

God's Immutability & Immanence—Selected Scriptures—5/21/23

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Today's message is in response to questions I've received that all relate to this issue of God's unchangeableness.

As I mentioned in Sunday evening question & answer sessions, I will address some in Sunday morning messages this summer.

Before I get into another book after finishing Philippians, I'll address some of these issues & passages that often raise questions.

The issue of God's immutability is one of those topics.

Immutability means unchangeableness & that is a description of God as one of His attributes that is essential to His essence as God.

The Bible teaches that God does not & cannot change.

He is immutable—meaning not mutable, not a mutant that has mutated or that can mutate because He is free from all change.

In today's title, I added the term '*immanence*' alongside God's immutability to help us view God's unchangeableness rightly.

I want to be sure we know that God is also immanent, meaning inherently present, at hand, close by, near & involved.

Typically, we speak of God being both transcendent—meaning above us—and also immanent, meaning close at hand.

The God revealed in Scripture is both—He is far above & also near.

God is all His attributes at the same time & He is all of them in one & not as parts of a greater whole.

Since God is everywhere all the time as Psalm 139 describes, it makes sense that He is both transcendent & immanent, beyond us & with us.

It's good to keep that in mind as we ponder immutability since a thought of God never changing may make Him seem distant.

Knowing God is unchanged by anything outside of Himself may make Him seem hard to relate to or hard to imagine His interactions with us.

But God does interact with us in time & He has revealed how He relates to us & how we rightly relate to Him.

God's immanence is true alongside His transcendence & immutability.

And God's immutability should draw us toward Him rather than keeping us distant from Him.

We should treasure & worship & be thankful for His immutability rather than treating it as unattractive or unappreciated or undesirable.

Glorying in the immutability of our God is my goal today as we seek to deepen our grasp on this transcendent reality.

I want to answer how God not changing motivates us to please Him far more than lesser ideas that attempt to make Him more relatable.

I want to answer how God's immutability motivates prayer.

I want us to appreciate the beautiful necessity that God cannot change.

As I studied this topic, I've been blessed by theology books & faithful pastors that may be readily available to you.

You can freely access an excellent sermon by Kevin DeYoung entitled "*The God Who Is Not Like Us: Why We Need the Doctrine of Divine Immutability*" from the Together for the Gospel Conference in 2018.

Many of you may have a copy of A.W. Pink's book on *The Attributes of God* from past studies we've done here as a church & he has a succinct & helpful section on this.

John MacArthur's *Biblical Doctrine & Essential Christian Doctrine* are helpful as are other historic, faithful systematic theology books.

I could overwhelm you with quotes & explanations & answers to objections from such books, but I'll try to summarize a lot.

I'll focus on a few major Bible passages & mention others & not flood you with cross references & related explanations of texts & contexts.

But first I want to tell you that I am mutable, not immutable, & one proof I have is that I changed this sermon to extend over 2 weeks in 2 parts rather than one as I originally intended.

Since all doctrine is practical, I will frame up 4 applications to take away from studying the biblical doctrine of the immutability of God.

In answering questions related to specific language & particular verses & personal responsiveness, I pray that we'll be helped by these 4 lessons from God's unchangeableness.

But it's going to take me today & next week to get through those 4 points & so we'll address 2 today & 2 next Sunday.

The 1st of those lessons is this—point #1—Let God's immutability move you to humble praise.

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Turn to Psalm 102:25-28 to see one text that describes God as never changing & exalts Him far above of as His creatures.

Humble praise is the right response to lofty ideas of God who created everything from nothing who eternally exists outside of time.

The right response is humbly recognizing God is over us & far above us so that we are awestruck to marvel at & honor Him.

All of Psalm 102 does that, as Stephen Charnock noted in his book *The Existence and Attributes of God*, but we'll just read a few verses.

Follow along as I read Psalm 102:25-28. [READ]

Verse 25 refers back to God creating the heavens & the earth & yet verse 26 clarifies how creation will perish & wear out & be changed.

We know the end of the current creation from Revelation & 2nd Peter & what God has prepared for eternity with His people.

But verses 26-27 contrast the apparent constancy of creation with the enduring nature of God as trustworthy & unchangingly the same.

God is not like His creation, which had a beginning & will have an end & always depends on Him for existence.

As Hebrews 1 says of Jesus—He upholds all things by the word of His power because as He is independent while all else depends on Him.

Verse 12 of this Psalm 102 says to God, "*You, O LORD [Yahweh], abide forever, & Your name to all generations*".

God's eternity in verse 12—that He abides timelessly forever—is consistent with His immutability in verses 26-27.

And as verse 18 says, "*This will be written for the generation to come, That a people yet to be created may praise Yahweh.*"

These truths were a comfort for souls seeking help in this psalm & they would be a help for generations because God would be the same.

That would be a reason to praise the self-existing, self-sufficient, ever-living God Yahweh—the LORD.

That is the place where we start with glad gravity about God's immutability as passages like Psalm 145:3 & 147:5 encourage.

Psalm 145:3 says “*Great is the LORD [Yahweh], and highly to be praised, And His greatness is unsearchable.*”

And Psalm 147:5 says, “*Great is our Lord and abundant in strength; His understanding is infinite.*”

We humbly admit that God’s greatness is unsearchable & His understanding is infinite as reasons to praise Him even if we wrestle with something as unlike us as His immutability.

Similarly, Psalm 33:8-11 says, “*Let all the earth fear Yahweh; Let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him. For He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast. Yahweh nullifies the counsel of the nations; He frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of Yahweh stands forever. The plans of His heart from generation to generation.*”

The mention of fear gets at that humble reverence before the Almighty Creator that the second phrase describes as awe of Him as speaking all things into existence & governing all time.

That’s another way God is unchanging is in His plans—theologians note that God is not only unchanging in His essence & character, but also in His purposes & promises.

Isaiah 46:9-11 is a familiar passage that highlights God’s unwavering commitment to accomplish all He has purposed.

Isaiah 46:9-11: “*Remember the former things long past, For I am God, & there is no other; I am God, & there is no one like Me, Declaring the end from the beginning, & from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, ‘My purpose will be established, & I will accomplish all My good pleasure’; Calling a bird of prey from the east, The man of My purpose from a far country. Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it.*”

That is the true & only God who governs all creation by His decree that includes tiny details & vast movements of history.

God has planned & He will do it because He controls everything in keeping with the properties He gave it.

He exists apart from time as He works in all He made in time.

God moves in the realm of time but never changes with time.

He cannot change because any change would add or subtract, making Him either better or worse, which would mean He was not fully perfect either before or after the change.

So His perfection & eternity & independence & self-sufficiency all adhere together with His immutability & transcendence.

That is the God revealed in Scripture that explodes our cerebral capacities that we worship as we also wrestle to grasp His ability to be completely immutable & yet personally relational.

A few weeks ago, when I was answering a question about being more pleasing to God as we seek to faithfully know & follow Him & His Word, I started with the basic foundation of God’s unchangeableness.

God is always pleased with Himself & He is all-sufficiently perfectly happy in His essence as God & that never changes.

That is fundamental to understanding pleasing God because we never add anything to God that He needed or that He did not have already or that He did not supply to us by His grace in the first place.

Yet we do draw nearer to His pleasure & goodness as we walk by faith in His grace in Christ & follow His Word.

We please Him by living in His clearly revealed secure love in Christ & His consistent standards of goodness & righteousness & truth.

In that sense we experience greater intimacy with Him & we walk worthy of Him & please Him.

So God remains unchanging while we change to grow closer to Him & are thereby relationally more pleasing to Him.

But as we hear that, it may seem strange because we think of people smiling or cheering us on or opening their mouths or arms to us to encourage or embrace us when they are pleased.

Since our experiences of others' pleasure are time-bound, we find it difficult to imagine how God is authentically relating to us in time when He is outside of time & unchanged by time.

We find it impossible to think outside of time & so as we ponder God never changing with time, it blows our minds.

Yet God's timelessness is consistent with His unchangeableness & we cannot disconnect those even if they explode categories of experience.

And that's why we must realize that our study of this topic leads us to what some call the wall of worship where we cannot go further to know more but we can & must stop & worship.

We come to the ceiling of our existence & we cannot get beyond it or outside our createdness to fully grasp what it is like to be the Creator.

As we feel our smallness, the right response is not reaction or rejection, but is awe & amazement & praise of God.

This transcendent God gave His name to Moses to tell Israel & His name points to His all-sufficiency as the eternal living One Yahweh.

In Exodus 3:14 when Moses asked what to call God, "God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM"; & He said, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

God is independent in a way that we cannot fathom because we are dependent on Him for life & all of creation holding together & more.

But God does not depend on anyone or anything else for His existence or His power or fulfillment or wisdom or anything.

He is fully self-sufficient & never lacks anything & always has been that way & never will not be that way & that does not change.

So when we feel the discomfort or confusion in our own limits to understand all that, the right response is to humble ourselves under God our Maker & praise Him.

And as you have heard me say before, no human would make up a God this big—no little human mind would invent a God that is so far above anything we can imagine or experience.

These attributes of God are proof that Scripture is God's own words, God's own revelation of Himself rather than any imagination or invention of man.

So before you open your mouth to tell God why He can or cannot be like that or to express dissatisfaction with how you feel or whatever else, stop & let God be God & you praise Him as greater than you are.

As Romans 9 warns of talking back to God, Ecclesiastes 5:2 says "*Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God. For God is in heaven & you are on the earth; therefore let your words be few.*"

Consider these words published in 1887 by James P. Boyce in his book *Abstract of Systematic Theology*—"We must never forget that we know but little, if anything, of the mode of operation of the divine mind. We are sure that we have to think and speak of it erroneously when our thoughts or words involve successive emotions in God or such as have beginning or end. And yet the only way in which change in him in such emotional acts could occur would involve both beginning, and end, and succession, Wherefore, we know that whatever possibility of change in God appears is due only to our own imperfection of knowledge and incapacity to form true conceptions."

In other words, God is so much greater than us that we can barely speak of Him without it being somehow less than He is.

The more we study God, the more we should realize how amazing He is & that should move us to worship.

It's no wonder heaven will be endless growing in awe of Him!

I pray that's a helpful start as a 1st point to let God's immutability move you to humble praise.

Let those thoughts put us in our place as creatures prepared to submit to & receive what God has revealed of Himself.

But let's press into this reality of God's immutability a bit deeper.

Is being unchangeable a good thing if it is by itself?

No it would not be—it is only a good thing when perfect goodness cannot & does not change.

For example, I do not want to be unchangeable in the state I am in because I desperately need to keep growing to be like Christ.

I would not want an unchangeable earache or other irritation.

We could think of numerous things or people that we would not want to see left unchanged.

But God is not like that & we can be glad that we can always count on God to be unchangingly & perfectly good & to do what is best & right.

We can be assured of His Word & His promises & purposes & we never have to doubt or wonder if He will be faithful.

We dig into more rich applications of this reality next week, but for a 2nd point today, let's consider how this motivates prayer.

Point #2—let God's immutability move you to fervent prayer.

Let God's immutability move you to humble praise & fervent prayer.

God's unchangeableness should move us to fervent prayer.

It may seem a bit crazy to be motivated to pray if God never changes.

Your flesh or limited experience may object that prayer cannot be meaningful if God does not change in answer to our prayers.

But the strangeness is because we imagine that we must be the prime mover and powerful cause in order to feel motivation.

Yet that is not the case & we need to let Scripture inform us.

We know from Scripture that the unchanging God has commanded prayer & promised that He works through the prayers of His people.

Since we know that, then we are simply lining up with the absolute certainty of His character when we pray.

We are trusting Him to act in ways that are consistent with His immutability & that makes His immutability both inviting & assuring.

When we pray in response to His Word, we are the ones who are changing to get in the path of blessing.

We are the ones moving to get under the fountain of His favor.

We are moving to become the channel through which His immutable purposes will flow to our lives & the lives of others.

If God were not immutable, then we could never be sure what mood He was in & whether we could trust Him today or with various issues.

But because we do not know details of His every future action, we can submit requests to Him & see what good He does.

And because we do know His general purposes, we can pray according to His revealed moral will & be assured that He will do what is right.

And since we know He is both immutable & also perfectly good, we can seek Him expecting good from Him always.

We can be encouraged to seek Him as the unchanging source of all good as James 1:17 reminds us.

James 1:17 says, *“Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.”*

There is no variation in Him & no turning to be a little bit shady here or there or to be a little off in His calibration to precise perfection.

He never has a bad day when He is not the Father who can be pursued in prayer for every good thing & every perfect gift.

That’s why His immutability provides security & why Deuteronomy 32:3-4 & Isaiah 26:3-4 call Him a solid rock to hold onto.

Deuteronomy 32:3-4 says, *“For I proclaim the name of the LORD; Ascribe greatness to our God! The Rock! His work is perfect, For all His ways are just; A God of faithfulness and without injustice, Righteous and upright is He.”*

God’s immutability should move us to prayer because He is the greatest whose work is perfect & all His ways are just & faithful.

And Isaiah 26:3-4 says, *“The steadfast of mind You will keep in perfect peace, Because he trusts in You. 4 Trust in the LORD forever, For in GOD the LORD, we have an everlasting Rock.”*

God’s immutability should move us to fervent prayer because He is the steadfast Rock of sure & stable peace to rest our hearts & minds.

You don’t want to be begging some genie who may run out of wishes to answer for you.

And you don’t want to be some tyrant who may redefine His standards or fail to keep his promises.

You want to pray to the unchanging God whose unchangeableness are truly inviting & encouraging & assuring.

God’s immutability should even be empowering & exciting that you are approaching the glorious One who is over all & welcomes you in Christ to be a part of what He is doing to change others.

Ponder how Cornelius Van Til said it: *“Herein exactly lies the glory of the Christian doctrine of God, that the unchangeable one is the one in control of the change of the universe.”*

Listen to that quote from Cornelius Van Til again—he said: *“Herein exactly lies the glory of the Christian doctrine of God, that the unchangeable one is the one in control of the change of the universe.”*

So when you pray, you are talking with that ultimate One.

Let’s turn to Exodus 32 to see an illustration of how powerful that is.

Exodus 32 records Israel’s worship of the golden calf when Moses was on Mount Sinai with God & they got impatient.

God had rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt & brought them through the Red Sea & destroyed Pharaoh & his chariots & He had led them to the mountain that He shook by His glory where He met with Moses.

God was testing them & Moses & you can study this more if you access my sermon on this chapter on our website or app.

But for today, let’s just read verses 1-14 of Exodus 32 & see a little of what it teaches us about prayer—let’s read Exodus 32:1-14. [READ]

God had trained Moses as a mediator between Him & Israel.

Yet God put Moses to the test as Israel's representative by offering to destroy Israel & make Moses into a new nation.

God told Moses to let Him alone and He would start over with only Moses and not all those frustrating Israelites.

Moses had faced much frustration & this could've been tempting but God did not declare that His purpose to destroy Israel was settled.

He left the door open to respond differently by bringing this issue to Moses' attention to allow him to respond.

Without hesitation Moses began to plead with God for mercy on Israel.

Moses prayed by reciting God's unchangeable promises & character—he gave God reasons rooted in God's immutability.

First Moses referred to Israel as God's people, the same people God had delivered from Egypt by God's own glorious power.

God's past grace & faithfulness gave reason not to destroy Israel & He had not changed in those commitments.

That's how we can pray too—we can appeal to God based on His own past work through His Word in keeping with His character.

We can link truths of God's immutable character & purposes to our requests as reasons why God should answer our prayers, as if we are reminding God why He should act.

That wasn't a magic spell or manipulative scheme by Moses to name it & claim it, but it was effective prayer.

Moses also appealed to God's glory as another reason.

Egypt & other nations would mock God if God killed Israel.

God had repeatedly promised blessing on the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

So Moses begged God for grace based on His unchangeable promises.

Moses did not minimize Israel's sin or point to anything worthy in them that could give reason for God to be gracious.

But Moses did pray with fervent zeal for what God Himself is immutably most zealous for—God's own glory.

God would be more glorified by continuing His grace & not quitting with these people He had saved because quitting would be like God had changed in His promises & plans.

God would be more glorified if nations saw God graciously keep Israel & prove Himself unswervingly faithful to every promise to His people.

So God allowed Moses' intercession to be what changed His mind about destroying all of Israel.

Yes—verse 10 does say that Moses pled with God to turn & change His mind about the warning of coming judgment.

And yes, verse 14 does say God changed His mind about the harm He would do to His people.

But we need to grasp those in relation to His overall unchanging purposes & promises & plans for Israel & for Moses as a mediator.

As Numbers 23:19 says, "*God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent.*"

So there must be a sense in which God does not change His mind or repent, while there is some sense in relation to people in time that His relationship with them does change.

We see the same words used in 1st Samuel 15 both about God not changing & also God regretting making Saul king.

Numbers 23:19 uses the same 2 words that Moses used in verse 10, one of which is in verse 14 referring to feeling grief or regret or being sorry or relenting or repenting in that sense of changing the mind.

The word is not linguistically as clearly contrary to being “unchangeable” as it may appear.

Numbers 23:19 explains that God does not repent or change His mind in an ultimate sense like humans do all the time.

And 1st Samuel 15:29 & Psalm 110:4 refer to that same reality that God does not change His mind in an ultimate sense.

God is always committed to punishing evil & He never wavers from that & He later does punish evil in this same chapter.

But He also never changes from being merciful in response to prayer & repentance & faith from His people.

And that’s exactly what happens here as Moses prayed & then the Levites & others renewed their commitment to follow God’s Word.

God did not change from His attributes & purposes here.

Rather, God stayed faithful to His own Word & His own glory by doing exactly what Moses asked that would be consistent with His promises & His relationship with Israel.

Moses prayed based on God’s immutability & God answered.

Moses was helped, not hindered, in prayer by God’s immutability & He even appealed to God’s unchangeable commitments in prayer.

There’s no contradiction between what’s translated as God changing His mind & what we noted as God never changing.

God makes many statements in relation to people that CAN change if somehow His relationship with those people changes.

Here He was presenting Moses an opportunity to intercede & He had planned to use Moses’ prayer to fulfill His purposes.

Moses’ prayer did not to change God’s ultimate purpose or all-knowing mind in any real essence.

But God did plan for Moses’ prayer to change His response to one of grace even when His people did not deserve it.

That should be so encouraging & motivating for us to trust & seek such a secure & stable source of unchanging love & goodness.

So listen—this chapter does not support any idea that God is open to the future as if He doesn’t know or plan the future.

God does have plans that He is transcendentally working in ways we cannot fully fathom & yet He says our prayers & choices are real.

Somehow in the majestic, sovereign complexity of God, He graciously condescends to allow us to be involved in His plans.

And so our prayers have a real influence on God’s actions in time as He bends down to work with and through us.

Though God never changes in His Person and purpose, He does change His relationships as those people & others change to align themselves with His prescribed will & purposes.

In His infinite grace and amazing design of humans as willing, responsible creatures, God chose to operate that way.

So Moses prayed and God relented in that limited relational sense and He chose not to destroy Israel.

And that illustrates that there is an opportunity in God's grace that His judgment on people may change if people pray.

That's amazing & far beyond complete comprehension & yet it should be a compelling invitation to pray and keep on praying.

Moses' prayer should teach us how to pray with God's glory in mind, appealing to His faithfulness and glory and promises.

God responds to such God-centered pleas & we should never doubt that God does answer prayer for His glory.

So as a 2nd takeaway application today, let God's immutability move you to fervent prayer.

Pray for yourself & for others, especially for those God has entrusted to your care if you are a leader or teacher or parent.

We should all want to be intercessory prayer warriors like this.

God's immutability does not lead to lying fatalistic excuses that God will do whatever He wants whether or not you pray.

Instead, God's immutability gives us reasons to pray fervently especially when He gives us knowledge of a need or a burden to care.

God may have planned our prayers to be what moves His work.

So let God's immutability move you to fervent prayer.

We'll consider 2 more applications from God's immutability next week, but I pray these are helpful in answering questions to lead us to humble praise & fervent prayer.

Pray with me now that God's immutability will move us to humble praise & fervent prayer in response to what we've studied today.

Let's close in prayer.