

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD:  
ANALYSIS ON THE BASIC DIMENSIONS OF GOD'S LOVE

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## INTRODUCTION

Studying the attributes of God was historically important for the early church and such a study is possibly even more important today, when citizens live in such a post-modern, pluralistic society where God can be made out to be anything and everything. As with any study on the attributes of God, one must be sure to include a study on the moral attributes, like integrity, purity, and love. If research were to only study the attribute pertaining to the nature of God, an understanding would not only be incomplete but it would paint a picture of God that could be construed as an immoral or amoral being.<sup>1</sup>

Ultimately the study God's attributes is important, and significant, because without an understanding of the nature and also the moral attributes of God, society is left with a limited view and understanding of God, and how God engages His people for His purposes. This understanding of God leaves one with just a societal view, much like the Greek and Roman gods, which scripture continually warns against saying, "I am the Lord, and there is no other, besides me there is no God" (Isaiah 45:5, 22).<sup>2</sup> Therefore, to understand the attribute a theological study assigns to God entitled *love*, one must understand the moral qualities of God such as moral purity, and moral integrity as well. Moral purity is usually referred to as complete removal of anything evil, which includes His holiness, righteousness, and justice (Ephesians 4:24). Moral integrity is the set of attributes that associate God with those qualities of truth or being true, such as

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<sup>1</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 310.

<sup>2</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (ESV)* (Wheaton, IL: Good News Publishers, 2007). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the ESV translation.

genuineness and faithfulness, asserting that the Lord is the true God (Jeremiah 10:10), but also that God is truth (John 17:3).

Scripture is filled with God's love. For example, God's love is continually and ultimately a means to His own end through choosing Israel (Deuteronomy 7:7) and calling His elect (Ephesians 1:4-5), for "in this the love of God was made manifest within us, that God sent His only son into the world, so that we might live through Him" (1 John 4:9). Loving His people to that extent that He sent His "son to be a propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10, see also Romans 5:8, 10 and 1 John 2:2), so they would not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).<sup>3</sup>

All of God's love flows down from His many moral attributes, but God not only shows His love to His creation, he *is* love (1 John 4:8), and His love is then perfected in us (1 John 4:12). This paper will present an overview of the moral attribute of God, classified as love, while detailing four different dimensions or elements of God's love; that of benevolence, grace, and mercy.

### **ATTRIBUTES OF GOD: LOVE**

Of all the moral attributes of God, God's love receives generous attention in both the New Testament, as well as the Old Testament. The cluster of attributes and specific meaning of God's love can take on a plethora of definitions but is certainly emphasized in the second chapter of Ephesians (2:4-18).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> G. R. Lewis, "Attributes of God", *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd Edition, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 496-497.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Hein, "God, in Your Grace, Transform the World; A Biblical Meditation," *Ecumenical Review* (World Council of Churches) 56, no. 3 (July 2004): 308(4).

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ — by grace you have been saved — and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 2:4-6)

As Ephesians (vv. 4-8) defines Christ, and therefore God, as love, grace, and mercy, then according to one author, these attributes can define each other. Hein states, all of these attributes, including benevolence, can “mutually interpret each other” as love is to have grace and mercy, and to define grace would be to say it is love and mercy.<sup>5</sup>

The terminology of God and love is used almost interchangeably by scripture to define God, and is so fundamental in the Word of God that it would be impossible to study and view God’s Word without seeing this correlation, between and in Himself, and His creation. The apostle John explains, even before the foundations of the world, love was present among the Trinity (John 14:31 and 17:24), to then be manifested between God and His creation saying, “whoever does not love, does not know God, because God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16-19).<sup>6</sup> Love, the attribute of God, can therefore be said to be, His perfection of His divine nature, encompassing many dimensions, such as benevolence, grace, and mercy, while being the means of communication “that God eternally gives of Himself to others”.<sup>7</sup>

#### THEOLOGICAL STUDY ON BENEVOLENCE

Benevolence, stemming from another moral attribute of God, His goodness, is also seen as one of the basic dimensions of love, and shows how God deals with His

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Y. Dadoo, "Religious Pluralism for Ibn 'Arabi: The Outcome of Divine Love and Mercy," *Religion & Theology* (Brill Academic Publishers) 14 (2007): 116-146.

<sup>7</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine, Essential Teachings of the Christian Faith*, 1st Edition, ed. Jeff Purswell (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 91.

people. Benevolence can be explained as God's "concern for the welfare of those whom he loves", providing for their food in due season (Psalm 145:15, see also 104:21, Job 38:41, Matthew 6:26), along with the desire of every living thing (145:16).<sup>8</sup> This selfless caring concern of God is not an *eros* type of love but the *agape* form, not only being "an emotional affection but also a rational benevolence that comes from His deliberate choice."<sup>9</sup> God specifically demonstrates his own love (*agape*) towards us that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). Paul also describes this love to the Corinthians using chapter thirteen to explain the various ways love is discerned, and concludes that love bears, believes, hopes, and endures all things (1 Corinthians 13).

One unique aspect of God's benevolence is that He does not reserve this love for his elect, but God has opened his hand and will satisfy the needs and desires of every living thing (Psalm 145:16). There is a part of God's grace, called particular or saving grace, which uniquely works within God's elect, but benevolence is seen as God's caring for all of His creation, which He deemed "very good" (Genesis 1:31-2:3). God's benevolence is "nondiscriminatory, being dispensed to sinner and saint, young and old, of every race alike" (Matthew 5:44-45; Luke 6:35), which is "more corporate than particular, more inclusive than exclusive."<sup>10</sup> Throughout Scripture it is noted that God "makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the

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<sup>8</sup> Erickson, 318.

<sup>9</sup> Edward E. Dudek, "A Biblical Study on the Heart of God the Father," *Christian Literature and Living* (Bethany College) 6 (January 2010): 14-27.

<sup>10</sup> Barry E. Horner, *Who is the Lord that I Should Obey Him: A Study of The Attributes of God* (Sahuarita, AZ: Bunyan Ministries, 2009), 105-106.

unjust” (Matthew 5:45; cf. Acts 14:17), benevolence is not something he reserves specifically for His elect.<sup>11</sup>

This caring love even extends beyond the love for His human creation, to the “birds of the air” (Matthew 6:26; Job 38:41), and all of the animal kingdom. Though His concern is for all His creation, man, being made in His own image, *imago dei*, ultimately is “worth much more” and He has greater concern for man and his wellbeing.

Benevolence can therefore be seen in a variety of ways, but is most accurately described as God’s caring “non-discriminatory welfare lavished upon His creatures, both animal and human, even though none deserves” such loving provision.<sup>12</sup>

#### THEOLOGICAL STUDY ON GRACE

Another element of the attribute of God’s love is that of grace. Grace can be a complex set of values that pertain to the goodness of God towards those who are ill-deserving, and guilty people. Scripture abounds with the “glory of His grace” (Ephesians 1:6), showing God’s “surpassing riches of His grace” (Ephesians 2:7; cf. 1:7), His “manifold grace” (1 Peter 4:10), and His “true grace” (1 Peter 5:12), but, grace, unlike benevolence, is something that God may or may not show to the guilty sinner. J. I. Packer describes grace as God’s “love freely shown towards guilty sinners, contrary to their merit and indeed in defiance of their demerit.”<sup>13</sup> Grace is said to be “optional” with God since He must be “Holy in all His actions”, showering His people with blessings instead of immediate judgment as they actually deserve (Hebrews 6:7).<sup>14</sup> Grace is often dissected into different categories containing common grace, preceding grace, and saving

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<sup>11</sup> Henry C. Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, 2nd Edition, ed. Vernon D. Doerksen (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 86.

<sup>12</sup> Horner, 103.

<sup>13</sup> J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975), 120.

<sup>14</sup> Thiessen, 87

or special grace, which are all “facets of the one jewel of grace”, extending to those who do not deserve its benefits.<sup>15</sup>

Common grace, or general grace, is that love which God has extended to all of man, or is common to all mankind, and its benefits are “experienced by the whole human race without discrimination between one person and another.”<sup>16</sup> The term, widely used in Reformed theology, has its historical basis leading back to Augustine, and while Augustine did not make a literary distinction between common grace and saving grace, he made a distinction in the way it was defined. Where Augustine would use the term “grace” for both, often saying, “give me the grace to do as you command, and command me to do what you will”, the differentiation between the two would not be coined until after John Calvin.<sup>17</sup>

Preceding grace, sometimes referred to as prevenient grace, by definition, is that love or grace of God that is “to go before”, grace that guides, prepares, instructs, and makes a path available to allow saving grace to enter a person’s life. Often associated with Wesleyan theology, “prevenient grace”, uses the apostle John’s explanation, who said, “all that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out” and “no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (John 6:37, 44-45), preceding grace however deals only with God’s elect (Ephesians 1:3-6; Colossians 3:12).<sup>18</sup> C. H. Spurgeon described prevenient grace as something that “comes before regeneration and conversion” as illustrated in the life of Paul before his

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<sup>15</sup> Horner, 119.

<sup>16</sup> P. E. Hughes, “Grace”, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd Edition, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001).

<sup>17</sup> Saint Augustine, “Book X”, *Confessions*, 1st Edition, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York, NY: Dorset Press; Penguin Books Ltd., 1961), 233.

<sup>18</sup> Horner, 124.

conversion, and also seen through the life of countless saints like Augustine who “wanders hither and thither that no heretical teaching could ever assuage.”<sup>19</sup>

Saving grace is unique in that God has chosen to manifest His saving grace towards those who are His chosen ones in their election and predestination (Ephesians 1:4-6), redemption (v. 7), salvation (Acts 18:27), sanctification (Romans 5:21; Titus 2:11), and glorification (1 Peter 1:13), but saving grace is perhaps best explained in salvation by the apostle Paul in Ephesians 2:7-9.

So that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:7-9)

Early Christians understood Christ’s saving grace “through their traditional greeting” *shalom* coupled with the reference to Christ, shown as “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ”.<sup>20</sup> Saving grace is a dimension within the larger context of grace that is not generally accepted in the pluralistic society of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But salvation is the eternal gift of grace from God and “that any are saved at all is amazing, for if God gave to all what they deserved, none would be saved.”<sup>21</sup> With the knowledge that God, through His grace, saves His people, “we must keep in mind that the grace of God is infinite and eternal”, the grace of God is free, and existed from the first sinner, and to the end of the age.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Vol. XI (London: Alabaster, Passmore, and Sons, Steam Printers, 1882), 589-600.

<sup>20</sup> Walter A. Elwell and Phillip Wesley, *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*, 1st Edition (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 551.

<sup>21</sup> Erickson, 322.

<sup>22</sup> A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge Of The Holy, The Attributes of God: Their Meaning in the Christian Life* (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 1961), 94-96.

## THEOLOGICAL STUDY ON MERCY

Pity, stemming from the same Latin word as piety (*pietas*), is “best translated godliness” in part because pity, or that of having mercy, is seen as a holy attribute of God’s love for those in need.<sup>23</sup> Viewed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as an attribute of weakness or powerlessness, pity is actually defined by *Webster’s Dictionary* as “having compassion for the suffering and misfortunes of others.”<sup>24</sup> Much in the same way, God shows pity, or is “rich in mercy” (Ephesians 2:4), having “compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him” (Psalm 103:13) and “seek His salvation” (Isaiah 55:7).

As with the other elements of love, mercy is found throughout the Old and New Testament. Mercy is expressed by God towards the Israelites after they continually sinned and cried out to Him (Exodus 3:7), and when David sinned through the census asking to fall into the hands of the merciful God instead of man (2 Samuel 24:14). Mercy is seen through Jesus when those with physical and spiritual sicknesses cried to Him for compassionate healing (Mark 1:41; Matthew 9:36; Matthew 14:14), by the tax collector’s pleading with God to be merciful in Luke 18:9-14, or by the compassion Jesus had to continue to teach and preach (Matthew 9:35-36; Mark 6:34).

Similar to grace, mercy is also a gift, freely given by God in love, and is also seen as optional “in any given case.”<sup>25</sup> As with grace, mercy can also be described in more specific categories, as attributed by Arthur Pink in *The Attributes of God*.<sup>26</sup> Pink describes mercy as having contained general mercy, special mercy, and sovereign mercy.

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<sup>23</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 4th Edition (Oxford, England: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 53.

<sup>24</sup> “Pity”, *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (2010).

<sup>25</sup> Thiessen, 86.

<sup>26</sup> Horner, 164-165.

General mercy is that mercy which God gives to all of his creation (Psalm 145:9), special mercy given and reserved for all of mankind, being either good or evil (Matthew 5:45), and that of sovereign mercy which God has reserved for His elect (Romans 9:15-16).<sup>27</sup>

#### RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LOVE AND JUSTICE

Many other attributes can be shown to contain God's love other than benevolence, grace, and mercy, and one with the largest points of contention in modern society today is that of the relationship between God's love and God's justice. God's love cannot exist without His holy justice, and justice is not defined biblically without including the attribute of love. Often being misunderstood outside the biblical context, love and justice are more likely to be seen as mutually exclusive. That is not the case, as "love is not fully understood unless seen as including justice."<sup>28</sup>

A more modern day description of justice has no mention of love, but is more concerned with what it sees as secular fairness, or the quality of being reasonable, assured that the wrong doers get what they deserve. The apostle Matthew brings up this "reasonable justice" in Matthew 5:38, in one of the most out of context quoted scriptures of modern culture, saying we must only take an eye for an eye, not a life for an eye. Matthew, quoting from the law, found in Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20, and Deuteronomy 19:21, understands the difference between the flawed secular justice without love, and God's justice with love. If mankind truly received what he deserved from God, he would get nothing other than complete destruction and separation from God for all eternity since the "wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). Secular justice will always be inherently flawed, changed with perspective, political affiliation, and power.

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<sup>27</sup> Arthur Pink, *The Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1975), 73.

<sup>28</sup> Erickson, 324.

God's justice, which is directly related to God's attribute of love, is perfect and just, getting not what we deserve from reasonable evaluation, but out of God's love for his people. As when David sinned, he did not want his punishment to be left to the hands of men, but to God who David knew would act out of love for His servant (2 Samuel 24:14). God's justice, therefore, being infinitely righteous, is concerned with the overall wellbeing of mankind. As God could never grant a removal of sin without payment, God's love and His holy justice are never in conflict with each other, nor are they given one without the other.

## **CONCLUSION**

The moral attributes of God are an extremely important topic to be studied, especially in light of the mindset of 21<sup>st</sup> century culture, and how that mindset views God in a progressively pluralistic society. God testifies to the fact, and the prophet Isaiah writes, in repeated fashion, "I am the Lord, and there is no other, besides me there is no God" (Isaiah 44:6b; 42:8; 45:5, 6, 14, 21, 22; 46:9; 48:12; 49:23). Because God is God, and God is Holy, He should not be shaped and molded into what the post-modern society deems He should be. God should be viewed in truth, as seen through all of His attributes, including the attribute of love. God is certainly seen as a God of love, even by people who despise Him, but often only in a generalist or secular sense. Even the church of today who does not take a careful examination of the specific elements of the attribute of love, that of benevolence, grace, and mercy, will come down on the side of a general or secular love. Without a proper examination of at least these three basic elements of God's love, benevolence, grace, and mercy, the risk is taken that love will not be

attributed to God in a holy manner, but in a manner of convenience where “God is love” is said with the same reverence and understanding as the slang of today “oh my god.”

These three basic elements of God’s love should be seen as just that, the most basic understanding of God’s love for His creation and for mankind. For purposes of this discussion on the attribute of God entitled love, a detailed overview of God’s justice was outside the scope of this research, but it is an extremely important aspect of God’s love, and should always be included in a more complete understanding of love. A love that does not include justice is “merely sentimentality in granting some specific desire”, and is not the love of scripture.<sup>29</sup>

To have a more full understanding of God is to understand, not just a select few attributes, but both his natural and moral attributes, and how they work together to form the complete holy and Supreme Being that is God. His moral attributes certainly cannot be fully understood without looking at the attribute of love that encompasses so much of scripture, and His love cannot be fully understood without a basic study of the elements of His love, that of benevolence, grace, and mercy. But even with a basic understanding of all of His known attributes, love is one of God’s attributes that is never fully known, unless His people put it into practice. For “anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love” and “whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (1 John 4:8, 16b).

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<sup>29</sup> Erickson, 324.

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