

Dr. Robert A. Peterson, Theology Proper, Session 13, Incommunicable Attributes, Part 4, God is Immutable and Great

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This is Dr. Robert Peterson and his teaching on theology proper or God. This is session 13, Incommunicable Attributes, Part 4. God is Immutable and Great.

Welcome back to our studies in the doctrine of God or theology proper.

Let's pray before we do anything else. Gracious Father, we thank you that you saw fit to reveal yourself to us in your holy word that we might know you, love you, and serve you. Teach us, we pray. Correct us where that is what we need. Encourage us in living for you, we ask through Jesus Christ the mediator. Amen.

We are finishing up the so-called incommunicable attributes of God, which are the unique ones that he doesn't share with his creatures. To review, he's the living God, aseity.

He is one, the attribute of unity. God is spirit, infinite, present everywhere, omnipresent, all-powerful, omnipotent, all-knowing, omniscient, eternal, and now our last two attributes. God is immutable or unchanging, and God is great.

By unchanging or immutable, we mean that God does not change in his character or nature unlike God's changing creation. Psalm 102:27, quote, you are the same and your years will never end. Verses directly applied to Jesus in Hebrews 1, spoken of God generically in the Old Testament.

As a result, the next verse, Psalm 102:28 says, quote, we will dwell securely amid a changing, close quote, amid a changing world. We're secure because God is steady, rock steady. Though we rebel against him, God remains our steadfast rock.

In the midst of words denouncing Israel for disobedience, God states, quote, because I the Lord have not changed, you descendants of Jacob have not been destroyed, Malachi 3:6. That is one of the key texts for immutability. So, we should take a little look at it to make sure we understand the context because context is king.

Great Osborne's *Hermeneutical Spiral* was a justly influential book. Instead of the liberal hermeneutical morass, he teaches the hermeneutical spiral, in which we get closer and closer to an accurate understanding of a text. He has a target with concentric circles going from the bullseye to the outside.

And that is a good way to illustrate the importance of literary context. The bullseye is in this case, Malachi 3:6. The next rung enlarging the circles is Malachi 2:17 through 3:6 or 3:5, the verses just before, and so forth. The next rung could be Malachi 3. The next could be the book of Malachi.

The next could be the minor prophets. Next one could be the prophets. Next one could be the Old Testament.

The final rung is the whole Bible, the final ring. That is part of the context for Malachi 3:6. But, as Osborne, who's now with the Lord, shows very well, the smaller the circle, the more immediately important for understanding the verse or verses at hand. Malachi 3:1, Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me.

That's John the Baptist. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. That's Jesus.

And the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight. Behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming? And who can stand when he appears? For he's like a refiner's fire and like fuller's soap.

He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver. And he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver. And they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord.

Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord, as in the days of old, as in former years. Then, I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner.

And do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts. Then, we have verse six. For I, the Lord, do not change.

Therefore, you, O children of Israel, are not consumed. Otherwise, they would be consumed. It is God's covenantal solidity, his covenantal faithfulness, and his unchanging character in commitment to his people that even is responsible for their continuing.

From the days of your fathers, you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts. I could keep going in the immediate verses that follow.

It is in the area of giving. They are cheating God, and he calls them to account for that. The Lord's unchanging character is the basis for his faithful commitment to his people.

God is stable. Images of God that pertain to his being unchanging include a rock, Psalm 62, one and two, and the father of lights, James 1:17. That is another; that is the other key passage, and we need to look at it.

James 1:12, blesses the man who remains steadfast under trial. In other words, he reflects God's character. For when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.

Let no one say when he is tempted, I am being tempted by God, for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he's lured and enticed by his own desire. This is the language that gives birth to sin.

This is the language of maternity. And sin, when it is fully grown, brings forth death. It's a regression in terms of a female image, a personified, and these things are personified, of course.

Desire is not necessarily an evil word in Scripture, doesn't necessarily speak of sin, but here it's a strong desire. When it has conceived, it gives birth to sin. The meaning is, the mother is desire.

Some of the translations, lust, which is a broader word than sexual desire. And again, there is good sexual desire, and there is illicit sexual desire. There's good desire in general and bad desire in general, applied to all different realms.

But the mother, so to speak, desire, in this case, evil desire, gives birth to sin. Evil desire given into produces sin. And sin is a female as well.

She grows up, she conceives, she gives birth to death. What an image. Desire, when it is conceived, gives birth to sin.

And sin, when it is fully grown, brings forth death. Merely a metaphor, merely a picture. But powerfully, it indicates that evil desires given into produce sin and transgressions against the Lord, and those, if we persist in the same area, can lead to death, breaking a fellowship with God, in the case of unbelievers, of course, eternal death, separation from God forever.

Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. God doesn't tempt, he can't be tempted and doesn't tempt. Temptation comes from within.

Later on in James, he says that temptation comes from Satan. But that is not appropriate here. Because that would be a possibility of, the devil made me do it, and to avoid personal responsibility.

That is not his point. Is he giving a complete theology of enticement to sin? Of course not. The Bible almost never gives a complete theology of anything in any one place.

Because more or less it's an occasional document, and here he's addressing particular things, with the rich and the poor of his audience, and so, rich and the poor, and the very poor of his audience, and so forth. Don't be deceived. God doesn't tempt you.

Temptation comes from within. In part, my beloved brothers here's what God does. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, the creator of the heavenly orbs, the stars; today, we would say the galaxies; they had no Hubble telescope then.

God is the great creator of the lights. And they move, and they produce shadows, but he doesn't move in that sense. And he doesn't produce shadows that come from him changing or shifting.

Every good and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there's no variation or shadow due to change. And here is an example of the good gifts that God gives. Of his own will, he brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

This is the doctrine of regeneration, and here it is attributed to the will of the Father, much as we find in 1 Peter 1:3, where it's the Father's mercies that are behind our new life. That is what God does. He gives good and perfect gifts.

For example, new life. People being born again, who were dead in their trespasses and sins. That they might be first fruits.

Here seems to mean something like they might be devoted to God in gratitude for his sovereign grace that regenerates them. The Lord's unchanging character is the basis for his faithful commitment to his people. God is stable.

That's what we mean by immutable or changeless. Of course, there are ways he does change, because he's a person and will qualify in a moment. But for now, and just to repeat, images of God that pertain to his being unchanging include a rock, Psalm 62: 1 and 2, and he's the father of lights, James 1:17, who, unlike them, doesn't move or cast shifting shadows, if you will.

While God's character remains constant, he is also a personal being who enters into a formal relationship with us via covenant. That's what a covenant is. It's a guarantee, a mark, a seal of a personal relationship between God and his people.

"I will confirm my covenant that is between me and you and your future offspring throughout their generations," Genesis 17:7. It is a permanent covenant to be your God and the God of your offspring after you, Genesis 17:7. The Abrahamic covenant was the foundation of the Mosaic covenant, and although the Jews wrested the Mosaic covenant out of the context of the grace and faith of the Abrahamic covenant, as Paul criticizes in Galatians 3, that was not God's intention. And as a matter of fact, the new covenant, predicted in Jeremiah 31 and fulfilled in Jesus, is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant. So, God's words to Abraham are words to us by extension and by our inclusion in the Abrahamic slash new covenant, if you will.

God does not change in who he is, and he genuinely relates to us. He answers our prayers, desires our praise, and is pleased when we love and obey him. Does that violate his immutability? Whoa, whoa, whoa.

Violate? What are you talking about? These attributes, as all Christian theology, is a human attempt to understand God's word. We don't hold God accountable to our theologies. We do the best we can to draw the teaching of his word out of an exegesis of his word, considered in progressive revelation and so forth.

And God says he doesn't change in both Malachi 3 and James 1. So be it. But let's allow him to tell us how he doesn't change and how he does change, which, of course, is not in the same sense. This is the proper context, in fact, to address the so-called problem of God's repenting.

The King James Version correctly translates two passages denying that God repents. Numbers 23:19, 1 Samuel 15:29. Numbers 23:19, 1 Samuel 15:29.

I will read that one just so we have one of them on the table. It's a good one. It's a clear one.

After Samuel announces to Saul that the Lord has torn the kingdom away from him because of his infidelity and disobedience, brazen disobedience, and given it to a neighbor who's better than you, that would be David. First Samuel 15:29. And also, the glory of Israel.

What a wonderful way to designate God. Will not lie or have regret. For he is not a man that he should have regret.

You notice the ESV has not translated will not change his mind. Although they could have in that context. But the King James Version, which correctly denies that God repents in Numbers 23:19 and 1 Samuel 15:29.

I've got to look at the other one now. I'm not holding to the ESV to consistency in translation because you shouldn't always translate even the same expression the same way. Numbers.

God is not a man. Oh, my word. Balak.

Oh, my word. He was not a true man of God. But when he opened his mouth, God's word came out.

Go figure that one out. God is not a man, and he should lie. Or a son of man that he should change his mind.

Oh boy. I'll leave Balak for another time. For some Old Testament professors who really know what they're doing.

Gasp. Suffice it to say, if your donkey corrects you, you're in trouble. And apparently, he tried to lead Israel astray.

He was a prophet for hire. And he couldn't because God spoke through him. But then he succeeded in the next chapter after Balaam.

In chapter 6 in Numbers he leads the people into sexual immorality and idolatry. And for that, he warrants condemnation in Jude and 2 Peter. When they said you've gone the way of Balaam, this is not a good thing.

They don't mean God has spoken through him. They mean you're going off into licentiousness and great evil. So, the KJV is inconsistent.

Well, it's actually consistent, and that leads to theological confusion. Better said. Twice, it translates passages that deny that God repents.

But it translates to others as saying that he does repent. Genesis 6:6 and 7. I'm not going to read all these. I'll read them twice.

Exodus 32:14. 12 and 14. Judges 2: 18.

1 Samuel 15:11 and 35. Jonah 3:10. Jonah 4:2. One more time.

The KJV was a good translation done by godly men. Over 400 years ago. And it should have had its day.

It was too beautiful, however. And it persists to this day. And for two reasons I encourage Christians to use a contemporary evangelical translation of the Bible.

NASB, NIV, ESV. My own personal favorite. For two reasons.

Number one. The reformation principle is that Christians need the word of God in their own language. We do not speak the language, English, of 400 years ago.

Oh, but there's a new King James. I wish there weren't a new King James. We need fresh translations in every culture.

Every, I don't know, two generations? Maybe one. Secondly, and more importantly, the oldest and best manuscripts of the New Testament were discovered in the early 20th century. 300 years after the King James Version was done in 1611.

It is beautiful. It still was a bestseller. I wish it weren't.

In the name of communication, Martin Luther spent a lot of time translating the Bible into German. And that's another story. What a character.

Even today in the Hebrew Bible, in the Old Testament, it'll say the Hebrew for this word is uncertain. Some kind of a h-a-r-e. A rabbit or some other kind of animal.

Luther had no idea what they were. So, he just put German animals in there. Because the Bible had to communicate.

Yikes. Calvin's cousin, Olivier Tan, translated the Bible into French. Why? They wanted the Bible in the language of the people.

To keep it in Latin, which even Trent said was the inspired word of God, not the Hebrew and Greek. Gasp. Again.

Anyway, and more importantly, because the most important New Testament manuscripts were discovered in the 20th century. The KJV errs when it says God does repent in, one more time, Genesis 6:6 and 7, Exodus 32:12 and 14, Judges 2:18, 1 Samuel 15:11 and 35, Jonah 3:10 and 4:2. These and similar passages are to be understood in light of scripture's clear affirmation of God's stable character as expressions of his genuinely relating to his people. For more on God's as un, for more on God as unchanging but responsive to humans in time, see John Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, pages 543 to 575.

A nice big treatment of it for those who want it. Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 543 to 575. Modern translations handle these passages better as the Christian Standard Bible

shows, translating the Lord regretted Genesis 6, 1 Samuel 15 as the Lord relented or God relented.

Exodus 32:12 and 14, Jonah 3:10 or the Lord was moved to pity, Judges 2:18. In each of these passages, it is not God's character or nature that changes. In each case, who God is remains the same.

The passages stress that God is genuinely responsive to human beings. When we sin, he is deeply disturbed. When we are hurting, he is truly compassionate.

Similarly, when we draw near to God, he draws near to us, which is exactly what he said in Malachi 3 after the statement of his not changing. Draw near to me and I will draw near to you. And likewise, James 4:8. When we pray, he acts on our behalf.

James 4:2. James 5:13, 18. When we confess our sin, he forgives us. James 5:15 to 16, 1 John 1:9. Who God is remains fixed, but God's actions toward us are historical and related to our responses to him.

As Francis Schaeffer said, and the philosophers beat up on him, and it's not fair. He's not trying to be a philosopher. God is the infinite personal God.

In his infinity, he doesn't change. In his being personal, he relates to his people by covenant. And that means give and take.

That means a response on the part of God. As with other attributes of God, scripture ascribes this one to Christ. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever." Hebrews 13: 8.

Such words are true only of God, and they thus remind us that Christ is divine. James insists that God is neither tempted nor tempts others. Instead, our evil desires lead us into sin.

He warns, don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. James 1:16, and 17.

God is the creator of the heavenly lights, as I said previously. And unlike them, he does not vary or change. He does not have phases as the moon does.

He is stable in his nature. He is always good. And unlike Star Wars theology, if it was intended to teach theology, God has no dark side.

Unlike the Force. God's stability of character gives us great security. Psalm 102, verse 27.

We end where we began. The Psalms are magnificent. Goodness gracious.

The Bible is magnificent. Psalm 102:27. Let me start with 25.

Of old you, the meaning is, O Lord, laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. These are directly quoted and applied to Jesus and James in Hebrews 1. They will perish, the heavens and earth, but you remain. They will all wear out like a garment.

You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away, but you are the same, and your years have no end. The children of your servants shall dwell secure. Therefore, is the sense.

Their offspring shall be established before you. Unlike us, God is not fickle and we can always rely on him. I love that Old Testament image.

He is our rock. The Psalmist says, Their rock is not like our rock. Speaking of the other nations, the pagans.

Pagan nations. Yeah. Our rock is the living and true God who enters in the covenant with his people and because he doesn't change, they are not destroyed.

God's unchangeableness undergirds the gospel. The gospel is the message. Could somebody be listening to these lectures and not know Christ? It's very possible.

The gospel is a message that God loves sinners. Oh, he is holy. And if we come into his sight, as these lights hit my hands, all of us should confess in his light; God is light, 1 John 1, and in him is no darkness at all.

We are convicted of sins in our minds, from our mouths, and in our actions. On our hands, if you will. The good news is that God loved the world and sent his son to be the savior of anyone who would trust him as Lord and savior.

For God so loved the world, John 3:16, that he sent his unique son that everyone who believes in him might have eternal life and might not perish. God demonstrates his love for us in this, Romans 5:8. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. We cannot save ourselves.

Christ is the only savior of humankind. He freely offers himself to us. Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

So, if you're watching these videotapes of the doctrine of God, we encourage you to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved. Despair of your own efforts to please God. It is not only ridiculous and impossible, it is offensive.

The last verse in Galatians 2 says, If righteousness comes from the law, then Jesus died in vain. If we could earn God's favor by our righteousness, we wouldn't need Christ on the cross and from the empty tomb. Everybody needs Christ.

You're a sinner like the rest of us, and you must believe and trust him as your substitute to be saved. God's unchangeable character undergirds the gospel. That's what led to that preaching.

We will enjoy final salvation because our immutable Lord has promised and will not go back on his word. Quoting Hebrews 6:18 and 19. Through two unchangeable things, God's promise and oath, we have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.

Hebrews 6:16 through 18. God saves us, God keeps us. Yes, we are to remain faithful, but the ultimate basis of our being saved and kept is not our faithfulness.

Thankfully, it is God's unchanging character which, as you might have already surmised, is organically related to his faithfulness. You could combine them into one attribute. There's not one way to organize or even list the attributes.

There are many ways. We have chosen one. Our last incommunicable attribute of God is one often neglected, but it shouldn't be.

God is great. Again, speaking covenantally, our God is great. God is also great, which means God is of utmost significance and beyond comparison.

His majesty is infinite. He alone is the High and Exalted One, and there's no one like him. As the Song of Moses proclaims, Exodus 15, 11, after the Exodus and drowning the Israelites in the Sea of Reeds, quote, Lord, who is like you among the gods? Who is like you, glorious in holiness, revered with praises, performing wonders? Exodus 15:11.

Images of God that pertain to his being great include King Isaiah 40:21 through 24. I can't resist that.

Isaiah 40 is magnificent. Isaiah 40:21. Do you not know? Do you not hear? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers who stretch out the heavens like a curtain and spread them like a tent

to dwell in, who brings princes to nothing and makes the rulers of this earth as emptiness. And now Isaiah likens the rulers to the seed of a plant.

Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth when he blows on them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble. To whom then will you compare me, God says, that I should be like him, says the Holy One. And on it goes, piling one image on another of God's greatness and a whole host of attributes intertwined, which is exactly the way Scripture speaks.

Images speaking of God's greatness include his royal image, God is King. This attribute emphasizes the Lord's uniqueness, especially against the so-called gods of the nations, a theme which we hit before, which are only idols. "Lord, there is no one like you among the gods, and there are no works like yours."

All the nations you have made will come and bow down before you, Lord, and will honor your name. For you are great and perform wonders. You alone are God.

Psalm 86:8 through 10. See also 96:3 through 5. Psalm 86: 8 through 10. 96:3 through 5. At times, Scripture combines expressions of God's greatness with other attributes.

The following passages do this for his sovereignty, faithfulness, and power, respectively. So, usually the Scripture does not isolate the attributes of God. It is God's, the Bible, I like to say, is a it's a picture book, but first of all, it's a story book.

It is God's true story of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation, or restoration. Along the way, in those contexts, creation, Genesis 1 and 2, the fall deserves notice, although it's one chapter of the whole Bible, Genesis 3, because the major division in Scripture is not even Old and New Testaments. The major division conceptually and theologically is pre-fall and post-fall.

The fall changes everything. Redemption starts in Genesis 3 with the promise of God in verse 15, and goes all the way through to the end of the book of Revelation, in which we have consummation. Of course, consummation is spoken of in different places along the way, but Revelation, especially 21 and 22, which speaks of a new heaven and a new earth, and it may well be as our premillennial brothers and sisters affirm, with a millennial kingdom preceding as a prelude to the new heavens and new earth, that would be Revelation chapter 20.

It is a debatable point, and I present all the different millennial viewpoints when I deal with that matter, which I'm not doing right now. So, scripture combines God's attributes, and so it does with the final, incommunicable attribute of God that we're studying, namely his greatness. Psalm 135:5 and 6, For I know that the Lord is great.

The Lord is greater than all gods. The Lord does whatever he pleases in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all the depths. Psalm 135:5 and 6. Nehemiah 1:5, The Lord, the God of the heavens, the great and awe-inspiring God who keeps his gracious covenant with those who love him and keep his commands.

And the sentence, of course, keeps going, but we won't. Nehemiah 1:5. Jeremiah 10:6 and 7, Lord, there's no one like you. You are great.

Your name is great in power. Who should not fear you, king of the nations? It is what you deserve. For among all the wise people of the nations and among all the kingdoms, there is no one like you.

Jeremiah 10:6 and 7. The Psalms praise God for the greatness of his name, his person. Psalm 8:1 and 9. Psalm 148:13. Psalm 8:1 and 8, 9. Psalm 148:13.

They also praise him, the Psalms do, for the greatness of his works. Listen to Psalm 145:3 through 6. The Lord is great and highly praised. His greatness is unsearchable.

One generation will declare your works to the next and will proclaim your mighty acts. I will speak of your splendor and glorious majesty and your wondrous works. They will proclaim the power of your awe-inspiring acts, and I will declare your greatness.

Psalm 145:3 through 6. Our last paragraph with this lecture is this. God's greatness leads us to worship him and him only. Psalm 86, 8 through 10.

Psalm 96:3 through 5. Luke 1. Luke 1:46 through 48. The words of Mary's Magnificat. My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant for behold from now on all generations will call me blessed.

For he who is mighty has done great things for me and holy is his name. God's greatness leads us to fear him. Psalm 96:3 through 5. Jeremiah 10:6 to 7. God's greatness leads us to submit to his sovereign hand.

Psalm 135:5 and 6. And it leads us to trust in his covenant faithfulness. Nehemiah 1:5. We keep coming back to that. God's greatness also inspires us to bear witness of him to others.

Psalm 145:3 through 6. In our next lecture, we will begin a study of God's shared attributes. That is his communicable attributes.

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