

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

A STUDY OF THE MAJOR DOCTRINES OF SCRIPTURE.

Topic 2 – The Doctrine of God

Lesson 18 – The Attributes of God: Immutability

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Immutability

- God is unchanging in His being, perfection, purposes, and promises.
- When we talk about God being unchanging we must begin with a confession that we do not and cannot understand how God thinks or feels. We gain a measure of understanding from His Word, but ultimately we must remember:
- Romans 11:34 "For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become His counselor?"
- Psalm 50:21 These things you have done, and I kept silent; **You thought that I was altogether like you**; but I will rebuke you, and set them in order before your eyes.
- Isaiah 55:8 "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways," says the Lord. 9 "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.

Immutability

- Being vs. Becoming – “The doctrine of God’s immutability is of the highest significance for religion. The contrast between being and becoming marks the difference between the Creator and the creature. Every creature is continually becoming. It is changeable, constantly striving, seeks rest and satisfaction, and finds rest in God, in Him alone, for only He is pure being and no becoming. Hence in Scripture God is often called the Rock.”

– Herman Bavinck

Immutability

- Exodus 3:14 And God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And He said, "Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.' "
- Psalm 102:25 Of old You laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands. 26 They will perish, but You will endure; yes, they will all grow old like a garment; like a cloak You will change them, and they will be changed. 27 But You are the same, and Your years will have no end. (Quoted in Hebrews 1:11-12).
- Malachi 3:6 "For I am the Lord, I do not change; therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob.
- James 1:17 Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.

Immutability

- Matthew 25:34 Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:
- Ephesians 4:4 just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love...11 In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will.
- Ephesians 3:9 and to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ...11 according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Immutability

- 2 Timothy 2:19 Nevertheless the solid foundation of God stands, having this seal: "The Lord knows those who are His," and, "Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity."
- 1 Peter 1:20 He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you
- Revelation 13:8 All who dwell on the earth will worship him, whose names have not been written in the Book of Life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.
- Numbers 23:19 "God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?"
- 1 Samuel 15:29 And also the Strength of Israel will not lie nor relent. For He is not a man, that He should relent."

Immutability

- But if He does not relent, why does the Bible say He relented?
- Exodus 32:10 Now therefore, let Me alone, that My wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them. And I will make of you a great nation." 11 Then Moses pleaded with the Lord his God, and said: "Lord, why does Your wrath burn hot against Your people whom You have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? 12 Why should the Egyptians speak, and say, 'He brought them out to harm them, to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from Your fierce wrath, and relent from this harm to Your people. 13 Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants, to whom You swore by Your own self, and said to them, 'I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven; and all this land that I have spoken of I give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.' " 14 So the Lord relented from the harm which He said He would do to His people.

Immutability

- Does God relent?
- Jonah 3:10 Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it.
- Note: Immutability is not immobility. There is change all around God, in His relationships with men and theirs to Him, but there is no change in His being, attributes, purposes, motives, actions, or promises.
- God expresses in His Word His present attitude toward the situation as it exists in that moment. If the situation changes, God's attitude has not changed, as He responds to the present moment as He always has, inline with the rest of His character and attributes. His response to repentance is forgiveness, for example. He did not change – we did.
- To say God is sorry, or has repented, is an expression of God's present displeasure, not a change in His eternal purpose or decree. And He often tells us how He will respond if we change.

Immutability

- Analogy: An earthly father who allows his child to embark on a course he knows will bring sorrow, both to the parent and the child, but who allows it nonetheless, because he knows that greater long-term good will come from it.
- This analogy is strengthened when we see that God providentially ordains these circumstances for the greatest outcome possible. Rom. 8:28.

Immutability

- Does that mean God has no feelings or emotions?
- Impassibility says that God is without passions like ours. The danger is to go to the extreme to say God has no passions, or emotions at all.
- This means, not that God is impassive and unfeeling (a frequent misunderstanding), but that no created beings can inflict pain, suffering and distress on him at their own will. In so far as God enters into suffering and grief (which Scripture's many anthropopathisms, plus the fact of the cross, show that he does), it is by his own deliberate decision; he is never his creatures' hapless victim. [Impassibility is] not impassivity, unconcern, and impersonal detachment in face of the creation; not insensitivity and indifference to the distresses of a fallen world; not inability or unwillingness to empathize with human pain and grief; but simply that God's experiences do not come upon him as ours come upon us, for his are foreknown, willed and chosen by himself, and are not involuntary surprises forced on him from outside, apart from his own decision, in the way that ours regularly are. – JI Packer

Immutability

- So a proper understanding of impassibility should not lead us to think God is unfeeling. But His "feelings" are never passive. They don't come and go or change and fluctuate. They are active, sovereignly-directed dispositions rather than passive reactions to external stimuli. They differ in this way from human passions. God's affections, like every other aspect of His character, simply cannot be understood in purely human terms. And that is why Scripture employs anthropopathic expressions. – Phil Johnson
- God rejoices (Isa. 63:5), is grieved (Psa. 78:40; Eph. 4:30), has wrath and anger that vary in degrees (Exodus 32:20), and He pities His people (Psa. 103:13).
- God also turns from His anger (Exodus 32:14; Deut. 13:17), relates differently to unbelievers and believers (Prov. 11:20; 12:22), is incarnated in time (Gal. 4:4), indwells the Church (1 Cor. 3:16-17; Col. 1:27), and is close at one time but far off in another (Jer. 23:23).
- There is never anything involuntary, irrational, or out of control about the divine affections.

Immutability

- A good way to understand God's apparent changes in Scripture is to consider that God reveals Himself in relations to His people. They perceive only one aspect of God at a time. God never changes, but creatures do change, and they perceive God's perfections and actions according to their current state. Thus, God's actions do not imply a change of essence or purpose. For example, the language of God "repenting" or "changing" in any way is an anthropopathic language – figurative expressions that communicate to man on his level of understanding about changes of disposition or actions. Thus, God's perceived "changes" are always in the context of His eternal omniscience and will, so they are never because God is surprised and has to adjust. – MacArthur, pg. 169

Immutability

- We confess:

1. He is eternally the same (Psa. 102:25-27).

2. He is the first and the last (Isa. 41:4; 43:10; 44:6; 48:12).

3. He is what He is (Exodus 3:14).

4. He is incorruptible, alone having immortality, always remaining the same (Rom. 1:23; 1 Tim. 1:17; 6:15-16; Heb. 1:11-12).

5. His thought, purpose, will, and decrees are unchangeable:

- a. He executes His threats and promises (Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29).

- b. He does not repent of His gifts and calling (Rom. 11:29).

- c. He does not cast off people with whom He has made a unilateral covenant (Rom. 11:1).

- d. He glorified those whom He foreknows (Rom. 8:29-30).

- e. He perfects what He starts (Psa. 138:8; Phil. 1:6).

- f. His faithfulness never lessens (Lam. 3:22-23).

6. He does not change (Mal. 3:6; James 1:17).

- MacArthur, pg. 169