

Lesson 3

Part One – Introduction to Systematic Theology

- I. Introduction
 - a. What is Systematic Theology?
 - b. What is the relation between Systematic Theology and Hermeneutics?
 - c. Why is it important to study the Bible systematically?

Part Two – Theology Proper - Beginning at the Beginning

- I. Introduction to the One True God
 - a. Arguments for the existence of God
 - b. Why only one God
- II. The Nature of God

Since we are combining our study of Systematic Theology with our study of Hermeneutics, it is very important to know how the two actually relate. When we discuss theology proper or the study of the Godhead, for example, it is important to note that our understanding of who God is will have an undeniably profound “*ripple effect*” on how we interpret the word of God. One verse that comes to mind in this regard is **2 Peter 3:9**. There, we’re told:

The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.

If we didn’t know anything else about who God is and we were to stumble upon this passage, what would we conclude about Him? We would see God as One who sits in heaven “wishing” that everyone in the world would come to repentance. Now, granted, as we’ve seen already in our Hermeneutics lesson on the importance of context, all one has to do is go back to the beginning of this passage and they’ll see that Peter is talking exclusively about the elect which would make this passage perfectly consistent with that doctrine. However, there is another way that we can know what this passage means (or at least know with a certainty what it DOESN’T mean). What am I talking about? Well, if we are familiar enough with who God is (having done our Systematic Theology homework, namely, in the area of God’s attributes), we would be equipped to immediately dismiss any suggestion that God is sitting in heaven wringing His hands and wishing that more people would be saved. The study of Systematic Theology will have a tremendous influence in terms of what kind of “*grid*” we put into place to filter what we read from the word of God.

In today's lesson we are going to look at the attributes (or, as I prefer, the "perfections" of God). Why do I make this distinction? Because attributes are something we "attribute" to someone or something whereas "perfections" are representative of what that someone or something is by nature.

Theologians over the centuries have categorized God's attributes in a number of ways. Some, for example, see them as "*moral versus non-moral.*" Others view them as "*absolute versus relative.*" Still others categorize them as "*incommunicable versus communicable.*" For the purposes of this study, we will be using the "*incommunicable versus communicable*" categorization. Let's look first at God's incommunicable perfections.

- a. **God's incommunicable perfections (attributes).** God's incommunicable perfections are those things that He does not share with man. These perfections speak of God's unique nature as the One True God of the universe.
 - **Self-existence** – God's self-existence means that He is totally independent in His being, His virtues, decrees, works...everything depends on Him for its existence but He Himself depends on no one. **Exodus 3:14** emphasizes His self-existence as He declares Himself as, "I AM WHO I AM." While everyone and everything that lives owes their very existence to God, He owes His existence to no one. See also **John 5:26**, **Daniel 5:23**, and **Acts 17:28**.
 - **Self-sufficiency** – What is the difference between God's self-existence and His self-sufficiency? They are closely related but whereas God's self-existence speaks to His existing without any external causal agency, self-sufficiency speaks of His continuing to live without any dependency on anything or anyone else. He is self-sufficient.
 - **Omnipresence** – Three of God's perfections are referred to with the prefix "omni." This comes from the Latin "omnis" meaning "all." Thus, omnipresence means that God is present everywhere. The theological definition, according to Augustus H. Strong, is as follows: "God, in the totality of His essence, without diffusion or expansion, multiplication or division, penetrates and fills the universe in all its parts."

Psalm 139:7-12 explains this perfection. The importance of this doctrine is that there is nowhere man can go and be where God isn't. Some have argued that God is not in hell but that is simply not true. God cannot and will not make His presence known there but if He isn't there, He cannot be said to be omnipresent. We need to distinguish between God's omnipresence and his immensity.

God's immensity speaks of His being transcendent (outside of space and time) while His omniscience places Him everywhere IN space and time.

- **Omniscience** – To say that God is omniscient means that God knows all (omnis + scientia). A more comprehensive definition would be that God knows all things actual and possible, past, present, and future in one eternal act. Now, due to God's eternity and infinity, the reason God knows these things is because with God there is no "possible" and there is no "future." God exists in what many theologians have defined as "the eternal now." God certainly condescends to us in terms of Biblical language and speaks in terms of past, present, and future but that is for our benefit alone. Our finite minds simply cannot grasp the concept of the absence of space and time. This is especially important when discussing God's foreknowledge and election as described in Scripture. I've taught on this before but it bears repeating now. God could not have looked down the tunnel of time, as some argue, made not of those who would, at some point, choose to be saved and then elect them unto salvation. Why is this not possible? Because it implies that, at some point, God did **not** know something (i.e. who would choose Him). You see, there are two possibilities concerning how God knows everything: 1) He knows everything by prescience. That is, he looked down the corridors of time and saw things before they happened, or 2) He knows everything by simple divine or fiat decree. Folks, this is a lot simpler than a lot of people make it. If one maintains that God looked down the corridors of time to gain His knowledge, he is guilty of denying two of God's perfections right away. First, he denies God's eternity and infinity which speak of His being outside of space and time. If it's true (and it is) that there is no future to God, how and why in the world would He look there to gain knowledge?!? Secondly, if God had to learn (via whatever method), He cannot be said to be omniscient. God knows all things because He is God.
- **Omnipotence** – This signifies that God is all powerful. The theological definition says *"God is all powerful and able to do whatever He wills. Since His will is limited by His nature, God can do everything that is in harmony with that nature."* The question, *"Can God create a stone so large that He couldn't lift it?"* then becomes irrelevant because for Him to do so would violate His very nature. See **Genesis 17:1; 28:3, Isaiah 13:6; Ezekiel 1:24, Joel 1:15, Matthew 19:26, Psalm 115:3.**
- **Immutability** – When we speak of God's immutability, a good theological definition is as follows: *"Immutability is that perfection of God by which He is devoid of all change, not only in His Being, but also in His perfections, and in His purposes and promises... and is free from all accession (gain) or diminution (decay)."*

- Since change is always either for the better or for the worse and God is absolutely perfect in every way, improvement or deterioration are impossible for Him. See **Malachi 3:8** and **James 1:17**. This doctrine is enormously important because it serves as the basis for our assurance.
- **Impeccability** – Simply put, impeccability means “*the absence of sin.*” Generally, this word is used in relation to Christ’s inability to sin but I wanted to bring it up here as well because God the Father is equally incapable of sinning. We’ll actually discuss this more in-depth when we get to our study of Christology.
- **Holiness** – The basic meaning of holiness is to be “set apart” or “separated” from that which is common. Many theologians refer to God’s holiness as being “transcendent.” This indicates that God is absolutely distinct from His creation and is exalted above them in infinite majesty. See **Exodus 15:11**, **Isaiah 57:15** (“high and exalted,” “high and holy place”), **Leviticus 11:44, 45**, and **Psalms 11:4-6**.
- **Infinity (includes eternity/immensity)** – To say that God is infinite is to say that 1) He is eternal, that is, He is not limited or bound in any way by time and 2) He is immense, that is, He is not bound or confined by space. God exists outside of the space/time continuum. As Charles Hodge stated, “*With Him there is no distinction between the present, past, and future; but all things are equally and always present to Him.*” See **Psalm 90:2**. God’s eternity extends backward to infinity and forward to infinity. With regard to God’s immensity, see **1 Kings 8:27**, **Isaiah 66:1**, **Jeremiah 23:23-24**, **Acts 7:48-49**. Solomon declared, “heaven and highest heaven cannot contain Thee.” He had built a magnificent temple to the Lord but recognized that God could not be contained in it.