

CHAPTER 4

GOD'S RELATIVE ATTRIBUTES

While God's absolute attributes are those which he holds in himself, without reference to his creation, his relative attributes are those attributes which God exercises as concerns his creation. Sometimes they are called communicable attributes, since these attributes may be shared, to some extent, by his creatures. The Shorter Catechism says that God is "infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth." Those attributes of wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth all can to some extent be shared by his moral creatures, and are thus called his communicable or relative attributes. These qualities of God make him the wonderful God and Savior we can worship, not only in fear, but in love.

Knowledge and wisdom of God

[excellent discussion in C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology* 1:393-402]

The Westminster Confession of Faith 2:2 expresses this infinite knowledge of God (his omniscience) and offers Scriptural proof as follows:

"In his sight all things are open and manifest (Heb 4:13); his knowledge is infinite, infallible, and independent upon the creature (Rom 11:33-34; Ps 147:5); so as nothing is to him contingent or uncertain (Isa 46:9-11; Acts 15:18; Ezek 11:5)."

As was shown earlier, God has perfect self-awareness and knowledge of himself. In addition, many Scriptures point out the perfect knowledge God has of his creation. This knowledge springs from his omnipresence and absolute sovereignty.

God's knowledge includes all the physical and spiritual universe

Since God created and inhabits all of the universe, and heaven itself, he must of necessity observe and know what transpires there. Yet one may question God's interest or capacity to contain all this information. The Scriptures, however, reassure us that, indeed, God does take an interest in his creation, and is capable to comprehend all he has made and sustains.

Job 26:6 (words of Job), “Death (Heb. **לְאוֹשׁ** *še’ôl*) is naked before God; Destruction (Heb. **אֲבַדְדוֹן** *’ābaddôn*) lies uncovered.”

Job 28:24 (words of Job), “He views the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens.”

Job 37:16 (words of Elihu), “Do you know how the clouds hang poised, those wonders of him who is perfect in knowledge?”

Job 38:17-21, 36-38; 39:1-2 (words of God), passages which contrast God’s infinite knowledge with the very limited knowledge of Job

Psa 147:4-5, “He determines the number of the stars and calls them each by name. Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit.”

Isa 40:12-14, “Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens? Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket, or weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance? Who has understood the mind of the Lord, or instructed him as his counselor? Whom did the Lord consult to enlighten him, and who taught him the right way? Who was it that taught him knowledge or showed him the path of understanding?”

Matt 10:29-30, “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny (Gk. an *ἀσάριον assarion*)? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered.” (this passage may refer also to God’s all-inclusive sovereignty, but certainly his complete and detailed knowledge is included in any case)

Acts 15:17b-18 (in some MSS), “. . . says the Lord, who does these things; known unto God are all his works from the age”; (NIV, following the UBS, which gives a {B} rating), “. . . says the Lord, who does these things that have been known for ages”

God’s knowledge includes all our lives, actions, and thoughts

Scripture especially notes how God’s omniscience affects us as his children. We assume he knows all that transpires with us when we worship him, or when we pray, often mentally (as Nehemiah did frequently). We are comforted by thinking that God knows our situation; and the wicked are warned that nothing they do escapes his notice. This is the significance of the words “before me” in the first commandment (cf. WSC 48, “What are specially taught by these words, ‘before me,’ in the first commandment? These words, *before me*, in the first commandment teach us, That God, who seeth all things, taketh notice of, and is much displeased with, the sin of having any other god”).

Gen 16:13, “She [Hagar] gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her: ‘You are the God who sees me,’ for she said, ‘I have now seen the One who sees me.’”

Ps 33:13-15, “From heaven the Lord looks down and sees all mankind; from his dwelling place he watches all who live on earth—he who forms the hearts of all, who considers everything they do.”

Ps 56:8, “Record my lament; list my tears on your scroll—are they not in your record?”

Ps 94:9-11, “Does he who implanted the ear not hear? Does he who formed the eye not see? Does he who disciplines nations not punish? Does he who teaches man lack knowledge? The Lord knows the thoughts of man; he knows that they are futile.”

Ps 139:1-4, 11-12, 15-18, “O Lord, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar; You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O Lord. . . . If I say, ‘Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,’ even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you. . . . My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand.”

Prov 5:21, “For a man’s ways are in full view of the Lord, and he examines all his paths.”

Prov 15:3, 11, “The eyes of the Lord are everywhere, keeping watch on the wicked and the good. . . . Death and Destruction (Heb. *še’ôl* and *’ăbaddôn*) lie open before the Lord—how much more the hearts of men!”

Jer 1:5, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you.”

Ezek 11:5, “This is what the Lord says: ‘That is what you are saying, O house of Israel, but I know what is going through your mind.’”

Matt 6:8, “Do not be like them [the pagans], for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”

Acts 1:24, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart.”

Rom 8:27, “And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit.”

Heb 4:13, “Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”

1 John 3:18-20, “Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.”

God’s knowledge includes all possible or contingent events

God knows not only what actually exists, but also all possible results from events that do not actually happen, commonly called contingent events. Here are two interesting examples in Scripture.

- (1) In 1 Sam 23:9-13, David inquired from the Lord by means of the ephod of the priest Abiathar. He asked if the citizens of the town of Keilah, where he was hiding from Saul, would surrender David to him if Saul should come. God replied that they would turn David over to Saul. With this information in hand, David decided to leave Keilah before Saul would arrive; he thus escaped Saul’s hands, and the contingent event did not occur. When Saul learned that David had escaped, he did not even go to Keilah.
- (2) The Mosaic covenant (Exodus-Deuteronomy) states two distinct results that would happen, depending on Israel’s obedience or disobedience. The Israelites followed the path of disobedience; so the curses of the covenant came upon, as Moses indeed predicted. However, God clearly knew what would happen if the Israelites had been faithful, since he had promised to them the blessings of obedience.

Many use the example of Jesus’ statements concerning Tyre and Sidon (Matt 11:21) to show God’s knowledge of contingent events. Jesus states that if the great miracles that he performed in the villages around the Sea of Galilee had been done in Tyre and Sidon, those cities would have repented. However, his statements in this case seem to be a figure of speech, a hyperbole contrasting the sinful disbelief of the Jews of Galilee to the lesser unbelief of the Gentile cities of Tyre and Sidon. In actuality, all people are incapable of receiving the gospel without the special call of the Holy Spirit. As it worked out, God did not choose those cities, and Jesus did not minister there, although the subsequent conversion of the Canaanite woman from that region (Matt 15:21-28) provides an indication of what might have happened if God had ordained otherwise.

These examples illustrate that God knows all contingent events which would occur based on the situation in reality from which they would spring. Of course, God in his sovereignty could make these contingent events diverge from that track by introducing other providences. It follows from this fact that God would know all possible contingent events.

A related controversial position is Molinism, or “middle knowledge” (*scientia media*), named for Jesuit theologian Luis de Molina. He sought to reconcile God’s predestination with human libertarian freedom by claiming that God, knowing what people will do in all possible circumstances, places them in situations where they freely will choose what he has determined. Variations of this view have been promoted recently by Christian apologists Alvin Plantinga and

William Lane Craig. This theory is effectively rebutted by Charles Hodge (*ST* 1:399-400 and context).

Passages which seem to limit God's knowledge

Occasionally Scripture uses language that sounds like it limits the knowledge of God. In Gen 3:9 he asked Adam where he was, in Gen 4:9 he asked Cain where his brother was, and in Gen 18:20-21 he went to observe the sin of Sodom; this literary device emphasizes the greatness of God over all events on the earth, the enormity of Sodom's sin, and the fairness of God in judging it. A similar passage, emphasizing God's transcendence over us is Ps 113:5-6, "Who is like the Lord our God, the One who sits enthroned on high, who stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth?"

In Deut 8:2 God said he would test Israel to find out what was in their heart ("Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands"). While he knew what was in their hearts already, these tests provided the proof to us that their hearts indeed were not faithful to the Lord, once again demonstrating God's justice in their judgment in the wilderness.

The NT sometimes offers similar passages. Three times Jesus asked Peter if he loved him (John 21); these questions were more for the benefit of Peter than they were for Jesus. Likewise, Peter asked Ananias and Sapphira if they had given all the price of the land, although he already knew the answer (Acts 5).

For an insightful, somewhat Arminian critique of the view that God is ignorant of the future (held by "open theists"), see William Lane Craig, "Appendix: Divine Eternity and God's Knowledge of the Future," *Time and Eternity*, pp. 243-265. The whole issue of *JETS* 45:2 (June 2002) is devoted to the openness of God debate, with articles by leaders on both sides.

Wisdom of God

Charles Hodge defines wisdom as being "manifested in the selection of proper ends, and of proper means for the accomplishment of those ends" (*Systematic Theology* 1:401). This certainly is the meaning of the term in the book of Proverbs, which equates the wise person with the one who knows and follows the law of God in all areas of life. We are to attain to this wisdom as Christians: ". . . the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim 3:15).

God not only knows all things actual and possible, but he also is all-wise in determining what he will accomplish and how he will go about it. Hodge continues the quotation cited above:

“As there is abundant evidence of design in the works of nature, so all the works of God declare his wisdom. They show, from the most minute to the greatest, the most wonderful adaptation of means to accomplish the high end of the good of his creatures and the manifestation of his own glory. So also, in the whole course of history, we see evidence of the controlling power of God making all things work together for the best interests of his people, and the promotion of his kingdom upon earth. It is, however, in the work of redemption that this divine attribute is specially revealed. It is by the Church, that God has determined to manifest, through all ages, to principalities and powers, his manifold wisdom.”

God formally is denoted as “wise” in Rom 16:27, “to the only wise God be glory forever.” (The adjective “wise,” found in the KJV, is not in the Greek in the benedictions in 1 Tim 1:17 and Jude 25.)

God’s wisdom is displayed in his creation:

Ps 104:24, “How many are your works, O Lord! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.”

Prov 8:22-31, wisdom, speaking as personified, present with God before the creation, and at his side during all the creation

God’s wisdom is displayed especially in redemption:

Rom 11:33, “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!”

Power of God

By power we mean the ability to translate what is willed in the mind into reality. We as creatures of God have some power, but that power is quite limited.

“Power in man is confined within very narrow limits. We can change the current of our thoughts, or fix our attention on a particular object, and we can move the voluntary muscles of our body. Beyond this our direct power does not extend. It is from this small measure of efficiency that all the stores of human knowledge and all the wonders of human art are derived. It is only our thoughts, volitions, and purposes, together with certain acts of the body, that are immediately subject to the will. For all other effects we must avail ourselves of the use of means. We cannot will a book, a picture, or a house into existence. The production of such effects requires protracted labor and the use of diverse appliances.”

— C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology* 1:406-407

Hodge goes on to contrast our small power with God’s absolute power:

“It is by removing all the limitations of power, as it exists in us, that we rise to the idea of the omnipotence of God. . . . We can do very little. God can do whatever He wills. We, beyond very narrow limits, must use means to accomplish our ends. With God means are unnecessary. He wills, and it is done. He said, Let there be light; and there was light. He, by a volition created the heavens and the earth. At the volition of Christ, the winds ceased, and there was a great calm. By an act of the will He healed the sick, opened the eyes of the blind, and raised the dead. This simple idea of the omnipotence of God, that He can do without effort, and by a volition, whatever He wills, is the highest conceivable idea of power, and is that which is clearly presented in the Scriptures.” (p. 407)

The Shorter Catechism #4 lists as its proof texts for God’s being infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his power, Gen 17:1 and Rev 19:6. The Scripture says much about God’s power. He is all-powerful, omnipotent. This power is seen in his very person, and in his works of creation, providence, and redemption.

Gen 17:1, “I am God Almighty (Heb. אֱלֹהִים *’el šadday*); walk before me and be blameless.”

Gen 18:14, “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” (assumes negative answer, demonstrated by birth of Isaac)

Job 42:2 (words of Job), “I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted.”

Ps 62:11-12, “One thing God has spoken, two things have I heard: that you, O God, are strong, and that you, O Lord, are loving. Surely you will reward each person according to what he has done.”

Isa 40:28-29, “The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.”

Isa 46:10, “My counsel will stand, I will do all my pleasure.”

Jer 10:12-13, “But God made the earth by his power; he founded the world by his wisdom and stretched out the heavens by his understanding. When he thunders, the waters in the heavens roar; he makes clouds rise from the ends of the earth. He sends lightning with the rain and brings out the wind from his storehouses.”

Jer 32:17-19, 26, “Ah, Sovereign Lord, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you. . . . O great and powerful God, whose name is the Lord Almighty, great are your purposes and mighty are your deeds. . . . Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah: ‘I am the Lord, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me?’”

Dan 4:17 (God's verdict to Nebuchadnezzar), "The decision is announced by messengers, the holy ones declare the verdict, so that the living may know that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of men."

Dan 4:35 (Nebuchadnezzar's testimony to God), "All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: 'What have you done?'"

Matt 19:26 (Jesus speaking of the salvation of the rich), "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

Eph 1:18-20, ". . . that you may know . . . his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms."

Heb 12:26, "At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, 'Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.'" (referring to Exod 19:18, and quoting Hag 2:6)

Rev 11:17, "We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign."

Rev 19:6, "Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty (παντοκράτωρ *pantokrator*) reigns."

Some have suggested that evil in the world indicates that God's power is limited (as Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* [1981]). There is only one way that the power of God is limited: God can do only that which is consistent with his holy character. As the Catechism for Young Children says, "Can God do all things? A. God can do all his holy will." Thus the Bible speaks of some things God cannot do:

2 Tim 2:13, "If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself."

Titus 1:2, ". . . which God, who does not lie (Gk. ἀψευδής *apseudes*, "the unlying God"; KJV, "the God who cannot lie"), promised before the beginning of time" (there is no lie in God, it is impossible for him to lie)

Jas. 1:13, "When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone."

As a subset of these "inabilities" of God, we can say that he cannot contradict himself. That means, since he is logical, he cannot contradict logic (make two plus two equal five); since he is

simple, he cannot oppose himself (make a rock so big he cannot move it); since he is holy, he cannot sin.

Holiness of God

The Confession states that God is “most holy,” and that “He is most holy in all his counsels, in all his works, and in all his commands” (2:1, 2). It cites as proof texts Isa 6:3; Rev 4:8; Ps 145:17; and Rom 7:12. Of the seven characteristics of God listed in the Shorter Catechism, holiness is the central one, and many consider it to be the single most essential quality of his character.

Holiness stems from the concept of separation, as reflected in the Hebrew adjective *קָדוֹשׁ* *qādôš* and its related words, and the Greek adjective *ἅγιος* *hagios* and its related words. The idea of separation applied itself especially to moral purity. Thus holiness in God is his essential moral excellence. He is known especially by this attribute. He is often called “the Holy One of Israel.” This does not imply a standard of excellence apart from God to which he must conform, but rather that he adheres to his own nature as holy (see Hodge 1:414-415). God combines absolute power and absolute holiness in such a way that sin is still possible in his universe (for a good discussion, see Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Bk. 1, ch. 18, “God So Uses the Works of the Ungodly, and So Bends Their Minds to Carry Out His Judgments, that He Remains Pure from Every Stain,” 1:228-237; this question will be dealt with in the study of sin).

The Scriptures emphasize the idea of God’s holiness:

Exod 3:5, “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.”
(at burning bush; first use of word in OT)

Lev 11:44-45, “I am the Lord your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy. . . . I am the Lord who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy.” (first time word “holy” applied directly to God in the OT; here in context of food laws)

Lev 19:1-2, “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: “Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.”’” (context of the laws to be observed in the Mosaic covenant)

Lev 20:26, “You are to be holy to me because I, the Lord, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own.”

Lev 21:8, “Consider them [the priests] holy, because I the Lord am holy—I who make you holy.”

Lev 22:31-33, “Keep my commands and follow them. I am the Lord. Do not profane my holy name. I must be acknowledged as holy by the Israelites. I am the Lord, who

makes you holy and who brought you out of Egypt to be your God. I am the Lord.”

Note on holiness statements in the Pentateuch.—As these quotations from Leviticus demonstrate, many times in the Law God refers to himself as holy: “I, the Lord, am holy,” etc. He also intersperses his laws with such statements as, “Be holy, because I am the Lord who makes you holy” (e.g., Lev 20:8). But most frequently he uses the simple expression, “I am the Lord [Yahweh],” or “I am the Lord your God” (e.g., Lev 19:3, 4, 10, 12, 16, 18, 25, 28, 30, 31, 32, 34, 36, 37). This expression is parallel to those expressions which declare his holiness, thus leading us to conclude that the Lord considers his name itself as identifying his holiness as the essential attribute of his character, just as the name represents the person himself (cf. Lev 22:32, “Do not profane my holy name”). In all these passages, the very identity of God implies our obligation to live in holiness. This gives added significance to the first words of the preface to the ten commandments: “I am the Lord your God.”

1 Sam 2:2, (Hannah’s prayer) “There is no one holy like the Lord; there is no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God.”

Ps 51:11, “Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me.”

Ps 89:35-36, “Once for all, I have sworn by my holiness—and I will not lie to David—that his line will continue forever and his throne endure before me like the sun.”

Ps 96:9, “Worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness; tremble before him, all the earth.”

Ps 98:1, “He has done marvelous things; his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him.”

Ps 99:3, 5, 9, “Let them praise your great and awesome name—he is holy. . . . Exalt the Lord our God and worship at his footstool; he is holy. . . . Exalt the Lord our God and worship at his holy mountain, for the Lord our God is holy.”

Ps 111:9, “Holy and awesome is his name.”

Ps 145:17, “The LORD is righteous in all his ways and loving toward all he has made.”

Isa 6:1, 3, “I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted And they [the seraphs above the throne] were calling to one another: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty.’” (note in v. 5 Isaiah’s reaction to the vision, “Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.”)

Isa 57:15, “For this is what the high and lofty One says—he who lives forever, whose name is holy: ‘I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit.’”

Hab 1:13, “Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong.”

Matt 6:9; Luke 11:2, the Lord’s Prayer, “Hallowed be your name”

Luke 1:49 (song of Mary), “for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name.”

John 17:11 (Jesus’ prayer), “Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name.”

Rom 7:12, “So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.”

Heb 12:10, “God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.”

1 Pet 1:15-16, “But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy.’”

Rev 4:8, “Day and night they [the four living creatures] never stop saying: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.’”

Rev 15:4, “Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy.”

Because of the Lord’s own holiness, he has a great interest in justifying and sanctifying us. He cannot receive us as sinners; hence, we must be justified—not by his merely proclaiming us innocent, but by Jesus’ actual righteousness, his perfect obedience to God’s law, being reckoned to us. And we must be sanctified, made truly righteous, so that we can live in God’s presence and favor; this sanctification takes place partially in this life, and is completed at death (or at the return of Christ). All those passages that teach these doctrines of salvation, in turn reflect back on God himself, and reinforce the Scriptural doctrine of the holiness of God.

Exod 23:7, “Have nothing to do with a false charge and do not put an innocent or honest person to death, for I will not acquit the guilty.”

Prov 17:15, “Acquitting the guilty and condemning the innocent—the LORD detests them both.”

Rom 3:25-26, “God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.”

Justice of God

The Shorter Catechism says that God is infinite in his justice; the Larger Catechism says he is “most just.” The Confession 2:1 states that he is “most just and terrible in his judgments, hating all sin, and who will by no means clear the guilty.” Scripture proofs listed are Exod 34:7; Deut 32:4; Neh 9:32-33; Ps 5:5-6; Nah 1:2-3; Hab 1:13.

The biblical concept of justice is linked with that of righteousness, and often the same Greek or Hebrew word is translated with one or the other English word (roots—in Heb. קִדְּוָה *ṣaddîq*, “just, righteous, straight”; and in Gk. δίκαιος *dikaios*).

“When we regard God as the author of our moral nature, we conceive of Him as holy; when we regard Him in his dealings with his rational creatures, we conceive of Him as righteous. He is a righteous ruler; all his laws are holy, just, and good. In his moral government He faithfully adheres to those laws. He is impartial and uniform in their execution. As a judge he renders unto every man according to his works. He neither condemns the innocent, nor clears the guilty; neither does He ever punish with undue severity. Hence the justice of God is distinguished as *rectoral*, or that which is concerned with imposition of righteous laws and in their impartial execution; and *distributive*, or that which is manifested in the righteous distribution of rewards and punishment.” (Hodge, *Systematic Theology* 1:416)

The Scriptures frequently assert that God possess this attribute:

Gen 18:25 (Abraham speaking to the Lord), “Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?”

Exod 34:7, “Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished.”

Deut 32:4, “He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.”

Neh 9:32-33, “Now therefore, O our God, the great, mighty and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love, do not let all this hardship seem trifling in your eyes—the hardship that has come upon us, upon our kings and leaders, upon our priests and prophets, upon our fathers and all your people, from the days of the kings of Assyria until today. In all that has happened to us, you have been just; you have acted faithfully, while we did wrong.”

Job (whole book)—one major point of the book is the justice of God in his dealings with Job; Job at first questioned this justice, but by the end of the book recognized the perfect righteousness and justice of God

Ps 5:4-6, “You are not a God who takes pleasure in evil; with you the wicked cannot dwell. The arrogant cannot stand in your presence; you hate all who do wrong. You destroy those who tell lies; bloodthirsty and deceitful men the Lord abhors.”

Ps 7:10-11, “My shield is God Most High, who saves the upright in heart. God is a righteous judge, a God who expresses his wrath every day.”

Ps 11:7, “For the Lord is righteous, he loves justice; upright men will see his face.”

Ps 19:8, “The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart.”

Ps 45:6-7, “Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever; a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom. You love righteousness and hate wickedness.”

Ps 50:4 “He summons the heavens above, and the earth, that he may judge his people.”

Ps 51:4 “Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge.”

Ps 89:14, “Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne.”

Ps 96:13, “They will sing before the Lord, for he comes, he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in his truth.”

Ps 97:2, “Clouds and thick darkness surround him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.”

Ps 119:137-138, “Righteous are you, O Lord, and your laws are right. The statutes you have laid down are righteous.”

Ps 145:17, “The Lord is righteous in all his ways and loving toward all he has made.”

Jer 23:5-6, “‘The days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The Lord Our Righteousness.’”

Dan 9:14, “The Lord did not hesitate to bring the disaster upon us, for the Lord our God is righteous in everything he does.”

Neh 1:2-3, “The Lord is a jealous and avenging God; the Lord takes vengeance and is filled with wrath. The Lord takes vengeance on his foes and maintains his wrath against his enemies. The Lord is slow to anger and great in power; the Lord will not leave the guilty unpunished.”

Hab 1:13, “Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong.”

Zeph 3:5, “The Lord within her [Jerusalem] is righteous; he does no wrong. Morning by morning he dispenses his justice, and every new day he does not fail.”

Mal 2:17, “You have wearied the Lord with your words. ‘How have we wearied him?’ you ask. By saying, ‘All who do evil are good in the eyes of the Lord, and he is pleased with them’ or ‘Where is the God of justice?’”

Luke 18:7-8, “And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly.”

Acts 17:31, “For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed.”

Rom 2:2, “God’s judgment against those who do such things is based on truth.”

Rom 3:4-6, “Let God be true, and every man a liar. As it is written: ‘So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge’ (Ps. 51:4). But if our unrighteousness brings out God’s righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.) Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world?”

Rom 3:25, “God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.”

1 John 1:9, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

Rev 19:11, “I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war.”

Rev 20:11-13, “Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. . . . The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books . . . and each person was judged according to what he had done.”

We notice in all these passages that God is just both in his character and in his actions. This justice lies behind the great theological covenants of redemption, works, and grace. Whether God dispenses judgment or reward, it is based on a perfect justice. Even his works of mercy must be based on justice (see quotation above from Romans 3).

It is important to remember that there is no standard of justice outside of his own will to which he adheres. Justice is defined as God's will. (See good discussion in Gordon H. Clark, *The Atonement*, pp. 91-137.)

God's justice primarily is seen in his punishment of sinners (or of their substitute, Christ). Charles Hodge points out that God's punishing sinners is a requirement of his justice, and is not directed primarily to other ends which people may prefer (see sections entitled "The Reformation of the Offender is not the Primary Object of Punishment," "The Prevention of Crime is not the Primary End of Punishment," and "The Optimist Theory," *Systematic Theology*, 1:417-420). The "optimist theory" says that happiness is the greatest good, and that, therefore, all God's works of judgment are directed to increase to the maximum the happiness of man. But, as Hodge points out, "If happiness be not the greatest good; if holiness be a higher end than happiness; if expediency be not the ground and measure of moral obligation, it is obvious that this whole structure collapses" (p. 420). An understanding of this truth would cure the prevailing lack of direction in our criminal justice system and the debate currently going on.

Goodness of God

While the WSC says God is "infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his . . . goodness" (#4), the WLC further specifies that he is "most merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth" (#7). The Confession says that God is "most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek him" (2:1). Verses cited in evidence are Exod 34:6-7; Ps 100:5; Rom 2:4; Heb 11:6; and 1 John 4:8-10.

As seen by the statements in the Westminster standards, the goodness of God contains many sub-categories. Chief among these are his benevolence, his mercy, and his love. His benevolence is shown in the general good his creatures enjoy at his hand, even those sinners who oppose God. His mercy is shown not only in the long-suffering patience of God, but also in his plan for the salvation of sinners. His love is shown in his statements about himself, his enjoyment of his creation and his children, and in the sacrifices that Christ endured to save us. As was the case with his justice, God's goodness is defined by what he wills; there is no standard of goodness outside of God's will.

Goodness in benevolence

God's general benevolence is distinct from the benevolence of his love for the elect (covered below). God gives undeserved blessings to all his creatures. He allows even Satan currently to enjoy some degree of freedom and privilege. God gives to all earthly creatures the beauties and bounties of their nature, their provisions, and all other such blessings.

Ps 33:5, "The LORD loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love."

Ps 104:10-23, “He makes springs pour water into the ravines; it flows between the mountains. They give water to all the beasts of the field; the wild donkeys quench their thirst. The birds of the air nest by the waters; they sing among the branches. He waters the mountains from his upper chambers; the earth is satisfied by the fruit of his work. He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate—bringing forth food from the earth: wine that gladdens the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread that sustains his heart. The trees of the LORD are well watered, the cedars of Lebanon that he planted. There the birds make their nests; the stork has its home in the pine trees. The high mountains belong to the wild goats; the crags are a refuge for the coney. The moon marks off the seasons, and the sun knows when to go down. You bring darkness, it becomes night, and all the beasts of the forest prowl. The lions roar for their prey and seek their food from God. The sun rises, and they steal away; they return and lie down in their dens. Then man goes out to his work, to his labor until evening.”

Ps 119:64, “The earth is filled with your love, O LORD; teach me your decrees.”

Ps 145:9, “The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made.”

Ps 145:15-16, “The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.”

Humans, in particular, enjoy all these blessings of God’s kind benevolence.

Jonah 4:6-11, “Then the LORD God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine. ⁷ But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. ⁸ When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah’s head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, ‘It would be better for me to die than to live.’ ⁹ But God said to Jonah, ‘Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?’ ‘I do,’ he said. ‘I am angry enough to die.’ ¹⁰ But the LORD said, ‘You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. ¹¹ But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?’”

Matt 5:45, “that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”

Acts 14:17, “Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.”

Goodness in mercy

God's goodness is shown in mercy to sinners, in refraining from judging us and in giving us life and salvation. God considers his mercy to be an important part of his nature.

Exod 34:6-7, "And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, 'The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.'"

(context of forgiving Israelites)

Deut 4:28-31, "There [in foreign lands] you will worship man-made gods of wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or eat or smell. But if from there you seek the Lord your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul. When you are in distress and all these things have happened to you, then in later days you will return to the Lord your God and obey him. For the Lord your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy you or forget the covenant with your forefathers, which he confirmed to them by oath."

(context of national repentance after falling into apostasy; note that mercy is shown in making the covenant in the first place, in leading the sinners to repentance, and also in fulfilling the covenant's provisions for the particular individuals who repent)

Ps 111:4, "the Lord is gracious and compassionate (Heb. רַחֻם *rahûm*, compassionate)"

Dan 9:18, "We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy."

Mic 7:18-20, "Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea. You will be true to Jacob, and show mercy to Abraham, as you pledged on oath to our fathers in days long ago."

2 Cor 1:3, "the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort" [KJV, "Father of mercies"; Gk. οἰκτιρμός *oiktirmos*, "compassion, mercy, pity"]

Jas 5:11, "The Lord is full of compassion (πολύσπλαγχνος *polusplagchnos*, lit. refers to one's "insides," in early modern English "many bowels," more modern way of saying it "of a great heart") and mercy (οἰκτίρων *oiktirmon*, compassionate)." (quoting Exod 34:6; Ps 103:8; 111:4)

1 Pet. 1:3, "In his great mercy (Gk. ἔλεος *eleos*, mercy, compassion) he has given us new birth."

This mercy of God is seen in his goodness toward all his creation, but it is manifested especially in electing, redeeming, and saving sinners (Rom 9:15-18; 11:30; Eph 2:4-6; 1 Pet 1:3).

Goodness in love

Perhaps even more than mercy, the love of God defines his character in himself and in his dealings with us.

1 John 4:8-10, 16, “Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. . . . God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.”

Theologians distinguish two types of love: the love of complacency, which is the delight one has in its object, including the delight of possession and of communion (this might be represented by the Gk. φιλέω *phileo*); and the love of benevolence, which seeks the highest good for the object (this might be represented by the Gk. ἀγαπάω *agapao*). That God loves us in both ways is apparent from Scripture:

Love of complacency

God enjoys his creatures, the fellowship of his children, and especially the fellowship within the Trinity. Many passages speak of God’s delight in others, and his sympathy for them.

Judg 10:16, “Then they got rid of the foreign gods among them and served the Lord. And he could bear Israel’s misery no longer.”

Ps 18:19 (psalm of David), “He brought me out into a spacious place; he rescued me because he delighted in me.”

Ps 103:13, “As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him.”

(While this verse speaks of God’s having compassion [Heb. Piel of רָחַם *rāḥam*], we note that the comparison is that of a father’s for his children, which certainly would be the love of complacency.)

Prov 11:20, “The Lord detests men of perverse heart but he delights in those whose ways are blameless.”

Ezek 16 (whole chapter) – God’s love for Israel pictured as a man marrying a young woman he rescued as a baby

Zeph 3:17, “The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.”

for love of complacency, cf. love of the Father for the Son: John 3:35, “The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands” (also Matt 3:17; John 17:24)

Love of benevolence

This is the highest or most noble kind of love, in that it seeks the highest welfare of another, even at sacrifice to oneself.

Jer 31:3, “I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness.”

Hosea [whole book], theme of God’s self-sacrificing love for Israel, in bringing her back from sin to salvation in himself.

Cf. 3:1 (Lord to Hosea), “Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress. Love her as the Lord loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes.”

and 14:4, “I will heal their waywardness and love them freely, for my anger has turned away from them.”

John 3:16, “For God so [οὕτως *houtos*, “in this way”] loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

John 15:12-13, “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.”

Rom 5:6-8, “You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

Eph 5:25, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.”

Heb 12:5, “the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son”

1 John 3:1, “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!”

1 John 4:10, “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”

Thus we see that in both types of love, God excels. He exists in love, and he is love.

Goodness of God and the existence of evil

One question that many raise is this: “How can a powerful God who is also good allow the existence of sin and evil?” Many have considered this question unanswerable, and have hence denied the existence of God. Those who do believe in God have answered this question in three main ways. One way is to deny the existence of evil, or to say that sin is not actually an evil; all events and conditions deemed to be evil are understood in another way; they are considered as mere finiteness, limitation of being, or as necessary conditions for virtue, or as merely subjective (cf. the stoics), or as a necessary stage of our development, or as the necessary means to attain the greatest good (cf. Jonathan Edwards). A second way to answer the objection is to say that God is not able to prevent evil in free moral agents; this frees God from responsibility for sin and evil (but at the price of eliminating his omnipotence and sovereignty).

The scriptural answer to this question rests in the glorifying of God. God is glorified in saving sinners and bringing happiness (Eph 1:6; 2:7; 3:10), and in condemning sinners and punishing sin (Rom 9:22-23; 2 Thess 1:8-10). For this reason, he causes what we call “evil” as well as what we call “good.”

Amos 3:6, “When a trumpet sounds in a city, do not the people tremble? When disaster comes to a city, has not the LORD caused it?” (NIV)

“Shall the trumpet be blown in a city, and the people not be afraid? shall evil befall a city, and Jehovah hath not done it?” (ASV)

Isaiah 45:7, “I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things.” (NIV)

“I form the light, and create darkness; I make peace, and create evil. I am Jehovah, that doeth all these things.” (ASV)

God has created the universe primarily to glorify himself, not necessarily to maximize the happiness or even the holiness of his creatures.

“The glory of God being the great end of all things, we are not obliged to assume that this is the best possible world for the production of happiness, or even for securing the greatest degree of holiness among rational creatures. It is wisely adapted for the end for which it was designed, namely, the manifestation of the manifold perfections of God.

“It, however, makes all the difference in the world, whether the Creator be subordinate to the creature, or the creature to the Creator; whether the end be the means, or the means the end. There is a great difference whether the earth or the sun be assumed

as the center of our solar system. If we make the earth the center, our astronomy will be in confusion. And if we make the creature, and not God, the end of all things, our theology and religion will in like manner be perverted. It may, in conclusion, be safely asserted that a universe constructed for the purpose of making God known, is a far better universe than one designed for the production of happiness.” (Hodge, *Systematic Theology* 1:436; for an excellent discussion of this question, see pp. 429-436)

Truth of God

When listing the attributes of God, the Westminster standards give only brief mention to his truth. God is “infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his . . . truth” (WSC 4), and “abundant in goodness and truth” (WLC 7 and WCF 2:1). Proof texts are Exod 34:6 and Ps 117:2.

Exod 34:6, “The Lord, the Lord, . . . abounding in love and faithfulness”

The Hebrew for “faithfulness” [KJV, “truth”] is אֱמֶת *’emet*, “truth, trustworthiness.”

Ps 117:2, “For great is his love toward us, and the faithfulness (*’emet*) of the Lord endures forever.”

Truth in nature and in Scripture

One of the main corollaries of this doctrine is the truthfulness of God’s Word in Scripture (NT, ἀλήθεια *alethia*) which the standards do discuss at great length (cf. WCF 1). This topic is dealt with in a separate course. Another corollary is the revelation of God in nature; this matter is discussed in the courses in apologetics and in revelation.

The truth of God has several aspects.

“All truth is God’s truth” (Augustine, also Aquinas)

“The true, therefore, is, (1) That which is real, as opposed to that which is fictitious or imaginary. . . . (2) The true is that which completely comes up to its idea, or to what it purports to be. . . . (3) The true is that in which the reality exactly corresponds to the manifestation. . . . (4) The true is that which can be depended upon, which does not fail, or change, or disappoint.” (Hodge, *Systematic Theology* 1:436-437)

In all four of these areas, God is and must be true. His incommunicable attributes require him to be true. He is unchangeable; he cannot deny himself or his works. Yet, we must recognize the incomprehensibility of God and the requirement of revelation that it be understandable to the recipient. Therefore, while those things God reveals to us are indeed true, it does not follow that

he has revealed everything about himself to us. Hence, the manifestation of God is not complete, but it is accurate as far as it goes.

God is true in all things.

- He is “the true God” (John 17:3, words of Jesus— “you are the only true God”; 1 Thess 1:9).
- His word is “true” (Ps 19:9; 119:160; John 17:17).
- He is the “God of truth” (Ps 31:5; Isa 65:16; cf. John 14:6, Jesus is “the truth”).
- If we believe God, then we have “certified that God is truthful” (John 3:33).
- All truth comes from God (Ps 31:5; Isa 65:16; John 1:17).

Truth includes both dependability with regard to facts, and dependability with regard to threats and promises. What God says is true in both respects. He is dependable, trustworthy. His threats will certainly be carried out (Ps 54:5; Rom 2:2), and he will carry out all his promises (Ps 31:5; 91:4; Jer 4:2). Nothing will thwart God’s plan.

Rom 3:3-4, “What if some did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God’s faithfulness? Not at all! Let God be true, and every man a liar. As it is written: ‘So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge.’” (quoting Ps 51:4)

Closely related to the truth of God is his faithfulness, which sometimes is considered as a separate attribute. However, it means the same thing as the truth of God in its contexts.

Deut 7:9, “Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands.”

The Hebrew word for “faithful” is related to the verb אָמַן *’aman*, which means “firm, dependable, trustworthy.” This word is related to the expression “Amen—let it be so” (cf. Rev. 3:14, “These are the words of the Amen, the faithful [πιστός *pistos*] and true [ἀληθινός *alethinos*] witness, the ruler of God’s creation”).

Ps 89:2, “I will declare that your love stands firm forever, that you established your faithfulness in heaven itself.” (speaking of Davidic covenant)

Ps 119:75, “I know, O Lord, that your laws are righteous, and in faithfulness you have afflicted me.”

Ps 119:89-90, “Your work, O Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens. Your faithfulness continues through all generations; you established the earth, and it endures.”

Jer 33:20-21, 25-26, “This is what the LORD says: ‘If you can break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night, so that day and night no longer come at their appointed time, then my covenant with David my servant—and my covenant with the Levites who are priests ministering before me—can be broken and David will no longer have a descendant to reign on his throne. . . .’ This is what the LORD says: ‘If I have not established my covenant with day and night and the fixed laws of heaven and earth, then I will reject the descendants of Jacob and David my servant and will not choose one of his sons to rule over the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. For I will restore their fortunes and have compassion on them.’” [Note that God compares the “fixed laws” of physics to his faithfulness to his covenant.]

1 Cor 1:9, “God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.”

1 Cor 10:13, “God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear.”

1 Thess 5:24, “The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it [sanctify you wholly].”

2 Thess 3:3, “But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one.”

2 Tim 2:13, “If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself.”

Heb 10:23, “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.”

1 John 1:9, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

As these passages point out, God’s truthfulness and faithfulness enable us to trust in him entirely. All that we read of him in the Bible is true. He himself will continue to be the same God. He will sustain the creation; he will be true to all his promises; he will sustain us in all life’s difficulties and trials; and he will bring us to glory.