

# FOLLOWING JESUS

*If any man serve me, let him follow me... (Jn 12:26)*

## Lesson 7

### The Character of God

#### Outline

##### Introduction

- I. The primary attributes or essences of God – Those qualities that define His very being
  - A. God is holy
    - 1. A definition of holiness
      - a. A state of sinless perfection
      - b. Separated (in the sense of “set apart”, i.e., the idea of sacredness)
    - 2. Examples of God’s holiness
  - B. God is love
  - C. God is light
- II. The balancing attributes of God
  - A. God is just and merciful
  - B. God is both omnipotent and humble
  - C. God is infinite and personal
  - D. God is deity and humanity

#### Part 1

##### Introduction

To understand even a little about God is a lifetime quest... but it is not an impossible quest. It was Paul’s quest! He wrote in Phil 3:10, *That I may know him....* It isn’t impossible because God has revealed exactly what He wants us to know about Him. We just have to commit to put in the time, and then learn to be in awe!

Our two best resources for this quest are of course are...

- 1) Jesus the Living Word (i.e., the life and teachings of God Incarnate), Who is revealed in source number...
- 2) the Written and eternally-preserved Word. Now, we can look at the Creation and get a sense of God’s awesome power, his creative prowess and his appreciation for beauty and aesthetics, but to really know God, we have to get into His mind! And the Written Word is the Mind of God revealed to humanity.

In His Holy Bible God reveals to us exactly what He deems necessary and adequate for us to know. And to be realistic what He chooses to reveal is really probably all that we can understand anyway, for how can the finite mind grasp infinity, how can the creature understand The Creator? God through Isaiah proclaims, *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD. 9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts (Isaiah 55:8, 9).*

In the Scriptures God reveals Himself in two classes of attributes.

- 1) **Primary attributes**, i.e., those qualities that make Him God. Examples of primary attributes are omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence. I’ll use the word “**essence**” to define a primary attribute.
- 2) **Balancing attributes**, i.e., those qualities that make Him infinite and inscrutable. One example of balancing attributes is His justness versus His mercy. We can’t “unpack” the infinite justness of God without first balancing it with His infinite mercy. If we try, we will “unbalance” God. We will make Him something that He is not! God is really best defined by the use of **balancing pairs**.

And of course the challenge for every Christian is to be like Christ. In fact did you know that this is God's mission? His goal is to conform every born-again believer into the image of His Dear Son? Paul writes in Romans 8:29, *For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be to the image of his Son, that he (Jesus Christ) might be the firstborn among many brethren.* Yes, even before the Creation, God preordained that those who would believe in time would be "conformed" into the image and likeness of His Dear Son. We can think of this a "conforming process", as molding, or morphing. This, in itself, is a mind-blowing concept. So since we are to be like Christ, we need to be busy learning about his character: His nature, His attributes, and His personality.

And in this quest to know God, perhaps one of the biggest challenges for us as finite humans is to grasp and comprehend God's nature of **infinite balance**, i.e., those just-mentioned balancing attributes that make Him inscrutable.

- We use the phrase "**Divine Tension**" to describe how God can be, for example, both just and merciful at the same time. We say, "God holds these balancing attributes, these truths, in divine tension." In our minds tension exists because in our ability to understand, this balancing pair will eventually produce logical conflict. For example, "How can God be infinitely JUST, and judge sin, and yet, at the same time, infinitely MERCIFUL, and forgive those who are sinners?" Of course the tension exists only in our minds, not in God's! But that is how we describe it as human beings: Divine Tension.
- Our admission, in the use of the word "tension", is that there exists a balancing point somewhere and somehow, but it is not initially obvious, or easy to understand, or to explain with human logic.

And perhaps the most perplexing of all of God's balancing attributes is His sovereignty (which includes His foreknowledge) balanced against mankind's God-given gift of free-will responsibility!

Apologist Dr. Ravi Zacharias once fielded an open forum question from a student at Colorado College in Colorado Springs. The student innocently asked, "How can you reconcile God's sovereignty and man's free will?" Ravi answered correctly; he replied, "With great difficulty!"

You see, God is not one-dimensional, but this, seemingly, is how our minds work. It is difficult (if not impossible) for us to understand that 1) on the one hand, BEFORE CREATION our omniscient God knew every soul who would repent and be saved and conversely every soul who would in pride reject the Son and be lost (and He did) and yet 2) on the other hand, IN OUR TIME give every one of those souls a free-will choice to repent, believe, and call then out FOR that salvation. How can both conditions simultaneously exist?

It is just hard for us to logically comprehend how God can be infinitely sovereign over all Creation and yet give man a free will, for isn't He sovereign even over that free will. Well, the answer is, "Yes, He is!" So then, how can it be truly a free will? And yet the Scriptures are replete with those wonderful "whosoever" verses, e.g., *For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved* (Romans 10:13). Friends, the only way for us to explain this is to understand that **foreknowledge is not causation**. Simply because God foreknew something, does not mean He caused it to happen.

Well, this is just one example of God's nature, with which our finite minds wrestle! And to be quite honest, these kinds of balancing attributes pretty much stay in "Divine Tension"! God has simply deemed that it is our responsibility to BELIEVE (have faith in) the Scriptures (His Word!). And in regard to this specific pair (Foreknowledge vs. Man's Free Will) He asks us to believe the clearly taught truth...

- 1 - that God grants ALL men the ability and the opportunity to repent (e.g., Mark 6:12),
- 2 - that He woos ALL men (He is not willing that ANY should perish —II Pet 3:9), and
- 3 - indeed, WHOSOEVER will may come (Acts 2:21; Rom 10:13)!

And yet, at the same time, He knows just who will and who will not come, and He knew this even before the Creation!

Consequently, because...

- 1) we do not enjoy holding two concepts in tension (you see, our nature is to want to understand and when we can't "logic" something out, it can cause us to respond in unbelief) and

2) because the balancing attributes are so difficult to get our minds around...

well then, we tend to UNBALANCE GOD! We tend to define God only by one or two attributes of our convenient choosing... and in so doing we paint a picture of God that is unscriptural!

For example, if the lost world acknowledges God at all (and more and more don't, but if they do...), they will almost always key in on the attribute of love. Their default is to picture God as a benevolent Grandfather-figure who will, in the end, accept all, based upon the fact that people did their very best and besides, they muse, "Surely a loving God would never send anyone to Hell (if such a place even exists)!" If you ask the average lost religionist if he or she is going to Heaven when they die you will almost always hear, "I hope so!" And then when you ask why they hope so, they will reply with the standard, "Because I haven't committed murder, or abused children, or kidnapped, or robbed banks." In other words, it's Heaven for all except for a few like Hitler, Stalin, and Genghis Kahn.

Ironically it was Cain, the first man ever born, who was the first purveyor of this view of God. He insisted that he be allowed to come to God on his own terms. He offered God the very best work of his hands, and then he insisted pridefully that God accept Him. He essentially said, "God this is the best that I can do, so you must accept it!"

So perhaps one of the most significant discoveries to be learned in this lesson, is how that God's attributes exist in perfect couplets (sets or pairs), albeit (to our finite minds) they seem to be opposites, and therefore present PARADOXES! Truly, **God is a Being of infinite balance.**

Therefore we too must strive to be servants of balance in our living. We cannot be satisfied with self-justifying statements like...

"I'm sorry I said that. You see, I have my dad's temper; so that is just the way I am!", or

"I'm sorry I'm constantly late but I'm just not a morning person; that is just the way I am."

Yes, we are all weak in certain areas, but justifying tardiness with the excuse "Well, I'm just not a morning person", doesn't cut it with the boss... and "That's just the way I am" excuses will not "cut it" with God either! Since we are in the process of being conformed into the image of Christ, and Christ is infinitely balanced, then we need to strive for balance in our lives.

And the last point in this introduction is this: perhaps one of the greatest "proofs" of God's existence is that He cannot possibly be a manifestation of mankind's imagination. He is too far off the scale. Mankind's invented "gods" are just exaggerated forms of mankind. Think about the Greek and Roman pantheon of mythological beings. These imaginary figures were primarily known by their weaknesses, excesses, and frailties! They suffered from the same maladies, immoralities, character flaws, circumstances, as did their mortal inventors! The gods of mythology could even die! The point then is that the One True God's nature and character are not what men would choose if they were building their own deity.

So let us now learn just a bit about our Great Creator and God. We will divide the study into two parts:

- 1) the **primary attributes** of God, i.e., those qualities that describe His Essence and
- 2) the **balancing attributes** of God, i.e., those qualities that make Him infinite and inscrutable.

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## I. The primary attributes or essences of God — Those qualities that define His very being

If you were asked to define God in one word (what we will call a **primary attribute** or **essence**) how would you respond? While we might view this as an impossible task, it really isn't... because the Bible gives us some scriptural choices. We CAN come up with some one-word descriptors that describe His Essence, i.e., characteristics that make God... GOD! But if I had to pick just one essence to describe our Great Creator God it would be...

## A. God is holy

### 1. A definition of holiness

The New Testament word *holy* is translated from the Greek *hag´-ee-os*, which is in turn from the root *hag´-os*, which means “an awful thing”. “Awful” in this context does not mean something horrible or repulsive, but something that produces awe and amazement. Holy then defines these concepts: sacred, pure, morally blameless or religiously (i.e., ceremonially) consecrated (or set apart).

*Hag´-ee-os* is akin to the Greek word *hag-nos´*, which means clean in the sense of innocent, modest and perfect (all of these from Strong’s Concordance).

These definitions of “holiness” bring about two connotations in regard to God.

#### a. A state of sinless perfection

- This connotation is what we most likely think of first when we hear the word “holy” in relation to God. The idea of absolute moral purity can only be used in reference to 1) God, 2) the angels that chose to stay with God, 3) Adam and Eve in their pre-fall state and 4) the saints who are now in Heaven with the Lord.

Indeed, God is absolutely perfect in moral character. God is infinitely separated from sin and evil. Hebrews 7:26 reads, *For such a high priest became us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners....*

It is hard for humans to grasp this idea or concept of “holiness” because it is so alien to our present condition and life! In my opinion it is impossible for the fallen human mind to conceive of sinless perfection.

- Consider these inspired proclamations of God’s “holiness” in the sense of an infinite separation from sin and evil.

- **Ps 99:3** *Let them praise thy great and terrible **name**; for it is holy.* (His NAME is to be revered)

- **Ps 99:5** *Exalt ye the LORD our God, and worship at his footstool; for **he** is holy.* (HE is to be revered)

- **Ps 99:9** *Exalt the LORD our God, and worship at his **holy hill**; for the LORD our God is holy.* [His HOUSE OF WORSHIP, His place of worship, is to be set apart, respected and revered.]

- But, of course, just because God is separated from sin does not mean He is oblivious to sin. His quality of omniscience demands that He knows exactly what is going on in every heart, both acts of sin and acts motivated by God-imputed righteousness. God sees and even foreknows, all things. Consequently, Matthew writes, *He shall reward every man according to his works* (Matthew 16:27). This includes punishment for sin and rewards for Holy Spirit-enabled acts of righteousness. In fact, God foreknew every evil that mankind would ever commit... and yet, He created us anyway!
- So, the first concept of “holy” in regard to our Creator God is the idea of sinless perfection, of complete moral purity and character. And now, the second concept of “holy” is...

#### b. Separated (in the sense of “set apart”, i.e., the idea of sacredness)

- Now, let’s consider this second connotation, i.e., separation. A good example of this “separated” concept of “holy” is how God called His nation Israel a *holy people* (Deuteronomy 7:6). Now, we know that there was absolutely no way that He was referring to their moral character because, for the most part, God called the Jews stiff-necked (stubborn), unrepentant, and idolatrous! They were always rebelling! And on a couple of occasions He was ready to wipe them off the face of the Earth and start over. And He would have, had not Moses interceded.

In this context then, “holy” is referring to Israel’s state of being positionally sanctified (set apart) by God... as His chosen nation. Psalm 135:4 reads, *For the LORD hath chosen Jacob*

unto himself, and Israel for his peculiar treasure (Jacob, in this context, refers to the Jews).

- So when we use this connotation of “holy” to describe God we describe Him as being separated, set apart, particularly from anything that would defile, debase, or delimit.

And it is in this context that we understand His command to His people, *Be ye holy, for I am holy* (Leviticus 20:7; I Peter 1:15, 16). God knows that because we still exist in fallen bodies and are led by corrupt minds, we can never be totally sinless or absolutely moral. That is why He had to send His Son to die for us! But one day at the resurrection and rapture event, because of Christ’s sacrifice, He will be able to make us sinless and perfect, just like the original Adam and Eve.

But right now He commands holiness in the context of conscious, dedicated **separation!** Paul writes in II Corinthians 6:17, 18, *Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, 18 And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.* The *them* in this context were the ungodly, the unbelievers, and especially those unbelievers who were idolators (see 2 Corinthians 6:14-16).

So, we recognize this second sense of “holy” as **separation, as personal (a.k.a., progressive or practical) sanctification.** The Holy Spirit resides in the temple of our body (I Corinthians 3:16) and He wants a clean home! Therefore God says be ye holy, i.e., separated people!

## 2. Examples of God’s holiness

- To the Jews, God’s holiness was awe-inspiring! Isaiah saw God ...*high and lifted up* (Isaiah 6:1) and John the Revelator saw Jesus as the Great and Fearsome Judge (Revelation 1:12-16). The vision caused John to literally faint to unconsciousness. In Revelation 1:17, 18 we read, *And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last: 18 I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death.*
- Sadly, most human beings, and even Christians, have lost our awe of God! Our generation tends to trivialize God and conceptualize Him as a softhearted “Grandpa” up in the clouds. Our sinful world needs to renew this ancient Jewish view of God! It will reveal to us a God who is infinitely offended by sin and who will in turn judge sin with infinite wrath!
- A correct view of God will then cause us to have a correct view of ourselves! We need to repent! We need to fall upon our faces before our holy God and in contrition, cry out for his mercy. The 18<sup>th</sup>-century preacher Jonathan Edwards<sup>1</sup> had a very ominous view of our Great God. He warned that humanity is, for the most part, destined for the wrath of God. His most famous sermon, delivered July 8, 1741, at Enfield, CT, is entitled, “Sinners In the Hands of an Angry God”<sup>2 3 4</sup>

In like manner, the late Dr. Adrian Rogers (long-time pastor of Belleview Baptist Church in

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jonathan\\_Edwards\\_\(theologian\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jonathan_Edwards_(theologian))

Jonathan Edwards was a Congregationalist preacher, and like most Puritans, held to Reformed Theology (theology that sprang from Martin Luther’s “reformation” and Protestantism). Consequently, Edwards was a Calvinist in regard to salvation theology. True Baptists did not spring from the Reformation. True Baptists (while not in name but in theology) have been in existence since the calling out of the Apostles by the Creator of the local church, Jesus Christ. True Baptist are not Calvinistic nor Arminian in their salvation theology, but are Biblicists, affirming that first, whosoever will may come (salvation is open and available to every human being and that because God is not willing that any should perish, He did not pre-determine some for salvation and some for damnation prior to the creation) and second, that salvation is ever-secure in Christ (the Doctrine of Eternal Security of the Believer, i.e., we can never become “un-saved”).

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/edwards/sermons.sinners.html>

<sup>3</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sinners\\_in\\_the\\_Hands\\_of\\_an\\_Angry\\_God](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sinners_in_the_Hands_of_an_Angry_God)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=11140523305>

Memphis, TN, and past-president of the Southern Baptist Convention) was keen to warn, “Even now the raging waters of God's wrath are furiously pounding against the dam of His mercy. And one of these days, that dam of God's mercy will give way to God's judgment and the day of the Lord will come.”<sup>5</sup>

- The Jews so revered Jehovah that they would not even pronounce His proper name: YHWH. Theologians call this Hebrew word the tetragrammaton. When the Jews came to this name in Scripture they would substitute another name for God such as Adonay or Elohiym.
- Consider how even God’s chosen nation Israel was kept physically separated from God because of His holiness.
  - When God came down to Mt. Sinai to deliver His Law, the people trembled with fear (Exodus 19:16). They were not even allowed to approach the base of the mountain under penalty death (Exodus 19:12, 13).
  - Another example of how God’s holiness separated Him from even His own set-apart nation was the dedication of Solomon’s Temple. When God filled the Temple in the form of a intensely bright cloud, the priests and Levites had to exit. There was no choice; they could not minister in His presence because of that intense glory (I Kings 8:10, 11).
  - And consider the separation depicted upon the Day of Atonement. On this single day, only one man—the High Priest, Israel’s intercessor with God—was allowed enter beyond the veil into God’s dwelling place, the Holy of Holies. And even then, he dared not to enter without the blood of an innocent sacrifice (prefiguring the blood of the Lamb of God), first for himself, and then a second time, for the people.

Tradition holds that the High Priest went in to the Holy-of-holies with a rope tied around his ankle. For if God did not accept his offering, and struck him dead in that holy place, his peers could then retrieve his body.

- Consider how God’s House was a holy place because it was the dwelling of the Most High Holy God.
  - This is why Jesus was so incensed at the raucous merchandizing that was taking place in the courtyard of the Temple. Twice during His ministry—once at the beginning of his public ministry and again at the very end—He drove the moneychangers and livestock vendors out of the court.
  - At that second cleansing He cried out, *It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves* (Matthew 21:13; also Mark 11:17 and Luke 19:46). Obviously the many vendors (who were without a doubt operating with a license from the Sanhedrin, who themselves were probably taking a cut on the action, i.e., a kickback) were taking advantage of the pilgrims coming to Jerusalem to worship. From Jesus’ charge we understand that they were most likely charging exorbitant prices for their animals and charging exorbitant fees for their money exchange services. They were literally ripping people off in the Temple, and probably giving the religious leadership a good kickback on their profits.
- Consider how the Seraphim praise God constantly.
  - The Seraphim are a class of angel (Cherubim being another). Evidently the Seraphim personally attend God’s throne day and night. Their duty gives us an inkling of how holy God is, for they never cease to praise him, crying out to each other antiphonally, *Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory* (Isaiah 6:3).
  - In the Revelation John witnessed their duty. He writes in Revelation 4:8, *And the four beasts (creatures) had each of them six wings about him; and they were full of eyes within: and they rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come.* These seem to be the same angels seen by Isaiah and Ezekiel.

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<sup>5</sup> Rogers, Dr. Adrian. Love Worth Finding: The Best is Yet to Be. Sermon notes on OnePlace.com. <http://www.oneplace.com/ministries/love-worth-finding/read/articles/the-best-is-yet-to-be-10790.html>

- Obviously the Seraphim's praise never, ever stops. It has been going on since the creation of the angels and it continues presently. And there is no reason to believe it will ever cease!
- And finally, consider the response of men who have been given glimpses of God's glory!
  - What did Isaiah the prophet do when he was given his revelation of God sitting on His throne in Heaven? He could only cry out in utter fear, self-loathing, disgrace, and awe, *Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts* (Isaiah 6:5).
  - Does this tell you why ALL of humanity will one day bow their knees before the Lord of Glory?
  - **Isaiah 45:23** *I have sworn by myself, the word is gone out of my mouth in righteousness, and shall not return, **That unto me every knee shall bow**, every tongue shall swear.*
  - **Romans 14:11** *For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, **every knee shall bow to me**, and every tongue shall confess to God.*
  - **Philippians 2:10** *That at the name of Jesus **every knee should bow**, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth....*
  - And, by the way, this kneeling will not be a courteous, formal response (as one would traditionally bow, kneel or curtsy before a monarch) and neither will it be an enforced act. In other words, there won't be angels with swords or spears forcing you to kneel against your will. It will be a natural, involuntary **reaction** to the awesome presence of the Infinitely Holy God. Believers will collapse before their Creator/Savior in awe of his grace and love. And God-rejecters at the Great White Throne will fall before Him in fear and trembling!
  - Recall that when saints were given glimpses of even holy angels that they often fainted! Daniel fainted in the presence of Gabriel, God's messenger angel to mankind (Daniel 8:18). And when John the Revelator was given his glimpse of Jesus the Austere Judge, he too fainted as one dead (Revelation 1:17)!
- Truly, one of the essential characteristics of God's nature is His holiness, in both the sense of moral purity and in the sense of separation from defilement.

B. God is love