry and this is a human way of speaking about God. The Bible speaks of God's arms and feet and other ways in which it expresses his power in the fact that he may go from one place to the other fast. All of these are anthropomorphic ways of speaking about God.

We had a student at seminary some years ago, about fifteen or so, and he was in my class and a real nice fellow but he had a quirk about him. And that quirk about him was this he was convinced that we could understand the Bible literally. And I'm convinced that we should understand the Bible normally, but he would not even

acknowledge that there was any figure of speech in the Bible. In other words, for him everything was to be taken in a starkly literal fashion.

If it said, for example, I cannot follow you because I must go home and bury my father as one the men said to our Lord; he never recognized that as a figurative expression in common use at that time. No his father was really dead and he had to go to the funeral. And so finally, one day I in the class this thing came up again and I said well now Richard if that's true then, of course, what you are really going to have to say is that God has a nose. And he looked at me real strange because he had not really put that together with this idea that the Bible be taken completely literally. And then he answered, as you would expect a consistent man to do but as you would expect a wise man not to do, he said, "Yes God has a nose." And at that I gave up. [Laughter]

I don't know what that young man is doing now, but to my guess is if he has not changed his ideas he's not doing much of anything worthwhile; but I hope that he has changed his viewpoint. He did not graduate from the seminary as I remember.

Why do we have anthropomorphisms in the Bible? Well, in the first place, they are necessary; and because they are necessary and because they are used, they are valid. If man is created in God's image it should not be surprising to us that God should be described in anthropomorphic language.

Now, we are not to take that literally but we are to see the truth back of it because it enables us to understand things about God, which we would not if they were given to us as he is. We don't have the capacity to understand God now. We are not yet spirit beings in the fullest sense. Just as we are personal rational spirits so God is a personal rational spirit. Just as we have a mind, as we have volition, as we have emotions so does God. And as we are created in the image of God we find the Bible speaking about him being like us only to draw attention to those features of God that parallel our own make up. And of course he has them in imminent degrees. In addition, we have no other way

of knowing God if we cannot speak of him in our own terms. How can we possibly know God if we must use an unknown language?

Now, we cannot speak of God, for we have no one to teach us that unknown language. We could not learn it. If the Bible were written in that kind of language no one could read it. It has to be written in our language. Furthermore, Jesus Christ, king as the God-man, and he has revealed God perfectly to us. And God was manifested in human form. He was manifest in the flesh, Paul says. So it's not surprising then, that we should find God spoken of as a man in an attempt as possessing features of man; because in this way the Bible speaks to us so we can understand it. Let's move on now to Roman II. The definition of the divine attributes. The term attributes is not an ideal term because it conveys the notion of adding something to the divine being as an attribute. Well, that's something that he has and so we add to his essence, his attribute. Berkhoff, one of our theologians, likes the word properties rather than attributes. The biblical term is virtues; 1 Peter chapter 2, verse 9. Perhaps we can point out the meaning of attributes in this way. First what they are not, then what they are.

A. What they are not.

Attributes are not parts of the divine essence. We are not to think of the attributes of God as parts of the divine essence because theologically the whole essence of God is in every attribute. And the attribute is in the essence. So there is a unity of attribute and essence, which we are inclined to miss if we think of the attributes as something that, as things added to God.

Now I have a good friend who likes to speak about the attributes as the doctrine of the essence box. But if we are to think of a box out of which we may draw goodness, righteousness, justice and so forth; apart from the essence and the whole essence, that is an untheological illustration. Almost every human illustration is untheological and untrue ultimately because God cannot be completely illustrated. You just cannot do it. It's like trying to illustrate the Trinity. Three

in one. Well, what can we say? Well, God is like an egg. It's one and then you have a shell, and you have a yoke, and you have a white. There you are, three in one.

But that's not an illustration of God. He is a person. An egg's not a person. It doesn't greet you on a quarter to seven every morning as Mary fixes my breakfast, puts it on the table. The egg doesn't say, "Good morning Lewis, I'm ready." It's three in one but it's not an illustration of the Trinity. And yet at first glance you might say, "ah, I finally found an illustration of the Trinity." No you cannot illustrate God like that. Well, attributes are not parts of the divine essence for the whole of God is each attribute and the attribute is in the essence. The essence did not exist by itself and prior to the attributes God is not essence and attributes, he is essence in his attributes.

In addition, attributes are not persons. A person is a mode of the existence of the essence. The essence exists as a person, that is a mode of the existence of the essence of God. God exists as Father, Son, and Spirit. Three persons who subsist in one essence. Person is a mode of the existence of the essence. An attribute is a mode of the internal relation or external operation of the essence. So they are not parts and they're not persons. So what are they? Well as Shedd, one of our best theologians says, "The divine attributes are modes either of the relation or of the operation of the divine essence." I'll explain this, so don't get discouraged. They are consequently an analytical and closer description of the essence. Let me read that again. If you're going to be a theologian, you've got to think. Think.

Now, I know that this is new for some of you, but nevertheless think. Listen to what he said. The divine attributes are modes either of the relation or of the operation of the divine essence. They are consequently an analytical and closer description of the essence. They're two kinds. They are of two kinds. As passively related to itself, the essence is self-existent. In other words, if we look at the essence as a relation of the divine essence, not related to others but simply within itself, within the essence of God; then the attribute is self-existence. As passively related to duration, we have the attribute

of eternity, eternity. As related to space, God is immense. As related to number, he is one. All these are inactive relationships. They are ways of existing. And so those are one aspect of his attributes. Those things that mark him out as a person who does not relate, operate towards others but just as he relates within himself. Then as related to his action toward men his attributes are different.

Now, he, of course, is inclusive of all of these things. And we're going to discuss them one by one later on and that's when the blessing will come, but we've got to classify them now. As actively related to action or energizing, God is omnipotent. When he acts toward men in energy, acts outside of himself, he is not simply powerful. He's all powerful. When he acts in knowledge in cognizing, he is not only knowledgeable, not only wise, but he is omniscient. When he adapts means to ends, he possesses infinite wisdom. When he benevolently exercises himself towards men, he is perfectly good. So within himself looked at only within himself, he possessed such qualities as eternity, infinity, simplicity, unity, self-existence. In his operation toward men, he demonstrates that he is omnipotent, he is all-wise, he is good and so on.

Now, Roman III, classification of the divine attributes. Many attempts have been made to classify the attributes and some of them are these. And I'm going to run fairly quickly through the six classifications that have been suggested of the attributes. What shall we say about those properties those excellencies of God's being and how shall we put them together in such a way that we shall remember them. Some theologians have said we should divide them first of all into natural and moral attributes. Under natural attributes we have self-existence. He's not dependent on anyone else. We are. He has simplicity. He's not made up of parts. He's not body, soul and spirit. He is a spirit being. These belong to his constitutional nature.

Now, his moral attributes belong to his will. And they are truth, goodness, mercy, justice; etc. Now this is not a perfect classification. And I wish we had time have a good discussion over this because I'm sure one of two of you would ultimately say, but after all

are not the moral attributes of God just as natural in God as the others. And I would have to say, yes. And if that's so then it's not proper to divide the attributes into natural and moral attributes, and that's why theologians who have suggested this but others have abandoned it. And I've abandoned it too.

Second, absolute and relative, quite common for theologians to classify God's attributes as absolute on the one hand and relative on the other. By absolute attributes, they refer to his essence considered in itself, and then by relative his essence in relationship to his creation.

Now, if we look at the essence of God in relationship to himself, what does he possess? Well he possesses self-existence. He possesses immensity. He possesses eternity. But if we look at his attributes to his creation, what does he possess? Well, he possesses omnipresence. He possesses omniscience. He possesses omnipotence. These are different ways of classifying the same attributes. Now, again really all the perfections of God are relative for they all indicate what he is in relationship to this world. Even when we say he is self-existent we say he's not like us. He is not dependent. So it is impossible really to speak of absolute attributes, I cannot have knowledge of God absolutely. I'm no god. Every knowledge that I have of God, every little piece of knowledge is a relative kind of knowledge. So I do not think it best to classify God's attributes as absolute and relative. Others have suggested imminent or intransitive, whatever that means and imminent or transitive.

Now, imminent and eminent sound alike but do not mean the same thing. Imminent means to abide. Eminent -- e-m-i-n-e-n-t -- means to abide out from; that is to emerge that type of thing. Well, now his imminent, I -- double - m, attributes are those, which do not go forth and operate outside the divine essence. That is they are imminent. They remain imminent. What are they? Well, I'm even thinking about these attributes. Someone tell me what would be one of the attributes that is imminent by this classification. Hmmm? Self existence, right. Immensities, simplicity, eternity, so forth.

Now those that are transitive or imminent would then be what kind? For example, hmmm? What did you say? Justice, right. I have a budding theologian, lives right next door to me almost, too. Association I hope. Anything else? Well, all of those others; omnipotence, justice, mercy, goodness, so forth. Well, now if some of the attributes are purely imminent, i-m-m-i-n-e-n-t, how could we have knowledge of them if they were totally within God? So you see again this classification does not really classify.

Fourth, some have classified them as positive and negative. By this they mean the positive expressed some positive expression of the essence such as omnipresent omnipotence. They belong in a finite degree to the creature. The negative deny defect or limitation of any kind of god so that he immutable not mutable. He is infinite not finite. He is incomprehensible not comprehensible. I think we can pass that one by.

Fifth, active and passive. Now, active involves action, and so consequently what type of attributes would be his active attributes? Well, they would be his omnipotence again; His justice, his benevolence, his goodness, his mercy. The passive would be those that imply what he possesses when he doesn't act towards us when he's at rest. Now those are those imminent attributes. That is those that expresses self-existence, his immensity, his eternity. See these are just different ways of saying trying to arrange the attributes and describe them correctly. So I'm going to come to the last because this is the most popular classification of the attributes among reformed theologians. Now the Lutherans have never really warmed up to the idea of classifying the attributes as incommunicable and communicable. But it's still is the most common distinction. And this is the one that we will be following although we will not spend a whole lot of time on this after tonight. The incommunicable attributes are those that have no analogy to the creature. His immutability, the creature is always mutable. God is immutable. God's infinity. We are finite. God's unity. We are made up of parts and so on. The communicable are those to which the properties of human nature bears some analogy such as his power. We have power. He has all power. We have goodness, but his

goodness is perfection. We may exercise mercy, but he is perfectly merciful. We may be righteousness, but he is all-righteous. So the incommunicable are those that cannot be communicated to men. The communicable are those, which we may in some measure experience.

Now we must qualify this. As Hodge says, “All of God’s attributes known to us, or conceivable by us are communicable in as much as they have their analogy in us, but they are all alike incommunicable in as much as they are infinite.” And so when we say that the communicable attributes are justice, mercy etc., we don’t mean to say that the way in which God is good, is communicable. Or the way the in which God is just, is communicable. It is not. The degree to which he is just or communicable can never be transmitted to us, but we can in measure know them.

So if we will think of God’s attributes as incommunicable; those that have to do with those aspects of his being into of which we have no experience; his infinity, his incomprehensibility, his eternity, his self-existence. And if we will think of his communicable attributes as those of which we have some experience we will have a classification that will enable us to understand the types of the attributes of God.

Now, I began tonight by saying there’s nothing more important then our thoughts about God. There is nothing more difficult really then to think thoughts about God. Thomas Cohearne once said, “As nothing is more easy than to think so nothing is more difficult to think well.” And if that is true of human thought how much more is it true of God? It may be easy to think. It is difficult to think well. It is even more difficult to think accurately of God.

But to think about God is to think about the ultimate thoughts; and for us it should be a tremendously sweet absorbing spiritual exercise to come to know God as he really is. And so to think of God and his attributes should really have a tremendous effect upon our own spiritual life. And perhaps as a result of coming to know who he really is and what he is really like, perhaps some of the concept of the majesty of God may

become a reality in our lives and be a transforming experience. At least that is my hope and my prayer. Let’s bow together in a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father we thank Thee for the greatness of our God. We do not know we do not for one moment think Lord that we can understand Thee perfectly, but we know Thou hast given us Thy word. And thoust said the secret thing belong of the Lord. That Thou hast said the things that are revealed belong unto us and to our children. Enable us, oh God to come to know Thee in a better way as we study the attributes and properties of our great self-existent and eternal God.

In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.