

The Attributes of God:
Why it is important to think rightly about God
John 1:1-5
April 22,2012

“It was business as usual in the San Diego... Sheriff’s office on that March afternoon in 1997. But then something happened to change all of that. The sheriff’s deputy, Robert Brunk, was guiding his cruiser up the winding, hilly roads to Rancho Santa Fe, twenty miles north of San Diego. A couple of calls had come into the... office asking deputies to please check on relatives and friends [who were staying at the ranch].

When Deputy... Brunk got to the back door of the estate he knew immediately that something was terribly wrong; there was a sickly odder coming from the house. He knew it was the smell of death, but he had no idea what awaited him inside. He entered the house and was shocked to see dead bodies everywhere. He counted up to ten... but had to go back outside for fresh air and to call for backup. Help quickly came ... [and] eventually they counted thirty-nine bodies inside the mansion.

... All the [victims] were dressed in comfortable black garb, including pleated collarless tunics and brand-new black-and-white athletic shoes. They wore black plastic wristwatches, and wide gold bands on their left ring fingers. Near each body was a neatly packed suitcase.... Oddly, each person had a five-dollar bill and a bunch of quarters in his or her shirt pocket.... [And] they all wore arm patches with the words *Heaven’s Gate* stitched at the top and *Away Team* along the bottom. There were no signs of struggle.”¹

Please turn with me to John 1:1-5. Today is an introduction to a new series in which we will be examining the attributes of God – what God has revealed to us about who He is. And our title today is “Why it is important to think rightly about God.” I want to start by saying this topic is unequivocally the most important subject of all time, because who we believe God to be determines everything about the way we live and where we will spend eternity.

The great pastor and theologian A.W. Tozer said “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. The history of mankind will probably show that no people has ever risen above its religion, and... no religion has ever been greater than its idea of God.”²

[John 1:1-5]

I would like to look at three things from this text today, the first two we will use as an introduction to the attributes of God in general, and the last one will focus in more specifically at the question of “why it is important to think rightly about God.”

¹ Moore, James W. “The Top Ten List for Christians: Priorities for Faithful Living” (Nashville, Dimensions for Living Press), 1999. pg 45-47.

² Tozer, A.W. “The Knowledge of the Holy” (San Francisco, Harper Collins Publishers), 1961. pg 1.

First, Thinking rightly means accepting mystery
Second, Thinking rightly means relying on revelation
Finally, Thinking rightly saves us from idolatry

1.) So, first, thinking rightly means accepting mystery.

Look again at verses one through three.

[Read John 1:1-3]

The book of John starts with these words “In the beginning”. Now, if you have been in the church for long these words will probably sound familiar to you, but it is impossible to overstate how significant and familiar these words would sound if you were a Jew in the first century.

And of course the familiarity goes back to the first verse of the first chapter in the first book in the Bible - Genesis. And of course Genesis starts with these words “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” – you know the verse well.

Now we call the first book in the Bible Genesis – which means “beginning”, but the Jews had no titles for their books, instead they recognized them by the first three or four words of the book. So Genesis for the Jews was actually titled “In the beginning”.

Here is the significance, for John to start his book like this was to give it the same name as the first book in the Bible. And in doing this every Jew in the first century would immediately get that in these words John was claiming that the story about Jesus he was telling was the same story they had been reading for thousands of years.”

In the beginning... God..

And John says, “Get a hold of this”, In the beginning... Jesus!

Now of course John 1:1 one says “In the beginning the Word...”, but John makes it clear in verse 14 that the Word is Jesus. John says “And the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us.” Jesus is the Word, the Word is Jesus.

In the beginning Jesus.

Now this is huge!

Right from the onset the mystery of what John is writing here was incredibly potent, incredibly problematic, and incredibly risky for him to pen.

Here's why. 1st century Israel held uncompromisingly to the fact that there is only One God.

Deuteronomy chapter six, the most famous and most important passage to every Jew says: "Hear o Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one."

This wasn't up for debate, so for John to claim that Jesus, the man many of his readers knew, was God was the most preposterous thing possible to claim.

Imagine walking into a university science class full of evolutionary atheists and giving a presentation in which you said "Jesus Christ, the man who lived 2000 years ago, is God Himself and spoke the universe and the laws of physics we abide by into existence thousands of years before He was born." What response are you going to get?

First there is going to be a moment of stunned and awkward silence as they contemplate the lunacy of your statement, and then they are going to mock you out of the classroom.

John could have expected the same response, except instead of mocking him out of the classroom he could have expected to be stoned to death.

Now John manages to avoid this fate, but this is the mystery of what he is claiming here. And of course the same mystery that Jesus claimed about Himself.

In John 17:5 Jesus prayed "And now, Father glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began."

Jesus the man existed with God as God for all eternity. Infinitely long before the universe let alone people existed. How is that possible? How could Jesus pre-exist everything? And if so what did He and the Father and the Spirit talk about for infinity years? What did they do together before time existed? How did they not get bored? How could anything capable of creating everything exist for eternity before creating anything?

If you have ever lay awake at night thinking about that your mind will spin. There is no way to make any sense of it. But as we look at who God is over the next several weeks we are going to come up against this mystery over and over again.

Our choice is either to reject what we find as too difficult and walk away or embrace and worship **Him**.

Commentator Bruce Milne says:

At the “point we confront the profound mystery of [God]... apprehension moves imperceptibly (but delightedly) into adoration.”³

The God we worship is too big for our puny minds. I don't know about you, but I think that's a good thing! If I was capable of holding the extents of God in my puny brain He would be a lot less worthy of worship than I would be. But that isn't the case.

And God unapologetically responds "My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts," says the LORD. "And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine. (Is 55:8 NLT)

Mystery.

So, first, as we turn our attention and study to this Being we are going to have to be content to come up without conclusive answers on many things.

Because thinking rightly about God means accepting mystery.

2.) Alright, second, thinking rightly about God means relying on revelation.

Look with me at verses four and five.

[Read John 1:4-5]

In these verses we move beyond the Word, beyond Jesus merely creating the universe, and on to Him showing or revealing Himself to the world. Unlike a clockmaker God who might create and then step back leaving His work to run its course and figure itself out; Jesus is not only the creator, but He enters His creation to be intimately involved with it.

And He does this by becoming the light and life of the world.

This word “Life” is the Greek word “zoe”, and it becomes a central thought for John. Zoe life isn't just any kind of life, it describes absolute abundance of life, fullness of life, and it is the life that belongs specifically to God.⁴ God has zoe life - it is one of His characteristics or attributes.

And John uses this word 36 times in his book, which is a lot, and always connects it with Jesus and what He is doing or who He is.

³ Milne, Bruce “The Message of John” Ed. John Stott (Downer's Grove, Inter Varsity Press), 1993. pg35.

⁴ “NAS New Testament Greek Lexicon”

(<http://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/zoe.html>), accessed April 20,2012.

But this verse takes this idea one step farther. This life it isn't just something Jesus has within Himself. Instead this abundant life that is bubbling up within Him is something that pours out of Him and into His creation. "In Him was abundant life, and that **zoe** was the light of men." Do you see it?

This zoe is Christ's gift to humanity. A little later Jesus says:

"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give **eternal life** to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand." (John 10:27-28)

Followers of Jesus receive this abundant life here and now as well as the promise that they will live forever with Him.

It is no coincidence then that John ties this zoe life to the idea of light in our text. Once again we have a reference to Genesis 1 and this time to verse 3. "And God said 'Let there be light' and there was light."

In Genesis light is the first thing brought into existence even before the sun, because light is a revealer of what is around it as well as the giver of life. Without light there would be no point describing everything else because nothing else could exist and even if it could it wouldn't be worth looking at.

And here is the connection John makes to Jesus. Verse four says "In Him was life, and that life was the **light** of men..." Like the sun which gives life and light to the world, Jesus is the life and light of the world.

...

Ok, let me ask you a stupid question. The sun gives light so that we can see everything else right? What has to shine on the sun so that we can see it? Nothing, it reveals itself to us because it is the thing that gives off light. Obviously.

We never go around wondering where the sun is right? Well, sometimes they do in Vancouver, but really it constantly reveals itself to us.

And in the same way the thought of us having to seek out or search for Jesus on our own makes no sense because He is the light of men, He is revealing Himself to us, that is what light does and He is the light of humanity. If He weren't it would be impossible for us to find Him.

In the book of Job at one point Job questions why God is allowing all this bad stuff to happen to him and Zophar, one of his friends rightly challenges him with these words:

"Can you fathom the mysteries of God? Can you probe the limits of the Almighty? They are higher than the heavens – what can you do? They are deeper than the depths of the grave – what can you know?" (Job 11:7-8)

This verse of course speaks to the mystery of God, but also to the fact that on our own it is impossible for us to understand God and what He is doing. But the good news is that we aren't required to.

Notice again in the John 10 passage that Jesus says "My sheep hear My voice." Everything starts with Jesus calling out His sheep, only after He calls do we follow. We know God because He calls out to us, He gives us the light to find Him.

And then verse five in our text today expands this thought even farther.

[Read John 1:5]

Like light, darkness is also a major theme for John. In fact these two forces, light and darkness, are locked in constant battle with each other all throughout the book. In John 3:19 it says

"This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil."

Darkness then is tied to evil and unbelief while light is tied to Jesus and Truth.

Now this could be bad except that the word translated "understand" in verse five of our text can also be translated "overcome" or "overpower"⁵. So, not only can the evil and unbelieving world not comprehend or understand the light Jesus brings, but they are powerless to do anything about it. Even though darkness appears to be gaining ground in the world around us we know that darkness doesn't overcome the light!⁶ Amen?

Imagine the pitch darkness of a room at midnight, and then the lighting of a single candle. Darkness flees from light. Darkness is always overcome by light, never the other way around.

Later in John 12:46 Jesus says "I have come as Light into the world, so that everyone who believes in Me will not remain in darkness."

And in 12:36 Jesus says "Believe in the Light, so that you may become sons of Light."

Jesus came into the world bringing the zoe life that was in Him to humanity and by believing in Him and receiving The Light He reveals to us we actually become members of the family of light.

In Ephesians 5:8 Paul says "For you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light."

⁵ See ESV for example.

⁶ Ideas for this paragraph taken from John Piper's sermon "Triumphant Light" Delivered Dec 3, 1989 at Bethlehem Baptist Church.

And here is the point. It is because of Jesus and through Jesus that we know anything about God. In verse 18 of this chapter John tells us that “No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made Him known” – Jesus has revealed God to us.

As we direct our attention to examining what God is like we are forced to start with the understanding that everything we know about God comes from Him Himself.

Commentator Barry Horner notes “God is the subject of this universe, not a passive object who is available for human scrutiny, as if under a microscope. Certainly man does investigate God’s sovereignty given revelation both in nature and Scripture, but only as a babe looks at an adult world and not as an analytical chemist.”⁷

Jesus is the only light, giving us all the ability we have to look at the world around us, and ultimately to look at Him.

Okay, so with the fact that it is impossible for us to fully know the mysteries of our Creator established, and the fact that it is only through the revelation of God that we can know anything about Him, we now turn to our third and final point and specifically to today’s question of why it is important for us to put the effort into thinking rightly about God.

I mean, if it is impossible for us to fully know God, and if all we can know about Him comes from Him in the first place what is the point of us laboring to understand what He has shown us?

3.) Thinking rightly about God frees us from the most grievous sin - idolatry.

The Ten Commandments, found in Exodus chapter 20 start with these words
“I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other God’s before Me.” (Ex 20:2-3)

This first commandment starts with God’s self-revelation – I am the God who brought you out of Egypt, I am the God who has shown Himself to you... and then proceeds to tell us God’s greatest concern for us and our greatest area of sin – that we would have another god besides Him.

“Come on” you say. Nobody worships idols anymore; that was an Old Testament thing. We live in the modern world. Very few people believe in a world of gods like Zeus and Athena vying for power. Nobody worships little carvings anymore.

⁷ Horner, Barry “Who is the Lord that I should obey Him?” (Sahuarita, Arizona), 2009. pg 19.

That might be true, but that 's not what idolatry means. A.W. Tozer writes “The essence of idolatry is... [to entertain] thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him. It begins in the mind.”⁸

...

Suppose you and I were talking after the service and as we spoke I told you about a guy I knew named Bruce Watters. At first you might suppose that you knew who I was talking about.

But then suppose I described this guy as a janitor, five foot four inches tall, two hundred at twelve pounds with thick coke-bottle glasses.

Then what would you think? Well you would either think I am not very observant, or else perhaps I'm talking about a different Bruce Watters than the one you know.

Otherwise I am completely confused or else lying. The attributes I've described can not be referring to the Bruce Watters you know.

And in the same way it matters what we think about God. If we think wrongly about Him, while we still may use the name “God” and “Jesus” to describe Him we are really talking about someone else – a figment of our own imaginations. This is what idolatry is, and this is something that is totally widespread within our culture as well as within the church.

Tozer again says “We educated Americans can create gods just the same as the heathen can. You can make a god out of silver or wood or stone – or you can make it out of your imagination. And the god that's being worshiped in many places is simply a god of imagination. He's not the true God... Christianity is decaying and going down into the gutter because the god of modern Christianity is not he God of the Bible.”⁹

Here is what it boils down to. When we picture God as someone who doesn't really mind when we tell white lies or participate in minor gossip, or hold on to old offences, or bend the rules to get bigger tax returns.

Or a God who doesn't care that we aren't directly involved in fighting for justice for the poor and oppressed, or who wasn't absolutely insistent that anyone who would claim to follow Him would have to be **willing** to give up not only all their physical possessions but even their family – the people they love if they are going to have any part with Him.

If we were to picture God like this, which I think our actions show we often do, then what we have done is say “God I don't actually think you are who You say You are, instead I think You are a lot like me.”

⁸ Tozer, A.W. “The Knowledge of the Holy” (San Francisco, Harper Collins Pub), 1961. pg 5.

⁹ Tozer, A.W. “The Attributes of God” (Pennsylvania, Christian Publications), 1997. pg 7.

We create God in our own image. Our god loves the things we love and is lenient with the sins we are lenient with. And our ability to do this is nothing new. In Psalm 50:21 God chastised the wicked people of David's day with the words of "you thought I was altogether like you!"

And thousands of years before that, it was this exact sin that got Adam and Eve banished from the Garden.

While the physical sign of their sin was eating the apple, Adam and Eve's real sin happened when they chose to believe that God was someone other than He said He was. That He was someone who wouldn't demand their lives from them if they chose not to obey Him like He said He would, or that He wouldn't mind co-existing with another being who also claimed to be the ultimate authority in the universe which is what we did by saying our way of doing things seemed better to us than His.

These were the beliefs that Adam and Eve adopted before they ate of the apple back in Genesis 3. See, our view of God determines how we live.

Of course Adam and Eve found out that the truth or errors of their beliefs about God did matter. God didn't change depending on what they believed about Him and they were left with the consequences.

And the consequences for idolatry remain unchanged to this day. When we reject the abundant zoe life gained through communion with the God of the universe and replace Him with a god of our creation it will always result in a wasted life and ultimate death. Whether that wasted life takes the ludicrous form of the thirty-nine members of the Heaven's Gate Away Team or merely is a life lived the way we want to live the reality is that it is the same. Life away from the true source of life will never be abundant life and will ultimately end in eternal death.

We must think rightly about God because to fall short here is to worship a puny god we have created in our image and at the same time to find the God of the universe to be our enemy.

It is only by thinking rightly about God that we avoid the sin of idolatry. And so this study demands our utmost attention.

Conclusion:

So today we have talked about the mystery of God – the fact that it is impossible for us to mine the depths of who He is – He is beyond our ability to comprehend. We also said that the only way we can know Him as He reveals Himself to us. And finally we said that in spite of these two factors it is incredibly important for us to give ourselves to the study of who God is because only when we hold an accurate view of Him do we escape the fallacy of idolatry.

Hopefully you see the importance of this study, but I want to conclude today with a word to where this knowledge should bring us. As we dig into the scriptures and look at who God is we should fully expect to find many things that we don't necessarily like about this God. Are you okay with that?

Here is what I mean.

The fact is that we are sinful people and God does not exist in our image. He is not in favor of many of the ways we live our lives. But He is good and He does offer forgiveness.

Here is the picture I want to leave us with today. It comes from Isaiah chapter six and it is one of the most powerful pictures in the Bible of who God is and what this means for us.

[Read Isaiah 6:1-5]

Isaiah doesn't like what he sees. The God Isaiah sees is the holy, holy, holy God. A being who isn't anything like Isaiah at all. And Isaiah's immediate response when he realizes this is repentance and worship. He falls on the ground crying out "Woe is me, I am undone because I am a man of unclean lips – I'm a sinful man and I have seen the King, the Lord YHWH almighty!"

And this will be our response as well when we see who God is too. Please don't allow this to be an academic exercise, instead when you see a picture of God that confronts you allow yourself to be humbly undone before the three times holy God.

Finding yourself here is absolutely the best place to be because it is here and only here that we meet the God of the Bible and He forgives us.

This is how Isaiah six continues:

[Read Isaiah 6:6-7]

It is this God we come to study and we come to worship. Not a friendly buddy we can joke around with, but the totally holy Creator of the universe who is utterly other, and utterly worthy of our worship.

[Let's pray.]