

# DISCIPLES 'R' US

## Part 1 – “The First Commandment”

### Introduction

I once observed a mother show her four year-old son how to button a shirt, giving him this preliminary instruction before she did: “Get the first button right! If you get the first button right, you can get the rest right. If you get it wrong, you’ll get the rest wrong as well.” She was right of course as all of us know by experience. We *can* get the rest of the buttons wrong even if we get the first one right. But we *will* get the rest of them wrong if we get the first one wrong.

Life goes just that same way. There is a foundational fact, a fundamental reality, upon which the abundant life that every normal human being desires and seeks is built. If we get that fact right, we *can* get life right. But if we get it wrong, we *will* get life wrong.

We get that fact right by doing two things. First, we ascertain correctly what it is. And second, we live consistently with it. We act it out in the real world of our everyday lives. Part 1 of our *Disciples 'R' Us* study purposes to assist us in doing both of those things.

We begin by ascertaining the foundational fact upon which the abundant life is built. We do so by correctly answering a fill-in-the-blank question. “Human life is about \_\_\_\_\_.” Suppose we randomly asked 100 people that question. What do you think the most frequently given answer would be? It would be that “Human life is about humans.”

That is undoubtedly the directing assumption upon which our current culture, generally, operates. All of its institutions perceive human purposes, needs, and desire as overridingly significant. Consequently, they direct their energies and activities solely toward achieving those purposes, meeting those needs, and satisfying those concerns. To them human life is about humans.

What is true of our current culture generally is true of the vast majority of individuals who comprise it particularly. Let’s adapt our fill-in-the-blank question to those individuals. “My life is about \_\_\_\_.” Suppose we randomly asked 100 people that. What do you think the most frequently given answer would be? It would be that “My life is about me.”

It’s an observable fact. People in their natural state have three primary goals in life. The first is security, getting their needs met. The second is satisfaction, getting their desires or wants fulfilled. And the third is status, being respected. Their lives, in other words, are about them.

Several years ago, for instance, the wife of a celebrated televangelist got mad at a stewardess and acted so inappropriately toward her that she was thrown off of the plane. Several years before that, a celebrated televangelist was thrown off a plane for the same reason. Her dispute was over ski equipment and his over his pastoral robe.

They illustrate that the lives of most people are about them. They take themselves in thought and practice as God. Their lives revolve around attaining and protecting their own security, satisfaction, and status. They're willing to harm others or to allow harm to come to others in order to meet their needs, fulfill their desires, or get respect.

There's a psychological term that aptly describes what I've just described. It's self-idolatry. It's thinking and acting in practice as if life is about me.

That's self-idolatry and it's fatal. By fatal, I mean that it excludes people from the abundance of life that everyone desires and seeks. It destines them instead to a life of burdens, problems, failures, and disappointments. It also leads collectively to the unending soap opera that we call human life.

Consider the divorce rate in America for 2012, which is the sixth highest in the world. The marriage rate is 6.8 marriages per 100,000 of population. The divorce rate is 3.6 divorces per 100,000 population. That means for every 1.9 marriages there is one divorce.

Let me ask you. What is the cause of divorce? One article I read identified 25 causes including infidelity, differences in personality, financial problems, lack of communication, and lifestyle differences to name a few. Those causes are commonly cited but in actuality, they aren't causes. They're consequences. They're the result of the ultimate source of almost all human conflicts and problems - self-idolatry.

Hosea 4:6 explains precisely what idolatry of any kind is. It's a mistake about reality. And self-idolatry is the biggest of all mistakes about reality. It's getting the first button of life wrong so that we get all of life itself wrong.

All of us course want to get our lives right and we can – by answering those fill-in-the-blank questions correctly.

The very first sentence in the Bible, in Genesis 1:1, enables us to do just that, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." "In the beginning" implies that there was a time when nothing material, including our universe, existed. There was a time when only God existed. Since He pre-dates everything material and since He created it, He is at least superior in nature and importance to it.

We can, by knowing and believing that, correctly answer the fill-in-the-blank questions. First - "Human life is about God." And second, "My life is about God." The most important realities are invisible. And the most important of all invisible realities, by far, is God. Objectively, in other words, God is, by far, the dominant reality of the universe and life in it. Objectively, He is also the dominant reality in each individual life, including yours and mine. Human life, therefore, is primarily about Him and secondarily about humans. In the same way, your life or mine is primarily about Him and secondarily about us.

That is the foundational fact upon which the abundant life that all normal human beings desire and seek is built. So, to get our personal lives right, we must get that fact right. We must live in thought and practice as if human life generally and our own personal lives particularly our primarily about God and not us.

The first part of our *Disciples 'R' Us* Curriculum teaches us, as a practical matter, how to do just that. It's by loving God with our whole being.

### Loving God with Our Whole Being

Every person has a primary objective or goal in life. He or she wants to be, do, or acquire something and values doing so more than anything else. Let me ask you a question. What is your primary objective or goal? It's a major step forward in our lives to ask and answer that accurately.

That primary objective or goal must have integrity of course for it to rightly direct our lives. Do yours and mine have integrity? Or to ask it more specifically, is our objective or goal about God or us?

I don't know what your primary objective or goal is, but I do know what it should be. Jesus Himself tells us in Mark 12:28-31. He declares in verse 30, quoting Deuteronomy 6:5, "You shall love the LORD (Yahweh) with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength."

The phrase "with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength," means "with your whole being." Love for God, therefore, has four components: (1) Mental - we routinely think about Him; (2) Emotional - we feel affection for Him; (3) Volitional - we will His will over our own; and (4) Behavioral - we try and train sacrificially (no matter what the cost) to do what He wills. To love God with our whole being means that all four components are present in our relationship with Him.

Now, notice what calls loving God with our whole being in verse 30. It's the "foremost" or "greatest" of all commandments.

It's estimated that there are 613 commandments in the Bible. While we might think that all are equal, they aren't. They are all good but they aren't all equal. We know that because Jesus Himself tells us this one is "foremost" or "greatest." Those words clearly imply superiority and separateness. This one is superior to and different than the other 612. It is so in three ways.

One way is in its impact. It is the most impacting of all commandments. Keeping this commandment, in other words, has greater consequences than keeping the others.

Jesus quoted one Old Testament text, Deuteronomy 6:5. But this isn't the only one that commands us to love God. There are many others including Exodus 20:6; Deuteronomy 5:10, 7:9, 11:1, 30:6-8, 30:16; Joshua 22:5; and Daniel 9:4. Each of those contains the same formula. God commands, "Love Me and keep My Commandments." Notice the order in this formula. We love and keep. We find that same order in John 14:15 and 14:21-23.

Those texts reveal how impacting loving God with our whole being is. Suppose I keep the commandment, "Don't lust." Will that necessarily make the rest of my life right? No, it won't. I might not lust, but I still might desire to gossip and gossip, for instance. But suppose I keep this "foremost" one. Will that necessarily make the rest of my life right? Yes, it will. If I keep it, I won't lust or gossip. It's the most impacting of all commandments. If I love God, I will naturally desire and try and train my best to keep them.

There's a second way this commandment is foremost. It's goes to God's nature in a way that the others don't. All the commandments are reflections of His nature. But this one is especially so. God is, as we will learn, utterly lovely and competent. He is infinite and perfect in His character and capability. Loving Him, therefore, is consistent with His nature and thus, the most appropriate and moral thing a human being can do. Not loving Him on the other hand is inconsistent with His nature and thus, the most inappropriate and immoral thing a human being can do.

The Summit Count common pleas court tried a criminal case in which the defendant picked up his girlfriend's baby and hurled him into the wall, killing him. That horrified people because the action was so contrary to the nature of the utterly helpless and innocent baby.

But anyone who envisions the utter loveliness and competence of God grasps this. Not loving Him is just as contrary to His nature as that criminal's act was to the nature of the baby – and thus just as horrifying. Most people, including Christians, don't grasp that but by the time you complete the *Disciples 'R' Us* curriculum, you will grasp it.

There's a third reason loving God with our whole being is the "foremost" or "greatest" commandment. It's because loving Him that way is the deepest need of human beings. Take any person - from the richest to the poorest, from the smartest to the dullest, or from the strongest to the weakest. His or her deepest need is to love God with his or her whole being.

Notice that Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6:4 in Mark 12:29, "Hear, O Israel! The LORD (Yahweh) our God is One Lord." Inherent in this stirring declaration, called the Shema, is the dominance of God. He is the author, sustainer, and governor of the universe and life in it. Well, after Jesus declares that fact in verse 29, He then quotes Deuteronomy 6:5 in verse 30 and calls us to love God with our whole being. It's clear that verses 29 and 30 are linked. Verse 29 reveals a reality. Verse 30 then reveals the response to which it should lead.

The foremost commandment, in other words, is about living consistently with reality, as I alluded to a few moments ago. God is the dominant reality in the universe. Because He is, we act *for* reality by loving Him with our whole being. Conversely, we act *against* it by not loving Him with our whole being. Do you realize what that means? Nothing of ultimate importance in our persons and lives will go right if we don't love Him. But everything will go right if we do. That makes loving Him the deepest need of human beings.

Take marriage as an example of what I mean. Wives, what is the best thing your husbands can do for you? I'll tell you. It's to love God with their whole being. Their love for you will be right if they do. It won't be if they don't. Several years ago, for instance, I made and am carrying out this decision - never to say or do anything that harms my wife in any way. Why did I make that decision and why am I carrying it out? It's because I love God. There's actually a causal connection between the love I have for Him and the love I have for my wife. The more deeply I love Him, the more selflessly I love my wife.

That illustrates that loving God has what are called "tentacles of impact." It reaches into every aspect of our person and life and sets things right. Who are the best citizens? Who are the best friends? Who are the best employees? Who doesn't worry? Who receives criticism with gratitude and joy? Who rejoices when others outshine them? Who faces death with ease? And so on. The answer to those diverse questions is "those who love God." Loving God eventually sets things right for us - spiritually, psychologically, socially, and behaviorally. That makes it the deepest need of human beings.

Those then are the three reasons that loving God with our whole being should be the one and only primary objective or goal of our lives.

J.I. Packer articulates the ultimate meaning of making it that in his book *Knowing God*. He writes: "What makes life worthwhile is having a big enough objective, something which catches our imagination and lays hold of our allegiance; and this the Christian has in a way that no other person has." People need something really big to fill the vacuum of their souls, in other words, and loving God with our whole being is the only aim big enough to do that.

He's absolutely right and we can think of it in terms of the metaphor with which we began our study. When we make loving God with our whole being our only primary objective or goal, we're making our lives about Him and not us. We're getting the first button of life right, which means we can get the rest of them right as well.

### How to Love God with Our Whole Being

We desperately need to love God and we can. Many years ago, a skeptical attorney challenged me by arguing this: "God is like an imaginary friend. You can't see Him, hear Him, or touch Him. So how could you possibly love Him? You can't!" I didn't take offense at what he said because the issue it raised is a valid one. Can we actually love a God whom we can't experience with our five senses? The answer is "Yes, we can!"

The attorney's declaration draws a false contrast between what is spiritual (non-material) and what is real. We know from John 4:24 that "God is spirit." He isn't made up of atoms and molecules. He doesn't have a body and brain, which is precisely the problem many people have with Him. They draw a contrast between what is spiritual (non-material) and what is real. If something is spiritual, they think, then it's also not real. But they're flat out wrong. Yes, God is spirit, but He's also real. He's real, in fact, in an absolute and final sense that nothing else is. He is the ultimate reality.

But He's personal as well. First, He can and does engage His creation. He acts on and interacts with the universe everything that inhabits it, including you and me. Second, He can be engaged by His creation. You and I can act on and interact with Him.

Because God is personal as I just defined it, He can and does love us. We can know His affection and concern for us experientially. But we can also love Him in return. He can know our affection and concern for Him experientially. We can, in other words, have an ongoing love relationship with Him that fulfills the foremost of all the commandments.

But how can we? Are there means that are known to be effective in loving God with our whole being and if so, what are they?

There are such means and Jeremiah 9:23-24 identifies what they are. Jeremiah calls our attention to the things about which people normally boast. He's referring to the things they value most. They are wisdom, power, and wealth. But those things, Jeremiah contends, are insignificant in light of understanding and knowing God. As he writes, "let him who boasts boast of this, that he understand and knows Me (God)." Those are the means for loving God with our whole being – understanding and knowing Him.

Jeremiah's words unveil an insight that's hidden from many. Loving God is a process not a moment or an event.

Preachers told me as I was growing up that I needed to love God and left it at that. They didn't explain how to love Him. I logically concluded, therefore, that I could love Him in a moment if I willed to. It didn't work though no matter how hard I willed it, which left me with feelings of guilt and shame. So I tried a different approach. I went forward during an altar call and prayed for the Holy Spirit to fill me with love for God. It didn't work though and the feelings of guilt and shame remained.

I realize now what the problem was. Loving God is a process not a moment or an event. It occurs over time as we make and carry out the decision to do what Jeremiah writes: understand and know God. Keeping the foremost commandment then is a partnership between the Holy Spirit and us. Our part is to know and understand God. The Holy Spirit's part is to transform our whole being as we do so that we love God as a result. The Holy Spirit will do His part if we do ours. So, let's do ours.

### Understanding God

First, we make and carry out the decision to understand God. To understand Him means to envision or perceive Him as He really is.

I once counseled a mother who lives in Barberton. She was upset about the young man to whom her daughter had just become engaged. And in the process of explaining why she was, threw up her hands in frustration and declared, "I guess what they say is true. Love is blind."

Actually, that isn't true. Love isn't blind, in this sense. It always has a vision of the beloved. Thomas Aquinas explained it well in his classic work *Summa Theologica*. He wrote, "Love is born of an earnest consideration of the object loved." In that same vein, he also wrote, "Love follows knowledge." Those are profound insights. They teach us that love isn't blind. It sees or perceives the beloved in a way that creates love for him or her. In the end, love is an emotional response aroused in our will by our vision of the beloved. Without that vision, there would be no love.

The mother I counseled and her daughter illustrate what I mean. The mother described her daughter's fiancée to me this way: "He's lazy, irresponsible, and doesn't care about anyone but himself." The very next week, I talked with her daughter who described him this way: "He's such a wonderful guy – spontaneous, carefree, and kind." We wouldn't know they were talking about the same person would we? The source of their conflict was the vision of this young man that each of them had. The mother saw him one way and her daughter an opposite way. The mother's vision aroused her will to despise him. The daughter's aroused hers to love him.

They empirically prove Aquinas right. Love isn't blind. It always has a vision of the beloved. It's that very vision in fact that cultivates the love. There are rarely any exceptions to that.

That's the way it is, not just with human beings but with God as well. To love Him, we must first of all have a vision of Him that enables us to, which in God's case is the true one.

Going back to the mother and daughter, the daughter's vision of her fiancée was a false one. He wasn't the lovely person she perceived him to be, which is why she divorced him two years after she married him. If she had perceived him as he really was, as her mother did, she wouldn't have loved and married him.

That isn't the case though with God. In reality, He is utterly lovely and utterly competent. The attributes that comprise His nature are absolutely ravishing. And because they are, building a true vision of Him, seeing Him as He really is, elicits love. Let's devote ourselves, therefore, to building a true vision of Him. That is the very first step in fulfilling the foremost of all commandments.

We do that by digging into the details of God's being. It's at this very point that so many of His followers fall short. Their conception of Him is general and vague. There's little substance to the vision they have of Him. They might know, for instance, that He's omnipotent or all-powerful but don't have any detailed knowledge of what that means. The result is that God isn't vivid and real enough in their thought and experience to actually love.

For God to be vivid and real enough to love, our vision of Him must be specific and clear. It must be substantial enough to arouse the required emotional response in our wills. We develop such a vision of Him by digging into the details of His being. That isn't a difficult thing to do. It requires effort but it isn't difficult because God has disclosed numerous details about Himself to us through Scripture, nature, and human beings. Those disclosures are the basis of our vision of Him. We do two things.

First, we study and learn all the details we can that Scripture, nature (creation), and human beings reveal about Him. This requires interpreting and understanding the relevant verses about Him. It also requires recognizing and analyzing what in nature (creation) and human beings reflect His nature. The thought life of human beings, for instance, which is in His image, tells us much about Him.

Second, we apply the logical relations of implication and contradiction to the details we've learned and draw conclusions from them. We ask and answer the question, "If this detail I've learned about God from Scripture, nature, and human beings is true, what must also be true?" The answers to that question comprise further details about Him that we can and thus, need to know.

Jeremiah 32:17, 27, for instance reveals that "nothing is too difficult for Him (God)," which I interpret to mean that He is all-powerful. His power is infinite or limitless. Knowing that detail, I asked and answered the question, "If it's true that His power is infinite or limitless, what must also be true?" It's many things including this. All of His acts are effortless. It took less effort for Him to create the universe than blinking my eyes takes for me.

You can see that digging into the details isn't difficult. It does take time, concentration, and effort, but it isn't difficult. All of us can do it and we desperately need to. To know generalities about God, like He is all-powerful, is one thing. To know the details, like the one I just mentioned, is entirely another. The details are awe-inspiring in a way that the generalities are not. They give us a particularized vision or understanding of Him that makes Him great and good enough to love.

To this point, we've learned that loving God with our whole being is the foremost commandment and the "first button" of life. We've also learned that thoroughly understanding Him by building a detailed vision of Him is the first step in loving Him that way. That implies, in my opinion, that the first thing a disciple of Jesus should do is to build a detailed vision of Him.

So let's do that now. We are going to dig into the details of God's being, focusing on the ones that are most vital to keeping the foremost commandment. Doing so will give us the foundational understanding of Him that we need in order to love Him. I will use two primary resources in doing so – the Bible and A.W. Tozer's book *The Knowledge of the Holy*.

God has a nature and just as our nature is characterized by certain traits, or "attributes" as I'm going to call them, so is His. We are going to identify and define 18 of those and learn in the process that He is utterly lovely and competent – one whom we can love with our whole being.

## #1 - God Is Spirit

We begin logically with a basic attribute of God that clearly distinguishes Him from our universe and everything that comprises it. Jesus Himself reveals what that is in John 4:24, "God is spirit." Notice that the word "spirit" is small "s." It refers not to the Holy Spirit but to the very nature of God's being. He is spirit.

Deuteronomy 4:15 is a little commentary on this attribute of God. He described in it how Israel experienced Him at Mt. Sinai (Horeb) in Exodus 19:16-25, "You did not see any form on the day the Lord spoke to you at Horeb." They saw "thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud" but they didn't see Him because He is spirit. That He is spirit means that He is non-material. He isn't made up of atoms and molecules as the universe and everything in it are. He has no brain and body, in other words, and doesn't need them. He has the highest possible powers of consciousness and activity without a brain and body.

The Bible does speak of God in terms of body parts and movements. It refers to His face, eyes, hands, arms, and ears. But it's using figurative language when it does so. The purpose of that figurative language is to make God's powers understandable, vivid, and real to us. In reality, He has no body parts because body parts are material and He is spirit.

Hearing that upsets some Christians. One, for instance, told me that learning what God is spirit means diminished her faith in Him. Thinking that He has a body, she commented, makes Him seem more vivid and real. But thinking that He doesn't makes Him seem less vivid and real.

That reminds me of a story I've told before. A father's little daughter called out to him from her bedroom that she was afraid to sleep alone. He in turn exhorted her not to be afraid because God was with her. To which she replied, "But I want someone with a face."

Many Christians seem to want what that Christian and little girl wanted – a God with a face, that is, a material and bodily God. One of the unspoken assumptions is that such a God would be more engaging and engageable than a spiritual one. They would be able to act upon Him and be acted upon by Him more personally if He were material.

But that's misguided thinking. In reality, our interactions with God are more personal and deep because He's spirit and not matter. Consider one of the most life-defining verses in the Bible, John 14:23, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him." God will be with and in us, Jesus says here. Notice the prepositions I used there, "with" and "in" us. God's promises to be a constant presence with and in us if we love Him and do what He says.

That is a promise that no material being of any kind could keep, including a human being. First, human beings, including our spouses, could never be a constant presence *with* us. Their material nature makes them localized so that their bodies could not always be where we are. Second, human beings could never be a constant presence *in* us. Their material nature renders them incapable of knowing or even touching us in the very core of our being. My wife, for instance, can never know or touch me in my essence and I can never know or touch her in hers.

But God, precisely because He is spirit, can do both of those things. Because He is spirit He isn't localized. He's omnipresent instead and thus, is always *with* us. And because He is spirit, He is able to penetrate into and intertwine Himself with the very fabric of our being. He is able to inhabit and work in my mental, emotional, volitional, and bodily processes, just as He says in John 14:23.

The consequence is that we can actually have an ongoing conversational relationship with Him that is as vivid and real but more meaningful and deep than any that we have with human beings. A.W. Tozer captured the gist of this in one of the most significant statements you will ever hear. In his book *The Pursuit of God*, he writes: "The Bible assumes as a self-evident fact that men can know God with at least the same degree of immediacy as they know any other person or thing that comes within the field of their experience." He's right. That God is spirit makes Him not less knowable but more. Our relationship with Him can be as Richard Foster describes it and it's a unique one, "Heart touching heart."

That means if we don't have a relationship with God, the problem isn't with Him and His spiritual nature, but with us. It's that we, being material, haven't learned how to interact with and engage the spiritual. But we can learn how to and when we do, the spiritual becomes as vivid and real to us as the material is. Our *Disciples 'R' Us* curriculum will eventually teach you how to interact with and engage the spiritual realm generally and God specifically.

That then is a basic attribute from God that sets Him apart from the universe and life in it. He is spirit or non-material. He has the greatest possible powers of consciousness and activity without a body and brain.

## #2 - God Is Self-existent

That God is spirit makes possible a second attribute of His. He is self-existent. One of our church members of days gone by, Russell Wells, asked me a question when I was visiting him years ago, "Who made God?" How would you answer that question if it were asked of you? Three texts, together, assist us in doing just that.

One is Exodus 3:1-12. In this narrative, God wanted to reveal Himself to Moses and then through him to the people of Israel, who were slaves in Egypt. He did so through a theophany or visible manifestation of His person. The theophany in this case was a burning bush. Burning bushes are common place and ordinary, but this one was unique and extraordinary, because it wasn't fueling the fire in it.

Fire needs something material outside of itself to feed on or it ceases to exist. That something else can be, as it was here, a bush. Because the fire relies on the bush to fuel it, it goes out when the bush is fully consumed.

But the fire that Moses saw was unique. You and I have never seen one like it. It needed nothing material outside itself, including the bush in which it was burning, to exist.

The burning bush was a symbolic phenomenon. The fire clearly represented God. And it needing nothing to feed on represented the fact that God needs nothing outside of Himself to exist. That's the attribute of His that He conveyed symbolically to Moses.

A second text, Exodus 3:13-15, assists us in answering the question, "Who made God?" Having revealed Himself to Moses through the burning bush in verses 1-12, God then revealed Himself to him in verses 13-15 in a name. God chose a Hebrew word to be His personal name by which His people would know Him. That Hebrew word was *Yahweh*, which means literally "I am who I am" or "I will be who I will be."

God chose that word to be His name because of what it connotes. It's that He has always been, is, and always will be.

The third text that assists in answering the question, "Who made God?" is Acts 17:22-29. This is a fascinating text because in it, Paul attempted to describe what God is like to a group of Greek philosophers. He identified one of His attributes in verse 25 this way: "Nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things."

Paul reveals two facts in verse 25. One is that "all things" including people are utterly dependent on the creating and sustaining work of God. They need Him to live. The other is that He is dependent on nothing. He doesn't need anyone or anything to live.

Those three texts, Exodus 3:1-12, Exodus 3:13-15, and Acts 17:25, together, reveal a mind-bending attribute of God. He's self-existent. He is an ultimate and absolute personal being who has the power of being within Himself. His own existence and His own activities depend upon nothing other than Himself, unless He so chooses.

Unlike everything else in the universe including human beings, therefore, He needs nothing outside of Himself to exist or live. He has the possession of life, with consciousness and the power to act, in Himself.

That is a staggering insight into the nature of God and its implication is a compelling one. It's that God has no cause or origin.

Investigators of physical phenomena adhere to the principle of "causal closure." This principle asserts and correctly so that every physical event has a physical cause. Whenever physical phenomena are investigated, researchers should look for physical causes. So, a baby is born. That event has a physical cause, which is the fertilization of the mother's ovum. Or the hard drive on our computer crashes. That event had a physical cause, which is the deterioration of the hardware from use or accident. Every physical event has a physical cause.

That principle, with exceptions here and there called miracles, is true of every individual physical phenomenon but is not true of those physical phenomena together – the universe in other words. Something is true of the universe generally that isn't true of the material realities that make it up particularly. Like all material events that make it up, it must have a cause, but unlike those events individually that cause can't be physical. It must be spiritual or non-material and it is. That cause is the spiritual or non-material God who created it.

Putting all of this together, everything that exists has a cause whether it's material or spiritual – except God. God, because He is self-existent, has no cause or to say it another way, He has no origin.

That enables us then to answer the question, "Who made God." You can quickly see from what we've just learned that the question has a faulty premise – that God was made. He wasn't made. The answer to the question then is this, "No one made Him because He wasn't made." He's self-existent, has the power of being within Himself, and thus, has no cause or origin.

The self-existence of God not only fills us with awe, but challenges us as well. Since God is the only self-existent being, He is the very ground of existence. The very existence of the universe and human life depends on Him. So, we need to think and act in practice as if He is that. That is our challenge. It's to think and act in everyday practice as if God is the ground of all existence.

Sadly, very few human beings do. Contemplate all the problems we face on this planet in terms of human behavior. The root cause of all of those problems is people living as if they aren't dependent on God. They think and act in practice as if they're totally independent of Him – as if they don't need Him and I mean at all.

I once talked with a wealthy businessman about the day to day decision making that businesses require of their owners. I asked him what his foundational principle was for making decisions. He answered, "It's whether or not it's ultimately beneficial or harmful to the business." Since he owned the business, I took him to me "Whether or not it's ultimately beneficial or harmful to me." Notice who he takes in practical terms to be the ground of existence. It isn't God. It's Him.

He illustrates the foundational sin. It's human beings taking themselves in thought and practice as the ground of existence. It's human beings running their everyday lives and not letting God run them.

A.W. Tozer explains this well in his book *Knowledge of the Holy*: "Sin has many manifestations but its essence is one. A moral being, created to worship before the throne of God, sits on the throne of his own selfhood and from that elevated position declares, 'I AM.' That is sin in its concentrated essence." Notice that Tozer capitalized the word "AM." He's referring back to God's personal name in Exodus 3:14 and His self-existence. Simply put, most people challenge God's self-existence by taking themselves in thought and practice as the great "I am" – by taking themselves in thought and practice as God.

Our call is to recognize and honor the self-existence of God.

William Wilson and Robert Smith founded AA in Akron, Ohio in 1935. Commenting on what alcoholics must do, they declared "And first of all, we had to quit playing God" and then allow God to "Play God." That is a foundational insight of AA. I'm fascinated by the title of the authoritative work on AA. That title is *Not God*. The historian who wrote it explained why he titled it that. He said that "not God" stands as the most important hurdle an addicted person must surmount. That is their root problem, thinking and acting like they're God, and it must be overcome in order to overcome their alcoholism.

But it isn't just alcoholics. It's all of us. The first thing all of us need to do is to quit playing God and allow God to play God. We must remove self from the throne of our lives and put Him in its place and declare Him the great "I am," the ground of existence. We must take Him in thought and practice as God – make His wants and will our wants and will. We're living consistently with reality when we do, which, as we've discussed before, makes our lives go well.

### #3 - God Is Eternal

Because God is self-existent, He must necessarily be eternal as well, which is a third attribute of His. He is eternal.

Scripture reveals in the eternal nature of God in verses like Deuteronomy 33:27; Psalm 9:7; Psalm 135:13; Isaiah 57:15; Jeremiah 10:10; Romans 1:20; 1 Timothy 1:17; 1 Timothy 6:15-16; and Revelation 1:8 to name a few. To reject that God is eternal would be to reject the unmistakable revelation of Scripture that He is. But even if Scripture didn't reveal it, we could clearly infer it from other attributes of His.

But again, Scripture does reveal it. Let's examine Revelation 1:8, 21:6, and 22:13 for example. In 1:8, God declares that He is the Alpha and Omega, which are the first and last letters in the Greek alphabet. In 21:6 and 22:13, He says that He is the beginning and the end. And finally, in 22:13, He says that He is the first and the last.

Those are metaphors of course. God is saying about Himself that He is like the Alpha and Omega, like the beginning and the end, and like the first and last – *simultaneously*. That's the critical point - *simultaneously*. He is *at the same time* the first and last letters; *at the same time* the Alpha and Omega; and *at the same time* the first and the last.

That is the key to interpreting what He reveals about Himself in these verses. He is, as 1 Timothy 1:17 says it, eternal. Revelation 1:8 defines what that means. He was, is, and is to come. There has never been a time when He was not and there will never be a time when He will not be. He always has existed, exists now, and always will exist. He had no beginning and will never have an end. He is eternal.

That eternal nature of His is a mind-numbing reality. It means that He isn't bound by time.

Let me ask you two questions. First, did time, defined as a succession of moments, always exist? No, it did not. Time had a beginning. It began. That leads to the second question. When did it begin? The answer is that it began in Genesis 1:1 when God created the material universe. Time did not exist. God created. Time then existed.

Time is a creation of His in other words. We absolutely must understand that in order to understand Him. He isn't a creature of time. He is the creator of it. Consequently, He transcends it, that is, isn't in it but apart from it. Time doesn't govern God. He governs it. He did not begin and will not end because "begin" and "end" are time words and time has no application to Him. He totally transcends it.

His life, therefore, does not come to Him moment by moment. There are no past and future for Him. There is only a never-ending present. There are no "before" and "after" for Him. There is only a never-ending "now." That means that He experiences September 25, 1913, September 25, 2013, and September 25, 2113 right now. September 18, 1913 isn't past to Him but present. September 13, 2113 isn't future to Him but present.

That makes the passing of time, therefore, irrelevant to Him. He's completely unaffected by it. He is never compelled to wait because for Him, everything that will happen has already happened.

The implication of that to history and our own personal lives is profound. It means that He doesn't see and experience the events of history or our lives in succession over a period of time, but always, all at once, now.

Think about the most significant events in your own life. They would undoubtedly include your birth, your graduation from high school or college, your first day on the job, your wedding ceremony, the birth of your first child, the day you were diagnosed with cancer or other life-threatening illness, the day of your death and entry into eternal life and many more. Time doesn't limit His perspective or experience of those things. He sees and experiences all of those events of yours continually and at once, right now as I speak – because He's eternal.

Now, there is something in human beings that reflects that attribute of His. Solomon identifies what that is in Ecclesiastes 3:11, "He has also set eternity in their heart." Eternity being in our hearts connotes what I would call our longing for permanence.

In his book *Divine Conspiracy*, Dallas Willard describes this longing more precisely: "Indeed, all of this touches upon a general human need, built into our nature as intelligent, active beings. What will become of our universe? What will become of the human race and of each of us individually? We ask these questions as naturally as we breathe. Human life and consciousness requires, by its very nature, a projected future. And everyone is deeply concerned to know what that future is." That description of his captures the essence of the "eternity in their heart" about which Solomon wrote.

I think of the celebrated cosmologist Carl Sagan and an article he wrote. Sagan was an atheist who believed that death is the end of us and the burning out of the sun the eventual end of life on earth. Yet, he expressed his hope in the article he wrote for space exploration and eventual colonization so that the human race would continue on. Even the most resolute atheists cannot suppress the eternity that God Himself has set in their hearts. They illustrate that the human mind must have some picture of the future for humans to be psychologically sound.

And God, through His written word, has given us just such a picture and what a compelling one it is. Because He is eternal, He has made us immortal. Immortal is different than eternal. Eternal means that God has no beginning and end. Immortal means that each person has a beginning but no end. We have not always been, but we will always be. Once we're born, there's no exit sign in the universe for any of us. A non-material part of us will live on forever consciously and actively.

All of us have a never-ending future, in other words, and what an astonishing one it is for disciples and friends of Jesus. God, through Jesus, is even now preparing this future for us. The fifth part of our *Disciples 'R' Us* curriculum titled "Happily Everafter" defines this life thoroughly, in comprehensive detail. But in the meantime, this accurate and stirring summary will have to do. We will, with God, His angels, and every disciple and friend of Jesus of every generation, live a breath-taking life in a breath-taking environment and world in which each moment is better than the one before.

If you and I want to live strongly and creatively with Jesus and in His kingdom at hand, we must know and believe that. To have the abundance of life that Jesus promises us in John 10:10, our future must make sense to us. It must be something that we can incorporate into our lives now – something that we can, with anticipation and joy, plan and make decisions in light of.

Those who do will then never be intimidated by aging or disappointed in how their lives have turned out. They will know that coming to the end of their lives on earth is of little account because the best is yet to be. Simply put, disciples and friends of Jesus need never fear or regret aging and the bodily death to which it leads. Why? It's because God, who is eternal, has made us immortal. He has secured for us an endless future that is glorious and bright beyond our abilities to imagine it.

#### #4 - God Is Triune

When I practiced law, I rode the metro bus from Barberton to my office in downtown Akron. I came to know several other regular riders, one of whom was a Jehovah's Witness. We discussed countless subjects over the months including the fourth attribute of God that I'm going to address now. As we discussed it one day, he kindly said to me when I told him I believed it, "You're blaspheming God." That attribute, as you've probably guessed, is that God is triune.

Let me quickly point out that the Bible doesn't use the words "triune" or "trinity." A church father named Tertullian used the word "trinity" for the first time that we know in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. It didn't find a formal place in the church though until the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. Jehovah's Witnesses consider that a consequential historical fact that bears heavily on the trinity debate, but it doesn't. It's utterly irrelevant to it.

I say that because though the Bible doesn't use the words "triune" or "trinity," it does clearly teach the reality that those words convey. A person who studies the Bible objectively and thoroughly will likely conclude that God is triune.

Suppose we know what I've taught about God being spiritual, self-existent, and eternal and that He wrote the Bible. That's all we know about Him but we believe it. Also suppose we study what the Bible teaches about Him and come across the following verses: Matthew 28:19; 2 Corinthians 13:14; 1 Peter 1:2; and Jude 20-21 to name a few. What questions, if we're thoughtful, would we ask? They'd likely include the following. Who are "the Lord Jesus Christ" and "the Holy Spirit?" Are they humans? Probably not because the manner in which they're listed with God suggests they're more than human. Are they then supernatural beings of some kind? If so, what kind of supernatural beings are they? What are they like and what do they do? Those texts would raise those questions in the mind of any thoughtful person, with limited knowledge, who read them.

Now suppose we continue studying the Bible and come across the following verses: Romans 9:5; 1 Corinthians 2:16; 8:6; 1 Thessalonians 3:11; 2 Thessalonians 1:8; 2:16; 1 Timothy 1:1-2; Titus 2:13; 3:4,6; Hebrews 1:2; 1:8; 1:10-12; 2 Peter 1:1; and Revelation 1:17; 5:8; and 5:13. They would teach us something startling about Jesus.

Let me exegete Hebrews 1:8 as an example of what I mean. The author of Hebrews quotes Psalm 45:6, which prophesies the coming of Messiah. Notice what that Psalm and this author's quote of that Psalm do. They call Jesus "God." That is characteristic of the other verses listed. They reveal either implicitly or explicitly that Jesus is God.

Also suppose in our study of Scripture, we come across verses like 1 Corinthians 2:10-11.

Verse 10 mentions the Holy Spirit and says that He "searches" (which means "knows") "the depths of God." The word "depths" in the Greek connotes the unfathomable things of God. Can any finite creature, including created spiritual beings like angels, search/know the depths of God? No, they cannot precisely because they are finite. Only an infinite being could search/know the depths of God. But the Holy Spirit does just that, which must mean that He is infinite.

In verse 11, Paul uses an analogy to explain what the Holy Spirit does. That analogy is a human person. The only one who can know the deepest thoughts of a person is the person himself. In the same way, Paul says, the only one who can know the deepest thoughts of God is the Holy Spirit. That clearly implies, consistently with the analogy, that God and the Holy Spirit are one in the same.

Let's go back now to our hypothetical situation. We study all the texts I've mentioned knowing about God only that He's spiritual, self-existent, and eternal. What would we conclude from all of those texts together if we were objective and thoughtful? It's one of two things.

First, we might conclude there are three equal Gods. Or we might conclude there are three persons, but for some reason the texts speak of them as if they are one and the same. Those are really the only two alternatives, but we can rule the first one out because the Bible makes it clear. There is one and only one God. We must conclude, therefore, that there are three persons, God (called "the Father" in many texts), Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, and that they are in some way one and the same.

That is in fact the case. God is Three but One. He is triune in other words. That means He is one being, one substance or essence, but with three persons.

Some theologians and writers, including A.W. Tozer, call this "Trinity in Unity." Trinity in unity means that we should neither confound the three persons nor divide their substance. We should not confound the three persons. We don't regard and treat them as one person but three distinct persons. But we also should not divide their substance. We don't regard and treat them as three beings but one. God is Trinity in Unity.

The three persons, by the nature of personhood, have a relation to each other. The Athanasian Creed articulated it this way: "In this Trinity, nothing is before or after, nothing is greater or less; but all three Persons coeternal, together, and equal."

Notice the word "equal" in that creed. None of the three persons is greater than the other two in authority, competence, or character. Jesus did say in John 14:28, "the Father is greater than I." But He didn't mean greater in authority, competence, or character. The old theologians explained it this way: "Equal to His Father, as touching His Godhead; less than the Father, as touching His manhood." That accurately expressed the reality. In His earthly body, Jesus was lesser than the Father in His position, as the God-man, but not in His person, as God. In His earthly body, Jesus was lesser than the Father in His position, but now, out of it, He is equal again.

It's helpful, for the sake of clarity, to think of the equality of the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit in these terms. Each of the attributes of God that we're learning belong to each of the persons of the Godhead. All three, for instance, are omnipotent or all-powerful and omniscient, or all-knowing. The Father, therefore, is no more powerful or knowledgeable than the Son or Holy Spirit are. All three persons possess all of the same attributes and all of the attributes they possess are perfect and infinite.

That reveals a mistake that we as believers in God sometimes make. We sometimes think and act as if one of the persons of the Godhead is more important than the other two. But we're misguided in doing so. We need to think and act as if each person is as important as the others because that is in fact the case.

Now, most secularists and many Christians operate under the assumption that our belief in the Trinity is just dogma. That is, it's something that we have to believe to be Christians, but it doesn't really matter much, in practical terms, that we do.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The belief in the Trinity dramatically and practically affects us and here's why. It's because we live in a Trinitarian universe. The material world and life in that world are an expression and thus a reflection of His nature. Since He is triune, we cannot thrive in that universe if we don't understand and respond to that fundamental characteristic of it. It's Trinitarian.

The most notable expression of God's triune nature is found in human relationships and communities. Relationships and communities form because we are personal beings. And we are personal beings because God who creates us is a personal being. And God is a personal being because He is triune.

Let me ask you a question. What did God do before He created something? Remember that He's eternal. That means that at one time and stretching back into infinity, He was alone. Nothing else existed, including angels. He has powers of consciousness and activity. So, what did He do with those powers?

If God is just one being with one person as Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons claim, then the answer is that He did nothing or almost nothing.

He didn't use His powers of consciousness to think about anything that currently existed because nothing did. He may have thought about Himself and what He would create but that was the extent of His consciousness.

And He also didn't use His powers of activity. He didn't exercise them to act on or engage anything that currently existed because nothing did.

I'd sum it up this way. We tell people to "get a life." That implies they don't have one, which sums up God's existence before He created angels – if He isn't triune. He didn't have a life because there were no objects to which to direct His powers of consciousness and activity.

But God is triune, which means He did have a life in the timeless eternity before the creation of anything. In John 17:24, Jesus gives us a glimpse into that life of His. He reveals that God the Father loved Him "before the foundation of the world." He gives us the further insight in verse 21 of that same chapter that God the Father and He are one. That Father is in the Son and the Son is in the Father. We can infer from the deity of the Holy Spirit that He has the same relationship with the Father and the Son that they have with each other.

That teaches us something profound about the triune God. He had a life before He created anything that exists. It was a life of perfect communion and love. By communion, I mean that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit thought and acted with regard to each other. By love, I mean that they thought and acted with regard to each other's will and joy.

Now, this life that God had can be summed up in the word "community." That is what the Trinity is. It's a community of persons thinking and acting with regard to each other. Let me share three quotes in that regard that open up the nature of that community to us.

The first quote is Dallas Willard's. He wrote one of the finest assessments of the Godhead that I've ever read. It's "a community of unspeakably magnificent personal beings of boundless love, knowledge, and power."

Neil Plantinga described that community this way: "At the center of the universe, self-giving love is the dynamic currency of the Trinitarian life of God. The persons within God exalt each other, commune with each other, defer to one another. Each person, so to speak, makes room for the other two."

Notice that the persons of the Godhead defer to each other. In an insightful essay he wrote, Frederick Bruner explained that deference this way: "One of the most surprising discoveries in my own study of the doctrine and experience of the Spirit in the New Testament is what I can only call the shyness of the Holy Spirit . . . . What I mean is not a shyness of timidity but the shyness of deference, the shyness of a concentrated attention on one another; it is not the shyness (which we often experience) of self-centeredness; but the shyness of other-centeredness." Or as we might say it, it's the shyness of love. Each person of the Trinity desires and seeks to draw attention to the other two.

Those quotes assist us in understanding the Trinitarian community. It's a community of persons who have a perfect and utterly fulfilling love for each other. It's a love in which each one defers and submits to the other two, desiring and seeking to please and esteem them. I want to emphasize that last thought. It's a love in which the persons involved defer and submit to the other two, desiring and seeking to please and esteem not themselves but the others instead.

Everything I've said about the Trinity to this point may sound merely academic and thus utterly impractical to you but it isn't. The implications to human life generally and to your lives and mine specifically are profound. The most profound implications are to human relationships.

Did you ever wonder, for instance, why God invented sex and created human beings so that they could experience it? He could have invented some other means of reproduction if He wanted to. The fact is that reproduction isn't the only or even primary purpose of sex.

Song of Songs 8:6 reveals its overriding purpose. That verse (best translated) says this about sex in marriage: "Its flashes are the flashes of fire, "The very flame of Yahweh." Note the two propositions here that Solomon articulates by way of metaphors.

One is that the flashes of sex in marriage are the flashes of fire. That's a metaphor of course. The Hebrew word translated "flashes" connotes intensity and energy. Solomon contends, therefore, that the intensity and energy of sex in marriage is like the intensity and energy of fire.

The second proposition is that the intensity and energy of fire are the intensity and energy of Yahweh. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have an intense and energetic love for each other. The intensity and energy of fire is like the intensity and energy that exist in the Trinitarian community.

Putting those two propositions together in the form of a syllogism reveals the meaning of the verse. Premise #1 – "The intensity and energy of sex in marriage is like the intensity and energy of fire." Premise #2 – "The intensity and energy of fire is like the intensity and energy of the Trinitarian community." Conclusion: "The intensity and energy of sex in marriage is like the intensity and energy of the Trinitarian community." That's the message of Song of Songs 8:6.

Sex in marriage, in other words, comes from the very nature of Yahweh Himself. The communal life of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is the pattern for the marriage relationship generally and the sexual aspect of it specifically. The implication is staggering. The one thing on earth that most closely resembles the nature of the Trinitarian community is the sexual union of a husband and wife who love each other deeply.

In reality then, sex in marriage is a reflex or expression of Yahweh's Trinitarian nature. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit reproduced the intensity and energy of their union and their love most vividly in the sexual aspect of marriage between one husband and one wife who deeply love each other permanently and exclusively.

Because sex in marriage is a reflex of Yahweh's Trinitarian nature, it's also a reflection or testimony of that nature. It points us to the depth and dynamism of the Trinitarian union and love. It does so of course imperfectly. Good sex in a healthy marriage is a reflection of that but as dynamic as it is, only a pale one. The intensity and energy of the Trinitarian union and love is beyond our ability to grasp it.

Song of Songs 8:6 has radical implications to human life. One of those is that sexual intercourse outside of marriage, in a relationship that isn't permanent and exclusive, is inconsistent with God's nature and thus a sin. What is beautiful inside of marriage is vile and even perverse outside of it. In the end, there is no such thing as "casual sex." Sexual intercourse outside of marriage and inappropriate sex inside it have dramatic and destructive physical, psychological, and most of all spiritual effects. The most destructive of those is that they defame God because they trivialize the Trinity. That's the most affecting consequence of all of the sexual sin we observe around us. It defames God because it trivializes the Trinity.

The nature of the Trinitarian community isn't just the pattern for marriage. It's the pattern for the church as well.

We need to be clear-minded about something. Jesus came not just to save individuals, but also to form those individuals into a community of people that resembles the divine community of the Godhead. The church, in other words, is also a reflex and reflection of the Trinitarian community. It's an expression and testimony of that community.

Jesus Himself teaches us that in John 17:20-21. He describes the community that disciples of friends of Jesus form in terms of union. Hear this and this is God's aspiration for our own local fellowship. It's that we be united in relationship as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are.

Remember what that relationship involves. It's a love in which each person of the Trinity defers and submits to the other two, desiring and seeking to please and esteem them. To be one as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are means just that. You and I as individuals defer and submit to our brothers and sisters in Jesus in practical ways, desiring and seeking to please and esteem them not us.

That is the kind of community Jesus came to form and it's a supernatural one. It's unlike any other that exists in the world. It's observably different in these ways to name a few. The individuals who make it up can be counted upon generally to do what is right. They never purposely attack and harm each other. They desire and seek to esteem each other. They regard each other as more important than they are. They act sacrificially to pursue the well being and joy of each other. They compromise their preferences, opinions, and rights for the sake of peace. They're patient with the failings and weaknesses of each other. They rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. They delight in each other, and on it goes. That's what the community that Jesus came to form looks like and as you can see, it's a unique one among earthly communities. It's characterized by the absence of harm and the presence of help, which make peace and hope prevail among its members.

Many believe that the creation of such a community is beyond reach in this fallen world of ours, but it isn't. History proves it so. In 125 A.D., the Christian philosopher Aristedes described the exuberant and joy-filled community of believers that Jesus had formed. His words are both stirring and challenging at the same time: "They walk in all humility and kindness, and falsehood is not found among them, and they love one another. They despise not the widow, and grieve not the orphan. He that hath distributeth liberally to him that hath not. If they see a stranger, they bring him under their roof, and rejoice over him as if he were their own brother: for they call themselves brethren, not after the flesh, but after the Spirit of God; but when one of their poor passes away from the world, and any of them see him, then he provides for his burial according to his ability; and if they hear that any of their number is imprisoned or oppressed for the name of their Messiah, all of them provide for his needs, and if it is possible that he may be delivered, they deliver him. And if there is among them a man that is poor and needy, and they have not an abundance of necessaries, they fast two or three days that they may supply the needy with their necessary food."

The community behind that description was remarkable. It was a community in which love, peace, and joy prevailed among the ones who composed it. Our challenge is to make our community of believers, our family of God, just like that one.

Such a community is possible but only when those who compose it are disciples and friends of Jesus. Nominal Christianity doesn't create such a community. But Biblical Christianity does. So let's do our part. Let's apprentice ourselves to Jesus, learn and apply our *Disciples 'R' Us* curriculum to our lives, and grow in Christlikeness. The Holy Spirit will create among us an earthly community that's like the divine community if we do.

That community then becomes our most powerful witness for Jesus and His gospel in the world. Jesus Himself makes that quite clear in John 17:21. After praying that His followers would be one like the Father and He are, He declares, "So that the world may believe that you sent me." I wrote a little note in my Bible beside this verse. It says, "The unity of God's people is the final apologetic." Do you know what an apologetic is? It's something that persuades someone that Jesus is real and that His gospel is true. In that regard, the most convincing apologetic to non-Christians is the unity of Christians and the love they have and demonstrate for each other.

After the Apostolic Age ended at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, Christians that made up local churches were characterized by a striking unity and love. It was a unity and love the likes of which the world had never seen.

The world of course took notice. Julian the apostate, a fierce opponent of Christianity and the church, admitted concerning Christians that "the godless Galileans fed not only their poor but ours also." Tertullian wrote the love of Christians was so exemplary that the pagan world confessed in astonishment, "See how they love one another." History does prove that the unity and love of Christians is the final apologetic.

I point out in closing out this fourth attribute of God that the original source of the church's unity and love is in the Trinitarian nature of God. It truly is a Trinitarian universe. The material world and life in that world express and reflect the Godhead of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

### #5 - God Is Omnipotent

The next attribute of God, along with His love, is probably the most widely known. It is so because of what Paul observes in Romans 1:20. It's that the world around us so clearly and constantly displays this attribute of His.

I'm referring of course to His omnipotence. God is omnipotent or "almighty," a word that the KJV Bible uses of Him 56 times. That means that He's all-powerful or as Paul says it in Romans 1:20, He's eternally powerful. His power is limitless in other words.

The Bible celebrates His omnipotence in many texts. Genesis 18:14; Job 42:2; Jeremiah 32:17, 27; Matthew 19:26; and Revelation 21:22 are a sampling of those texts.

That God is omnipotent doesn't mean that He can do anything. The fact is that there are some things He can't do. A well-worn old question is meant to convey just that. Can God make a rock so big that He can't lift it? If the answer is "Yes," there's something He can't do, lift the rock. If the answer is "No," there's something He can't do, make a rock that big. God cannot do illogical or contradictory things.

Or consider this. Can God make someone who doesn't love Him love Him? No, He cannot. Love by definition means that someone freely cares about and pursues the well being of someone else. The moment God "makes" someone love Him, it's no longer love but compulsion.

That explains, partially at least, the presence of evil in the world. God cannot make creature with the capacity to love without also making them with the capacity not to love. The first, by definition, requires the second. The inherent danger is that is an obvious one. The creature may choose not to love and thus, evil is born. We know from Scripture that did in fact happen, in the Garden of Eden.

That illustrates what God's omnipotence doesn't mean. It doesn't mean that He can do anything. He can't do illogical or contradictory things.

What then does it mean? It means that He possesses limitless power. His power is quantitatively and qualitatively infinite. Perhaps the best way to grasp the awe-inspiring power of His is to identify its implications. Consider four of those.

One is that His power must at least exceed all the power that exists in the material and spiritual worlds.

Think of the power that exists in the spiritual world. That world is inhabited by spiritual creatures we call angels, who have mind-boggling powers. Think more particularly of the power that archangels like Gabriel, Michael, and Satan possess. Since God created them and still has the same power after doing so than before, He logically must possess more power than they do combined, which is in fact the case. Ponder all the power that all the angels and all the demons, including Satan, possess. God's must at least be greater than the sum total of theirs.

That means of course that Satan is no match for God in terms of power. Consider my physical power as opposed to the physical power of Patrick Willis. Willis is a linebacker for the San Francisco 49ers and is considered the strongest player in the NFL. His power so exceeds mine that the difference is almost absolute. Now consider God's power as opposed to Satan's. God's power, which is infinite, so exceeds Satan's, which is finite however great it is, that the difference is literally absolute. Satan's power is far closer to mine than it is to God's.

Now let's think of the power that exists in the material world, our universe. When I say power, I'm speaking in terms of energy. Some years ago, nine satellites recorded a burst of gamma radiation deep in space. It lasted for only 1/10 of a second but in that instant, emitted as much energy as the sun does in 3000 years. If the sun suddenly emitted that same amount of energy, planet earth would vaporize instantly. It would simply and suddenly disappear. But that gamma radiation burst is just a drop in the ocean in terms of all the energy that exists in the universe.

Once again, God created the power or energy in that gamma radiation burst and all the energy that exists in the universe. Since He did and since He still has the same energy after doing so as He did before, His energy must at least be greater than the sum total of all the energy that exists in the universe.

Notice I used the words "at least" in the previous analysis. His power at least exceeds all the power that exists. But it obviously does far more than exceed it because it's limitless.

The second implication of God's omnipotence is this. All of His acts are effortless. Notice I said "all," which includes the greatest of His acts. They're done without any effort at all on His part.

What is your favorite miracle in the Bible, if you have one? The greatest of those is obviously creation. God, using the energy that only He possesses, created all the matter (every single atom and molecule) that exists in the universe in the form in which it originally existed.

Genesis 1:1, for instance, records that He "made the stars." Our sun is a star and it's huge. We could fit 1 million planet earths inside it. Yet, the largest known star is 1540 times larger than our sun. There are of course a countless number of stars. There are 100,000 million, for instance, in our galaxy, the Milky Way alone. God made each and every one of those, with the staggering power and energy that each possesses.

But He did so effortlessly. Blink your eye or raise your index finger. Calculate the minimal effort it took to do that. Since God's power is limitless, it took more effort for you and I to blink our eyes or to raise our index finger than it did for Him to create all of those stars.

That demonstrates that all of God's acts are effortless. Everything He does is without even the slightest exertion or strain, including creating and sustaining the universe.

There's a third implication of God's omnipotence. The first is that His power must at least exceed the power of what He created. The second is that all of His acts are effortless. The third is that He can do anything as easily as anything else.

In 2 Kings 6:1-7, God caused a valuable ax head that had been lost in the Jordan River to float to the surface to be retrieved. In Joshua 10:12-14, God caused the earth to quit rotating on its axis. We would certainly judge the magnitude of the second miracle to be greater than the magnitude of the first. But God stopped the earth from rotating on its axis as easily as He caused the ax head to float. The moral of the story is that He can do anything as easily as anything else.

A fourth and final implication of God's omnipresence is that nothing is too difficult for Him to do. That's how Jeremiah 32:17 says it. Nothing is too difficult for Him to do. Again, He cannot do logically contradictory things at the same time. But apart from that He can do anything.

Think of it this way. God has all the power He needs to do anything that He wills. Anything that He wills, He has the power to do. He willed to make the ax head float and to make the earth stop rotating and had the power to do it. Jesus said it well in Matthew 19:26, "*With God all things are possible.*"

Let's talk now about what that means as a practical matter, as it relates to our universe and our lives in it. Dallas Willard explains what it means this way. God is the absolute master of the ultimate foundations of all reality. He completely controls all the ultimate foundations of the visible world, the universe, and the invisible world, the heavenly places. Let's focus on the visible world, our universe.

I have a question for you. What runs our universe? Most people, secularists at least, would say that natural laws do. That's what they call them – natural laws. Those laws consist of formulas and equations that comprise different sciences including chemistry, physics, and biology.

Let's think about some of those natural laws, as they're expressed technically or even colloquially.

What goes up must come down. I've said that and heard people say it many times in my life. That refers of course to the law of gravity. No matter how hard Miguel Cabrera hits a baseball, it will eventually fall to the ground.

Matter can be neither created nor destroyed. That is one of the laws of Thermodynamics. Thus, all the atoms that made up Alexander the Great's body still exist. All the atoms that made up Noah's Ark still exist.

Unless an outside force acts upon a moving object, friction will eventually cause it to stop moving. That expresses a law of physics that can be stated much more technically than that but that's the gist of it. Thus, if I'm on a level surface and quit pedaling a bike, it will eventually stop moving.

Those are just samplings of a whole host of natural laws that we experience many times every day of our lives.

But here's what I want you to see. Those aren't really natural laws. They are simply phenomena. The word "law" suggests that they govern the universe, that they direct how things go and work, but they don't.

All of those things are nothing more than God's power operating. His power operates uniformly, in the same way all the time. It has a regular pattern in other words. Scientists observe or discover some particular aspect of that pattern and call it a law. But it isn't a law. It's simply a phenomenon of God's power at work.

Thus, there really is no law of gravity. There is a phenomenon of gravity. Cabrera hits a long ball 450 feet and it comes down into the bullpen. That isn't the law of gravity at work. That's the power of God at work.

God's normally uses His power uniformly, which is why human beings can practice "science." But He can and sometimes does alter the way that He normally uses His power. When He does, what we call a "miracle" occurs. A miracle is God modifying the way that He uses His power to work.

Let's go back to Joshua 10:12-14. The earth rotates on its axis because of what we call certain laws of physics. But remember that these laws are just phenomena. They are ways that God works through His power. On that day 3,000 years ago, He modified the way that He worked for the period of time that verses 12-14 encompassed. The laws of physics that were evident in the rotating of the earth during that period of time were different than they were before then and they have been since. It would be the equivalent of Cabrera hitting a fly ball that stayed in the air for six hours and then dropped.

Let's consider one other miracle to illustrate this. Deuteronomy 8:4 says that the clothing of the Israelites did not wear out during the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. Clothing wears out because the molecules that make them up break down. God altered the way that His power worked and the molecules that made up the Israelites clothing didn't wear out as a result. The atoms that comprised those molecules were more tightly bound together than they normally are.

That then is what the omnipotence of God is all about. He has limitless power. He has all power. And He exercises that power in and through all the laws, formulas, and equations of our universe. He has absolute mastery and control over the ultimate foundations of it.

Let's talk now about the implication of God's power to us. That implication is that he shares it with us. This sharing of His power is called "enhancement."

Enhancement manifests itself in two ways. One is in actions on our part that are beyond the natural. We say and do things that are beyond our normal abilities to say and do. The other is in the effects of our actions that are beyond the natural. The results of what we say and do are beyond what would normally occur.

One of Jesus' best friends, Frank Laubach, explained the dynamics of this well via his own experience: "I feel simply carried along each hour, doing my part in a plan which is far beyond myself. This sense of cooperation with God in little things is what astonished me. I must work, to be sure, but there is God working along with me."

That is precisely how God shares His power with us. We routinely move through our days in a power that is beyond us. He is right there working along with us. We say and do things as a result that are beyond our own natural abilities. Or the effects of the things we say and do are beyond what would naturally occur. Examples abound.

A person from our church had to confront an adult child of hers about a sin in her life that was diminishing the lives of her children, the person's grandchildren. She prayed before she did that the Holy Spirit would empower her to speak clearly, truthfully, and lovingly and that He would inhabit her words so that her daughter would receive, not reject them.

He answered her prayer. She felt strangely confident as she spoke to her daughter and found herself saying things that seemed to be beyond her own wisdom and understanding. Even so, she expected a backlash from her daughter, who, like most people, was sensitive to criticism. But to her surprise, her daughter listened attentively to what she said, began to cry, and asked for her help to overcome this habitual problem she faced. She later commented that it was as if she weren't speaking to her daughter, but as if God were speaking to her through her.

Or consider "Uncle Bud" Robinson. Robinson was born in a log cabin in the primitive mountain region of Tennessee. He was saved at a camp meeting and that same night felt God calling him to preach. He had no education, suffered various physical ailments, and stuttered so badly he could hardly tell his name. Yet, it's estimated that he traveled over 2,000,000 miles, preached over 33,000 sermons, and witnessed more than 100,000 conversions during the years of his ministry.

God clearly shared His power with that mother and Bud Robinson – and He'll do the same with us. He'll enhance our actions and their consequences, just as He has those of countless Christians through the ages. He'll work in, through, and for us.

But there's a condition we must meet before He'll do so. Jesus identifies what that is in John 14:12, "He who believes in Me, the work that I do, he will do also; and greater works than these he will do; because I go to the Father." Jesus promises that Father God will empower them to do His works, but only if they "believe." The belief to which He refers here has two components.

One is a mental component. Belief is an interior act of the mind that believes that something is so. In this case, that something is that Jesus is the greatest and best – utterly good, smart, competent, and divine – and that His person, words, and life matter, in practical terms, more than anyone and anything else do.

The belief to which Jesus refers in John 14:12 has a second component – a directional component. It directs two things.

First, it directs how we perceive and interpret the activities, experiences, and events of our lives. If we truly believe that Jesus is the greatest and best, we'll perceive and interpret them primarily in terms of Him. We'll view them primarily as they relate to Him – to His purposes and concerns.

I perceive and interpret my wife's cancer, for instance, primarily in terms of Jesus and only secondarily in terms of her and me. I consider His purposes and concerns as being more important than hers and mine are.

But our belief that Jesus is the greatest and best doesn't just direct how we think. It directs how we act as well. We take Him primarily into account in everything we do. We routinely behave in our everyday lives as if He is utterly good, smart, competent, and divine. Believing that He is those things, we also believe that it's safe and best to do what He says. And believing it's safe and best to do what He says, we just do it.

Jesus says that we should yield our preferences, opinions, and rights to others for the sake of peace. Knowing that He's the greatest and best, we know it's safe and best to do that, and so, we do it.

In summary, God is omnipotent. His power is limitless. And He shares His power with His people so that they can become and do what He wants them to become and do in their lives on earth.

#### #6 - God Is Omnipresent

I'd introduce the sixth attribute of God with a brief anecdote. I was on the website of a puzzled person named Ronald Lewis. You'll understand why he was puzzled when I read what he wrote: "Apparently researchers at Berkeley and Princeton Universities have figured out a way to be in two places at once. As you'll see from the image, I received a visit recently from one user logged at two separate locations (with two separate IPS, even): Berkeley, California and Princeton, New Jersey. How do we even begin to explain this oddity? I'm still scratching my head, because there isn't a logical explanation for this . . . considering the data presented above."

Lewis is puzzled because of a fundamental truth of our existence. A person can't be in two places at once. We often wish we could, when we have too many things to do, but we can't. We are always, at every moment of our lives, in one place at once.

But while that's a fundamental truth of our existence, it isn't of God's. In fact, He is right now, as I speak, in two places at once, or more precisely, in every place at once, which introduces a sixth attribute of God that we need to know. He's omnipresent.

Both the Old and New Testaments teach the omnipresence of God. Let's examine three passages in the Old Testament and one passage in the New that do.

The first Old Testament passage is 1 Kings 8:27. This verse is part of Solomon's prayer of dedication for the newly built temple. God would manifest His presence in a special way in that temple. But Solomon was quick to acknowledge that He wasn't only there, "Heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain You, how much less this house which I have built." Try to pour all of the water from Lake Milton into a glass and you'll grasp what He's saying. Just as the water from Lake Milton fills and overflows the glass, so God's presence fills and overflows the entire universe.

The second Old Testament passage is Psalm 139:7-8. There's a country song titled *If You Leave Me, Can I Go with You?* According to verse 7, if that title were about God and us, it'd be *If You Leave Me, I'll Be Where You Go*. We can't get away from Him because He always is wherever we go. Verse 8 drives that point home by mentioning the two places that are furthest apart, further apart even than the opposite ends of our universe – Sheol and heaven. God is in both of those places at once.

Jeremiah 23:23-24 is a third Old Testament passage. In verse 23, Jeremiah says that God is always right where you and I are, wherever that may be. The first line in verse 24 tells us the implication of that. We can't hide ourselves from Him. The last line in verse 24 makes the same point Solomon did. He's not only where we are but everywhere in the universe as well.

The New Testament passage is Acts 17:27-28. In the previous verses, Paul describes the one true God, Yahweh, to a group of Greek philosophers. He identifies several characteristics of His including this one in verse 28, "for in Him we live and move and exist." Paul is speaking literally not metaphorically here. You and I live our everyday lives literally in God.

Ole Hallesby uses an instructive analogy to capture the gist of this: "The 'air' which our soul needs also envelops all of us at all times and on all sides. God is around about us on every hand. All we need to do is open our heart." We are immersed in the air we breathe. It envelops us on all sides. In the same way, we're immersed in the presence of God. He envelops us on all sides.

What is true of us is true of everyone and everything else that exists. Jesus' wonderful little saying about the birds in Matthew 10:29 assumes that to be so. Every time a bird lights on the ground and takes off again, it does so in God's presence. The bottom line is that everything from the biggest star to the atom is immersed in God's presence.

Those passages reveal with clarity one of the attributes of God that go to His utter competence. It's that He's omnipresent. That's a good word to describe this quality of His. Let's break it down into its component parts and you'll see what I mean. The word "present"

means "here." The prefix, "omni," refers to universality. In this case, it connotes "everywhere." Putting the word and prefix together defines well what omnipresent means. God is everywhere "here." 225 miles from here, Pastor Steve Savage can correctly say to the people of Van Wert Friends Church, "God is here." At the same time, I can correctly say to you, "God is here." God is everywhere "here." He is always everywhere present with His entire being at the same time.

That "everywhere" includes all places. It's estimated that there are 10,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 planets in the universe. There are so many "places" on all of those planets together that we couldn't conceive let alone count them. Nevertheless, God is, right now as I speak, in all of those places at once. That means, of course, that He isn't localized. He isn't confined to one place at once like we are. On the contrary, He is always in all of the places in the universe at once.

But "everywhere" includes more than just all places. It also includes all space. Stop and think about how much space there is in the universe. 10,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 planets are a lot of planets to be sure – but not in the context of our universe.

According to some astronomers, the distance from the earth to the observable edge of the universe is about 45 billion light years. One light year equals 5,880,000,000,000 miles. Multiply that number by 45 billion and that's the distance from the earth to the observable edge of the universe. But the universe is far bigger than that mind-numbing figure, which means that most of the universe is space. But here's what I want you to see. None of it is empty. It's all, and I mean "all," filled – with the presence of God. He inhabits literally every square inch of the space in the universe. There's no such thing as empty space.

So that's what it means that God is omnipresent. He is everywhere "here." He is always everywhere present with His entire being at the same time. "Everywhere" includes all of the places in the universe. He is in all of those places at once. "Everywhere" also includes all of the space in the universe. He inhabits every square inch of it.

Now, that is one of the Bible's most staggering revelations about God. It's remarkable and we need to do two things in response to it.

First, we need to think straight. Unfortunately, many Christians don't. They think crooked instead. I know that because of the things they say.

I saw one of those black billboards that are from God. You know the ones that I'm talking about. They have a statement on it that is signed "God." This one said, "Don't make me come down there – God." That implies that He isn't down here already but up there. Then there's something I've heard many Christians say and said myself. It's that "My prayers don't seem to be getting beyond the four walls."

That implies that they have to get beyond the four walls for Him to hear because that's where He is – beyond the four walls.

Along those same lines, I've counseled many Christians struggling with loneliness who talk about being alone or being by themselves. That's how they say it, "I'm alone" or "I'm by myself"? They imply when they do that no one, including God, is with them.

Those statements show that many Christians, in reality, think crooked. They suppose that God is in what Paul calls the heavenly places and that those heavenly places are far from us. He's way out there someplace, in other words, and there is a vast amount of space between Him and us and that space is empty. That means that He's far removed from our everyday lives and us. Certainly, He does come to help us here and there when we need it. But then when He's done helping us, He returns to where He was – way out there someplace.

That's a devastating way to think though. It makes closeness and intimacy with God psychologically impossible. So, don't think that way about Him. Think straight instead, as if He's omnipresent, because He is. We think straight by doing two things.

First, we personalize the details about God's omnipresence that we've learned and continue to learn. That means that we identify what their specific implications are to our lives and us. Doing that requires reflection and thought but it's worth it, believe me.

Take the fact that God inhabits every square inch of space. I've personalized that. He inhabits every square inch of space *around me*. He envelops *me* just as thoroughly as the air around me does. Consequently, it's from the space immediately around me, not from above, that He watches me and acts for me. It's from "here" that He does so not from "out there." That means that the universe is a safe place for me to be because I'm not acting and being acted upon in isolation. I'm acting and being acted upon in the immediate presence of the utterly lovely and competent God who loves me.

We think straight by doing a second thing. We purposely and routinely place our minds on the details of God's omnipresence and their implications to us. We think constantly about them during the day.

When I take my dogs outside to "go night-night potties," for instance, I almost always look up at the stars and "consider" them as Jesus says it in Matthew 6. And I often contemplate the fact that He is fully "there," on each one that I see, and at the same time fully "here" with my dogs and me in my backyard.

Thinking straight in those two things considerably impacts us. It trains our minds so that we eventually have a constant and strong sense of

God's presence with us. That's what it's done for me at least. The first thing I do when I get up, for instance, is say, "Good morning God" and the last thing I say when I go to bed is, "Good night God." I now have such a strong sense of His presence that not acknowledging Him like that would seem rude, like not acknowledging my wife.

There's a second thing we need to do in response to God's omnipresence. The first is to think straight. The second is to act right.

I came across a poem titled *If Jesus Came to Your House*. It poses the hypothetical circumstance that Jesus appears in bodily form and comes to your house or mine. It asks two pointed questions in that regard. Would our behavior, the way we live our lives, change while He was with this? And would we be glad or sad when He finally left?

That little poem is certainly food for thought isn't it? Suppose that Jesus appears in bodily form and tells you or me that He's going to be with us 24 hours a day for the next week. I have a question for you, one that I've already asked myself. Would you talk and act differently than you normally do when He was with you? And if so, would you go back to talking and acting the way you normally do when He left.

If the answer to those questions is "yes," then one of three things is true. We don't understand the omnipresence of God. Or we understand it but don't believe it. Or we understand and believe it but don't care.

The objective fact is that the Jesus, and the other two persons of the Trinity, the Father and Holy Spirit, are with us 24 hours a day, every day of our lives. Whether we like it or not, they never leave us. If there is something that we wouldn't say or do in their presence, then we had better not say or do it because we are – in their presence that is. Understanding, believing, and caring about God's omnipresence is a spur to holiness. It compels us to act right.

Take watching a television program or movie as an example of what I mean. If Jesus were with us in bodily form, would we watch this program or movie in front of Him? The answer to that should determine what we watch because He is in fact with us.

Or consider responding to a person who insults us. If Jesus were with us in bodily form, what would we say and do in front of Him? The answer to that should determine what we say and do because He is in fact with us.

Or ponder buying a home. If Jesus were with us in bodily form, how much would we spend on it? The answer to that should determine how much we spend on it because He is in fact with us.

You get the idea. Act right. Only live the way we would – only say and do the things we would – if God were with us, because He is.

I close out our study of God's omnipresence with a thought. You and I can't be in two places at once. We can't be here and there at the same time. But God can be and is. He is in fact here, there, and everywhere. Hildebert of Lavardin though explained it far more exactly than that. He wrote what is the most precise description of God's omnipresence I've ever read. It goes like this: "God is over all things, under all things; outside all; within but not enclosed; without but not excluded; above but not raised up; below but not depressed; wholly above, presiding; wholly beneath sustaining, wholly within, filling." Let's think and act as if that's the truth – because it is.

### #7 - God Is Omniscient

Not long ago, I overheard one person say to another at a grocery store, "My father-in-law is a know-it-all." We're all well aware of what a know-it-all is. It's a person who obnoxiously purports to know more about a topic or subject than he or she really does.

But there is One who is, in the literal sense of the term without the censure that goes along with it, not a know-it-all but the only know-it-all. That One of course is God, which introduces us to His seventh attribute. He's omniscient.

To help us gain a meaningful grasp of God's omniscience, let's do this little exercise. Identify something that you know and when and how you came to know it.

I know, for example, that washing white clothes with dark clothes makes the white clothes dingy. When did I learn that? It was during my first semester in college. How did I learn it? For almost three months, I washed my white clothes with dark clothes and noticed them getting dingier and dingier. When I finally went home for Thanksgiving break, I asked my mother about it who laughed in disbelief and told me what I needed to know. Washing white clothes with dark clothes transfers color from the dark ones to the white ones.

That demonstrates two things. First, we at one time didn't know what we know now. And second, we know it because some person or some experience we had taught it to us.

But neither of those things is true of God because He's omniscient. Remember that He is spirit. He has consciousness without a brain and activity without a body. Omniscience has to do with the first of those, consciousness.

That God is omniscient means that He's all-knowing. Or to say it another way, His knowledge is limitless. The Bible teaches God's omniscience in

numerous texts including Psalm 139:1-6; Psalm 147:4-5; Jeremiah 51:15; Romans 11:33-34; and 1 John 3:19-20. Those texts teach us that God possesses perfect knowledge. He knows literally everything there is to know about literally everything everywhere including Himself. Anything that there is to know, He knows. There isn't anything there is to know that He doesn't know.

Let's take a peek at several of the things that God knows. These details assist us to appreciate the staggering nature of His omniscience.

Psalm 147:5 declares that "His understanding is infinite." Verse 4 illustrates that infinite understanding or knowledge of His. He "counts the number of the stars" and "gives names to all of them." Counting the number of stars suggests that He knows every star that exists. Giving names to them all suggests that He knows about the nature of every star. We can certainly infer that the knowledge described here extends to all the planets, asteroids, comets, and whatever other bodies exist in the universe.

I mentioned that there are approximately  $10$  to the  $22^{\text{th}}$  power stars in the universe. That is 1 followed by 22 zeroes, a number so large that we can't even begin to wrap our minds around it. According to Psalm 147:5, God knows that each and every one of those exists and knows everything there is to know about each and every one.

Psalm 56:8 reveals something else God knows. This is a lovely verse. It says that He puts all of our tears in a bottle and writes them in His book. The tear metaphor instructs us that He knows even the smallest details of our lives. Alluding to the metaphor itself, He knows every tear of every person that has been shed, is being shed, and will be shed. I saw a small child at White House farm fall down by the slide and cry. God knew that she fell down and cried.

Matthew 10:29-30 give us a final sampling of what God knows.

According to verse 29, He knows it when every bird lights on the ground and takes off again. Scientists estimate there are 100 billion birds in the world, which means that they light on the ground and take off again hundreds of billions of times a day. God knows every time each does.

According to verse 30 in Matthew 10, God also knows the very number of hairs on all the heads of all the people who live. It's estimated that there are 100,000 hairs on the average head. Suppose I gave you the task of counting all the hairs on all the heads of those who live in Mahoning County. How long would it take to do that? Verse 30 claims that God knows how many of those there are. But it isn't just the material things He knows. It's the spiritual or non-material things as well. We learn that from Psalm 139:1-6. The psalmist

claims that God knows one material thing about us and two spiritual things. The material thing is each time we sit down and stand up (verse 2). The spiritual things are our thoughts (verse 3) and the words we speak even before we speak them (verse 4). Verse 6 reveals the psalmists reaction to this. He's filled with wonder and appropriately so.

Let's consider our thoughts. Contemplate all the thoughts you've had in your minds from the time you were born until now. God knows each one. Also contemplate the thought you have right now, as I speak. God knows it. Now contemplate all the thoughts that you will have before you die. God knows each one. But it isn't just your thoughts and mine. It's those of all of the 110 billion people who've lived in human history.

The texts we've just examined give us only an inkling of what God knows. A.W. Tozer sums up the depth and extent of His knowledge well this way in his book *Knowledge of the Holy*: "God knows instantly and effortlessly all matter and all matters, all mind and every mind, all spirit and all spirits, all being and every being, all creaturehood and all creatures, every plurality and all pluralities, all law and every law, all relations, all causes, all thoughts, all mysteries, all enigmas, all feeling, all desires, every unuttered secret, all thrones and dominions, all personalities, all things visible and invisible in heaven and in earth, motions, space, time, life, death, good, evil, heaven, and hell." That's just a vivid way of saying that God is omniscient. He knows everything there is to know.

And He knows it perfectly. He knows no one thing better than any other thing but all things equally. I know law, for instance, better than I do interior design. But God knows both equally well. Omniscience, therefore, consists of what God knows, everything, and how He knows it, perfectly.

That He knows everything perfectly necessarily means that He has no need to learn. We can safely say in fact that He has never learned and never will learn because He cannot. That is one thing He can't do – learn. If He could learn, receive even one piece of information or knowledge that He didn't possess, He wouldn't be omniscient. That's why He never wonders about anything and never seeks information or asks questions in order to know something He doesn't know. He always asks questions instead for effect.

That He knows everything perfectly also means that He never discovers anything and is never surprised. I was surprised to learn that donkeys kill more people annually than airplanes do and that our finger nails grow faster in winter. God has never had that experience of mine. He never discovers anything and is never surprised because He knows it all. That is God's omniscience and its implication to us is profound.

Suppose that we began doing this in our group. Each Wednesday night, one of us would be selected to be totally honest and share with everyone in the group all of the worst things about him or her – past and present. Each of us would eventually take his or her turn in divulging his or her worst thoughts, feelings, motives, desires, and deeds. If coming to our group required our participation in that, how many of us would quit coming? Probably all of us would because let's face it, none of us want others to know the worst about us.

But why is that? Why don't we want others to know the worst about us? It's because we're insecure with each other. We operate under the assumption that if others knew the worst about us, they'd look down on us and outright reject us.

That's our fear and it's often a valid one. The truth is that most people, even in churches, will reject others when they come to know the worst about them. They not only hate the sins but in reality, despise the sinners and cast them out. They might not admit it, but they loathe them and want to have nothing to do with them. They may or may not be polite to them but either way, will most certainly exclude them from their "inner ring" to quote C.S. Lewis. Few people will continue respecting and caring deeply for those about whom they know the worst.

That explains what Rebecca Pippert calls "the law of acceptance." To be convinced that I have been accepted, I must be convinced that I have been accepted at my worst. That is the greatest gift an intimate relationship can offer. It's to know that we've been forgiven and accepted in the full knowledge of what we are and what we've done.

That the greatest gift an intimate relationship can offer, and exactly what God offers us. We need to bring two things constantly before us.

First, since He knows literally everything about us, He necessarily knows all the worst things about us. People are concerned about having skeletons in their closet. We have no such concern with God because we have no skeletons in our closet when it comes to Him. We don't need to "come out" to Him because we've always "been out." People worry about someone telling on them. We have no such worry when it comes to God because no one can tell Him about us what He doesn't already know. People fret about having something to hide and thus something to fear. But we have no such fretfulness when it comes to God because there's nothing about us that's hidden. God knows the worst about us.

But yet He loves us and exuberantly accepts us when we come to Him. That's the second thing we need to bring constantly before us. He eagerly enters into relationship with us – forgiving, communicating with, and transforming us despite what He knows about us.

I once counseled a married man who confessed multiple affairs, several of which were with prostitutes. He was wracked with guilt, his remorse being so deep in fact that he was suicidal. So, I explained to him the law of acceptance I just explained to you. I read 1 John 1:9 in that regard, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." I called his attention to the words "all unrighteousness" and explained that the word "all" encompassed each and every one of his affairs. I also explained to him that God wrote those words and knew that he was going to have those affairs when He did. The words "all unrighteousness," therefore, surely encompass them. I then exhorted him to ask God's forgiveness and decide to follow Jesus. God, who knew the worst about Him, would forgive and accept him if he did. So, he did just that, praying one of the most sincere prayers of confession and commitment I've ever heard.

The moral of the story is an inspiring one. To be convinced that we're accepted by someone, we have to be accepted at our worst. God, who knows everything, knows our worst and accepts us anyway when we decide to follow Him. No person has committed so many sins that God won't forgive and accept him upon repentance. Or no person has committed sins so bad that God won't forgive and accept him.

Our assurance of salvation rests on that fact. It's not uncommon for people who are sincerely following Jesus to have doubts that they're truly saved. That in turn tortures them psychologically. The celebrated 19<sup>th</sup> century Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard was a classic case in point. For several reasons, he constantly brooded over the painful question of how God was disposed toward him. "Does God wish we well or ill?" he wondered, "Will He save me or damn me?" That posture made him perennially morose, which is one of the reasons he was called "the gloomy Dane." He was not a happy man.

But you and I can be if we grasp the omniscience of God and the law of acceptance that accompanies it. Grasping that is the foundation of the assurance that we're saved.

### #8 - God Is All-Wise

God's omnipotence and omniscience are functionally related to each other and an eighth attribute He possesses. He's all-wise.

Divine wisdom is an emphasis of Scripture. Consider a sampling of texts that teach it.

Proverbs 8:22 teaches that Yahweh possessed "me" (wisdom) at the beginning of creation.

Daniel 2:19-23 reveals that wisdom is God's essence (verse 20) and that He has given it to anyone who has it (verses 21 and 23).

Romans 16:27 contends that Yahweh is "the only wise God." The words "only wise" indicate that God is wise in Himself and that all other wisdom (angelic and human) is a mere and pale reflection of His.

Finally, Colossians 2:3 declares that all the treasures of wisdom (the sum total of wisdom) reside in Jesus. Based on what we've learned about the Trinity, that necessarily means that the sum total of wisdom resides in the Father and the Holy Spirit as well.

God's wisdom, as is the case with all of His attributes, is infinite and perfect. It's limitless or measureless and it's full.

In Scripture, wisdom has a moral as well as a cognitive component. That is a central tenant of the Book of Proverbs. Wisdom is more than intelligence and knowledge on the one hand and cleverness and cunning on the other. It's those things harnessed to objectives or ends that are good and right.

J.I. Packer defines wisdom this way: "Wisdom is the power to see, and the inclination to choose, the best and highest goal, together with the surest means of attaining it." That is a precise and accurate definition. It identify three activities that together comprise wisdom. First, it sees what the highest goal is in a particular context. It grasps what objective achieves the greatest good. Second, it chooses that goal. It makes the decision to pursue it and does. And third, it sees and chooses the surest means for attaining it. It recognizes and employs the best possible means to achieve the goal.

God is all-wise in precisely that sense. His wisdom is infinite and perfect. That means three things.

First, He always sees the highest goal in every context. That highest goal is His own glory and then the highest good for the greatest number of people for the longest time.

Second, God always chooses the highest goal in every context. This choice of His comes from an attribute of His that we'll examine later – His goodness. Because He's good, He always makes the decision to pursue what glorifies Him and achieves the highest good for the greatest number of people for the longest time.

And third, God always sees and employs the surest means for attaining the highest goal. He always recognizes and employs the best possible means to achieve it. A better way to achieve the goal could not be found or the way He goes about achieving it could not be improved upon.

Wisdom of course is linked with power. Wisdom without power is pathetic. Power without wisdom is frightening.

Jim Carrey starred in a movie some years ago titled *Bruce Almighty*. God gives Carrey's character all of His power and assigns him the business of running life on earth. The problem is that God doesn't give him His wisdom and knowledge as well. Carrey's character, as a result, soon finds out how dangerous power without wisdom is. He begins answering people's prayers for instance. But he doesn't really know how to best answer them. So, he just gives everyone what they ask for, which in turn soon causes chaos in their lives particularly and human life generally.

It's true isn't it? Wisdom without power is pathetic and power without wisdom is frightening, especially when it comes to running the universe and life in it.

But in God, limitless power and wisdom are united, making Him capable of doing just that. We call God the Master of the Universe and that is literally so. He has the power, the knowledge, and the wisdom to run it masterfully, that is, perfectly. His wisdom is always active and never fails and I mean "never." I'd sum it up this way. God knows what He's doing. He always chooses and pursues the best possible good in the best possible way no matter what the setting or circumstance is.

God's wisdom, in conjunction with His knowledge and power, has an immediate and urgent application to us. We can and should trust Him. To trust Him means to be confident that He always knows and pursues the highest possible aim and always employs the best possible means in pursuing it.

Thus, whenever He allows or causes something to happen to us, good or bad, we believe He's doing just that – pursuing the highest possible aim. We believe He's acting or not acting to achieve the greatest possible good for the greatest number of people for the longest period of time.

I once counseled a distraught mother whose 28 year-old son had just been diagnosed with schizophrenia. She faced several problems, one of which was her anger with God for allowing it to happen. "What kind of God would allow such a horrible thing to happen?" she asked. She was bitter and on the verge of throwing in the towel of her Christianity. How would you counsel her? How would you answer her question, "What kind of God would allow such a horrible thing to happen?"

My answer to her was, "A wise God." I admitted that He did allow her son to become schizophrenic. But I told her that He was pursuing the highest possible aim or end in doing so. I also told her that we can't know His wisdom unless we know what that aim or end is.

And it's precisely there that people don't trust Him, in the aim or end He's pursuing. They have one of two problems with Him in that regard. They don't know what the aim or end is. Or they know it but have a different aim or end than He does.

Let's compare the general aim God pursues for people to the general aim they pursue for themselves.

Sociologist Tony Campolo claims that the chief aim of most people is to have a comfortable and trouble free life. Francis Schaeffer said it differently but the meaning is the same. He said the two highest values in American society are personal peace and affluence.

Many Christians have that same chief aim and in addition, project it on to God. They assume His chief aim for them is the same as theirs. They then become bitter and disillusioned when pain and discomfort come upon them. They conclude consciously or subconsciously that He isn't wise enough or good enough to achieve that aim.

But the general aim that God pursues for His people isn't a comfortable and trouble free life. It's something instead that's momentous in its implications to them.

Paul reveals what that something is in 2 Timothy 2:11-12. This text was part of a Christian hymn that was written in the first century. Notice what we who follow Jesus will do in verse 12. We'll "reign with Him."

John concurs in Revelation 22:1-5. This text describes our eternal life in heaven after the Second Coming of Jesus and our bodily resurrections. Verse 5 articulates in the same terms as Paul does what our destiny, generally, will be. It's to "reign forever and ever."

God will give us astonishing powers and the authority to use them to shape the very nature of heaven itself. In conjunction with God Himself and other Christians, we'll use our powers in mind-numbing creative enterprises that are unimaginable in their scope and effect and utterly enjoyable and fulfilling. That is what it means to reign.

That is our destiny and the highest aim that God pursues in our lives. God's overriding purpose in causing and allowing things to happen to us isn't to make our lives comfortable and trouble free. It's to prepare us to reign with Him in heaven. He always causes and allows things to happen with that ultimate aim in mind.

That does in fact explain many of the trials and tribulations we have. One author writes that the universe is a soul-making machine. That's just another way of saying that the primary purpose of our lives in the universe as it is now is to be made ready to reign.

The problem is that both the universe and those who live in it are fallen. Being that kind of people in that kind of universe, we can't be made ready to reign without adversity and pain. We must suffer adversity or pain to one degree or another in order to become persons who are ready to reign. If we weren't fallen, that wouldn't be so. But we are fallen and thus, it is so.

Joni Earekson Tada's testimony illustrates this. A swimming accident paralyzed her when she was 16 years-old, which was 48 years ago. She wrote an article for a Christian publication in which she stated that she's thankful for her paralysis. She commented that she wouldn't be the person that she is now, in terms of Christlikeness, if it hadn't happened.

That doesn't mean that God caused it to happen. Joni caused it to happen when she carelessly dove head first into shallow water. It does mean that God didn't prevent it from happening and for good reason. Joni will die with more power to reign because what happened did happen. She, according to her testimony, would have died with less power to reign if what happened hadn't happened. The larger point is that her paralysis doesn't mean God isn't wise.

I interpret the events that happen in my life, good and bad, through the lens of God's wisdom. I vividly remember my wife Jill's surgeon coming into her room and announcing that she had colon cancer. One of my first thoughts was what I've just explained. God did allow it to happen and was wise in doing so. It will achieve the highest of aims in her life and mine, which most certainly has to do with our reigning with Jesus in heaven. I believe that we'll be more prepared to do just that as a result of this occurrence in our lives.

One of America's most popular television shows in the 1950's was *Father Knows Best*. That title does accurately describes our heavenly Father and God the Son and Holy Spirit as well. Father God always and literally knows best. Why? It's because He's all-wise.

### #9 - God Is Transcendent

How many of you have a favorite number? What is it? My favorite number is "1". I always wore "1" on my baseball jerseys and always pick "1" in every game I play involving numbers. "1" is my favorite number because, in terms of nature, it's utterly unique among numbers. All other numbers are the same in that they're plural. But "1" and "1" alone is singular. It's literally the only one of its kind. In terms of nature, there is a bigger difference between "1" and "2" than there is between "2" and "10" or literally any other number no matter how high it is. That introduces, by way of analogy, the ninth attribute of God. He's transcendent.

Isaiah 6:1 gives us a glimpse into God's transcendence. Notice here that God is "lofty and exalted." That means lofty and exalted above everything else that exists in the spiritual or material worlds.

Isaiah 57:15 conveys the same idea. Isaiah declares there that God is "the high and exalted one." Again, he means high and exalted above everything else that exists.

The Bible's most stirring description of God's transcendence is found in Revelation 4:1-7. This text pictures a host of beings including 24 elders who probably represent a superior order of angels and 4 living creatures who probably represent the highest of all beings, perhaps the highest of all angels. It also uses vivid imagery to portray the unfathomable majesty and awesomeness of God. But notice a pivotal detail in verse 6. A sea of glass separates God from everything in the scene including the highest of all living creatures.

Notice the commonality in those three texts. It's that God is separate from literally everything else that exists in the material and spiritual worlds. When I say separate from, I don't mean spatially or even relationally. Spatially, we know that God fills the space around us. And relationally, we know that we can have an intimate relationship with Him.

When I say separate from, I mean in kind. He is a different kind of reality than literally anything else that exists. He is such an utterly special and unique kind of reality that nothing else is the same as Him or even the opposite of Him. Even human beings, who are made in His image, are in the end not even remotely like Him. They are less than remotely like Him. He is the only one of His kind, in other words, just like the number "1" is. Or as theologians say it, He is transcendent.

You might think of it this way. There are ultimately only two kinds of reality. There is that which is God and there is that which is not God. There is only one which is God. That one is Yahweh. There are trillions which are not God, including you, this building, the trees outside, Satan, Gabriel, and so on. God is transcendent, the only one of His kind.

An analogy helps explain this. Which is greater? Is it the difference between God and Gabriel, the highest of all angels? Or is it the difference between Gabriel and the slug in your garden?

The answer, from a Biblical point of view, is clear. As magnificent as Gabriel is and as primitive as the slug is, the difference between God and Gabriel is infinitely greater than the difference between Gabriel and the slug. That's because Gabriel and the slug are of the same kind. They are finite creatures. In contrast, God is the only infinite creator. He's transcendent in other words, the only one of His kind. He's a unique kind of reality, different than literally everything else is.

That includes Satan. Not being very thoughtful, I used to think that the opposite of God is Satan. But I realize now how wrong I was. Satan isn't the opposite of God because God has no opposites. For something to be the opposite of Him would mean that it is the same kind of reality that He is. But nothing is the same kind of reality that He is. So, Satan isn't the opposite of God. He is the opposite of Gabriel. The difference between God and Satan is infinitely greater than the difference between Satan and the slug. That's because God is the only one of His kind.

He is in three essential ways. First, He is infinite in all of His qualities and everything else is finite in theirs. Second, He is self-existent and everything else is created. And third, He is eternal and everything else is temporal.

And we need to "hallow" Him because He is, and I'm quoting Jesus in the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:9. That's our proper response to His "one of a kind-ness." The Lord's Prayer here consists of five requests. The very first of those is that people would hallow God.

Most people associate the word "hallow" with Halloween and ghosts. But it has an entirely different connotation with regard to God. It means to locate Him by thought and action as a separate and very special kind of reality. We uniquely respect him, that is, in a way that we respect no one or nothing else. We regard Him more highly than anyone or anything else. And because we do, we *view* and *respond to* everyone and everything else primarily in terms of Him not them.

Henry Blackaby relates a story that illustrates what I mean. A pastor friend of his divorced his wife, left his church and married a woman with whom he had been having an affair. Two years later, he asked Henry to meet with him and he did. His friend began to weep and confessed for the first time that he had sinned grievously against God, his wife, his children, and his church. He was sorry, he told Henry, and asked him to pray for him in that regard. To which Henry replied: "I will but let me tell you how I'm going to pray. I'm going to pray that God will forgive you but also that He will deal with you in such a way that anybody who sees the sin you committed won't do the same. I'm far more concerned about restoring His name in the hearts of people than yours. I care about you, but I want you to know that I care far more about what you have done to God."

Now, most people would have viewed and responded to that situation primarily in terms of the people involved – the pastor, his wife and children, and the church. But Henry didn't. Don't misunderstand me. He treasured the people. But he treasured God more. He thought and acted, therefore, primarily in terms of Him not them.

And that's what it means to hallow God. We locate Him by thought and action in a separate and very special kind of reality. We regard Him more highly than anyone or anything else. And because we do, we view and respond to everyone and everything else primarily in terms of Him. I'm diagnosed with an aggressive cancer. My thought isn't that I'm going to die. It's how I can glorify God as I do. I get a promotion at work. My thought isn't the money and prestige it brings me. It's how I can use that to serve God. That's the way it is with everything. My wife leaves me, I have to file bankruptcy, I graduate from college, I meet the girl of my dreams and so on. To hallow God means to regard Him so highly that we think and act in all those things primarily in terms of Him.

Let me ask you a personal question that you can answer to yourself. Do you truly hallow God? If you don't, you can and here's how. It's by seeing Him as He really is – one of a kind. Seeing Him as one of a kind requires that we build a purposeful and thorough vision of Him, which is precisely what we're doing in this part of our *Disciples "R" Us* curriculum. If we do that in a well-directed and unrelenting fashion, we'll eventually hallow Him.

A.W. Tozer told about a party of people who hiked in the Rocky Mountains, where a little girl somehow strayed away and got lost. Her parents of course became panic stricken when they discovered she was gone and searched frantically for her. They eventually found her safe and sound.

In discussing the incident later, the father said something that was quite revealing. He said that before his daughter was lost, he was just enraptured by the breathtaking beauty of his surroundings. His mind was lost in the utter majesty of what he saw. But the moment he discovered that his daughter was gone, he didn't even notice it. He treasured her far more than he did the mountains in other words. And because he did, he thought and acted primarily in terms of her, not them.

That same thing will happen to us once we see God as the one of a kind that He really is. He and not the people and things around us will dominate the landscape of our thoughts and acts. As the words of the great old hymn say it, "And the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace." When they do, we'll naturally and consistently view things and respond to them primarily in terms of Him.

And that is our deepest need. The deepest need of human life is to hallow God. I know most people think that's a ridiculous thing to say but it isn't. Nothing will go right for us until we grasp God's uniqueness and honor it in our everyday lives. We cannot have orientation and rightness in our lives until we do that. So let's do that. God is one of a kind. Let's think and act as if it's so.

## #10 - God Is Immutable

Our next attribute of God, the tenth, is that He's immutable. The general definition of "immutable" is "changeless." God is changeless.

God's immutability is an unmistakable Biblical teaching. Contrasting God with the ever changing world around him, the psalmist declares in Psalm 102:27, "But You are the same." God asserts concerning Himself in Malachi 3:6, "For I, Yahweh, do not change." The author of Hebrews states in 13:8 of his letter that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." And finally, James calls God "the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow." Those verses teach that God is devoid of change. He's immutable.

His immutability goes primarily to His nature and the particular attributes that comprise it. His nature never changes. What He is like now, He has always been like and always will be like.

Human beings of course are quite different in that regard. We are ever changing in terms of our nature, defined as character. There is a term that the secular and Christian worlds apply to this change. It's "spiritual formation." Spiritual formation is the process by which the self that we are, our character or inner dimensions, takes on a definite shape or form.

It's an observable fact of human existence. All of us have experienced spiritual formation, are experiencing it now, and will continue to experience it until the day we die. All of us have morphed, are morphing, and will continue to morph. Simply put, the human self that you and I are now is different than it was last month at this time. And it will be different next month at this time than it is now.

This change can be a good one. People can become better than they were and better than they are. I knew a young man in his 20's who was an irresponsible and overly impulsive person. He couldn't hold down a job for more than a year or so and couldn't be counted upon. But now, in his 50's, he's a responsible hard working businessman who has succeeded in his profession. The change in the self that he was is remarkable and good. He illustrates that people can become better than they were.

But just as people can change for the better, they can change for the worse as well. I'll never forget a young man named Randy who entered Malone College as a freshman with me. He was one of the most conscientious and hard working students on our dormitory floor. He never once skipped a class the entire year and always did studies as vigorously and capably as he could. But in his second year at Malone, he rejected his faith, skipped classes, and became a party animal. We were all puzzled by this dramatic change of his.

It's indisputable. Human beings are capable of dramatic change. It's possible for them to take on positive or negative qualities they didn't have. They can become different people than they were, that is, better or worse people.

But that is absolutely and positively not true of God. He is devoid of change in His nature or character.

Think about what change in the nature or character of any being entails. It's three things. One is coming to possess positive qualities that weren't possessed. Another is coming to no longer possess negative qualities that were possessed. And still another is the maturing of a quality possessed so that it's improved upon.

But God, because He's perfect and infinite, experiences none of the three. Since He's perfect, He already possess all the positive qualities that it's possible for a being to possess and none of the negative qualities that it's possible to possess. And since He's infinite, the positive qualities He possesses cannot mature or be improved upon. He's immutable in other words.

That implies that He never differs from Himself. He cannot change for the worse. He cannot become a lesser person in any way than He is now. He cannot become less loving or less holy, for instance. He also cannot change for the better. He cannot grow or develop. He cannot become an improved person in any way He is now. He cannot become more loving or more holy, for instance.

The 11<sup>th</sup> century monk and church prelate Anselm summed up this attribute of God well. He wrote: "All that God is He has always been, and all that He has been and is He will ever be."

That is the immutability of God and its practical implication to us alters the very substance of our lives. That implication is that we can rely on God. We can count on Him without any reservations at all.

Think of this in terms of people. Because people change, we can never rely on them completely. We can never be 100% sure, in other words, in our relationships with them.

Marriage illustrates what I mean. It's a risk isn't it? Consider this. A couple gets married. They will be different people, better or worse people, on their 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary than they were when they married. And they will be better or worse people on their 20<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> and so on. If they're better people, their marriage is blessed. If they're worse people, it's cursed.

Several abandoned spouses have told me they would never have dreamed when they married that their spouses would do such a thing. That's because the persons they were then would not have. But they've changed over the years and the persons they became would and did.

That's the way it is in all of our human relationships. There's always a measure of uncertainty and thus risk in them. They can change for better or for worse and if it's for worse, the people we can count on today, we won't be able to count on tomorrow. We can never rely on people completely. We can never be 100% sure in our relationships with them.

Some people have conceived gods that are the same way. Pagan religions and even Islam worship temperamental gods who regard and treat them according to whatever their whims may be at the moment.

But Yahweh isn't that way. We can rely on Him, count on Him, completely. He isn't going to love us more or less next year than He does now. He isn't going to be more or less good to us next year than He is now. He isn't going to be more or less merciful to us next year than He is now. His love, goodness, mercy, and every other attribute of His are perfect and infinite and thus incapable of even the slightest change. He isn't going to be our Friend today and our Foe tomorrow. There is total reliability in our relationship with Him, and in that, we rest.

### #11 – God Is Love

To this point, we've examined 10 attributes of God. He is spiritual, self-existent, eternal, triune, omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, all-wise, transcendent, and immutable. Those attributes reflect His competence. They reveal that there is not even the slightest incompetence in Him at all. On the contrary, He is utterly competent or capable.

We now address attributes of His that reflect His character. He is, in His character, just as lovely as He is competent. He is utterly lovely. The person and life of Jesus Himself flesh out that divine loveliness. Jesus, during His earthly life, was God embodied. Thus, we can see God's utter loveliness most vividly in the incarnational person and life of Jesus.

God has an attribute for which He is universally known. Even the most Biblically illiterate persons usually know this quality of His. I worked with a law clerk who had no Christian background of any kind and who knew almost nothing about God. But he did know and even believed that "God is love," and I'm quoting him what he said one day. Yes, he was right. God is love.

The Bible is saturated with God's love. It repeatedly articulates and narrates it from the beginning, Genesis 1:1, to the end, Revelation 22:21.

But it states it most precisely in 1 John 4:7-21. The theme of this text is that God loves us and demonstrated that He does by sending His Son, Jesus, in the flesh to suffer and die for us. Since He first loved us, we should love Him and others in return.

In the course of explaining that theme, John writes what is probably the most universally known statement about God in the Bible. It's found in verses 8 and 16, "God is love."

But while that's probably the most universally known statement about God, it's also probably the most misunderstood. Every secular person I've talked to about God and His love has misinterpreted what it means. They've taken the word "love" to be a predicate nominative and to mean that "God = love." That means they believed that God's essential nature is love and that everything else that is true about Him is secondary and subservient to that essential nature.

That's what most secular people believe and their confidence lies in doing so. Since every other quality of His, including holiness and righteousness, are secondary to love, they need not anticipate harm from Him no matter how they live. They'll experience His goodwill and benefits whether they intend and try to obey Him or not.

Sadly, they're in a state of denial and are deceiving themselves. When John writes that "God is love," he doesn't mean that "God = love." That interpretation is heresy in fact. That's because if "God = love," then "love = God" and that cannot be. If "love = God," then love is on the same plane as God is. We should worship and serve love just as we worship and serve God. But that isn't the case. As we've learned many times in our study thus far, nothing equals God. God has no equals or opposites. There would be multiple God's if He did.

My point is a simple one. It's wrong to view love as God's essential nature to which every other attribute of His is secondary or subservient. It clearly isn't true that "God = love."

The word "love" in verses 8 and 16 is not a predicate nominative but a predicate adjective. Thus, the statement "God is love" doesn't equate love with God. It just identifies love as one of His attributes. Love isn't God. Rather, it's something that's true of God. That means that His love doesn't supersede any of His other attributes.

That reveals the catastrophic mistake that secular people make. They assume that God only acts in His love. But He doesn't. He always acts in all of His attributes together. His love does find expression in everything He does. But so do all of His other attributes. Whenever He acts in His love, for instance, He also acts in His holiness. Or whenever He acts in His holiness, He also acts in His love. God never acts only in His love.

The confidence of secularists is thus misplaced. When they enter into eternity, God will respond to them not only in His love but in His holiness and righteousness as well. God never suspends His other qualities to exercise His love. He always acts like Himself instead, with all of His qualities working perfectly and harmoniously together.

But having said that, I'd also say this. The "God is love" is one of the Bible's most heartening revelations. Knowing and experiencing His love is the apex of human experience both now in this life and forever in the life to come. As Tozer describes it, "To know God's love is indeed heaven on earth." What makes life abundant now on earth? It's experiencing God's love. What makes life full then in heaven? It's experiencing God's love far more deeply than we do now. If we had every other experience possible to its fullest possible extent, except God's love, life would be empty now and forever.

That being true makes clear what we need to do. First, we need to understand God's love. And second, we need to experience it. We experience God's love by engaging Him, which we'll learn how to do later in our "The First Commandment" study. We understand God's love by studying what the Bible teaches us about it, which we'll do now.

Deuteronomy 7:1-8 teaches us the foundational truth about God's love. In verses 7-8, God explains to the Israelites why he loved them. There is a long sentence that begins in verse 7 and ends in verse 8. In it, God declares "I love you because I love you." He didn't love them because they were great, powerful, and culturally developed. These verses state that they were in fact just the opposite: smaller, weaker, and less culturally developed than the nations that inhabited Canaan. He loved them because He loved them.

The Bible teaches that the same thing is true of us. God loves us because He loves us. He doesn't love us because we're so attractive, talented, or good. He loves us only because He loves us.

But what kind of explanation is that? What does it mean? It means that there isn't anything about us that compels God to love us. There is something about Him that makes Him love us. As 1 John 4:8, 16 says it, He is love. His love doesn't proceed from some merit or quality in the ones He loves whether it's intelligence, looks, talent, influence, goodness, and so on. It proceeds from His own nature instead and that is the foundational truth about His love. It proceeds not from the nature of whom or what He loves, but from His nature instead. He loves us because He loves us. He loves us not because we're lovely but because He is love.

That is a confidence building, relationship sealing, and hope generating reality. It means three remarkable things.

First, He loves everyone. He never considers whether or not a person is worthy of being loved. Worth has nothing to do with it. He just loves everyone, including you and me, because He can't help Himself so to speak. He can't resist His own impulse to love us. His love is wholly indiscriminate. He has loved every person who has ever lived, loves every person who lives, and will love every person who will ever live.

Second, God loves everyone equally. He doesn't favor any one person over any other in that regard. He loves everyone as much as it's possible for a person to be loved. That necessarily means that He loves everyone equally. He loves the profoundly retarded child I visited at the Hattie Larham Foundation as much as He loves the 12 year-old genius I read about who's entering college. He loves Hugh Hefner as much as He loves Billy Graham. He loves no one person more or less than any other.

Third, God loves everyone unflinchingly. He never stops loving anyone. There isn't anything we can become or do that can make Him stop loving us. He could never stop loving us no matter how unlovely or unlovable we became. There is no person in history that He did stop loving and there is no person in history that He will stop loving.

To flesh out how remarkable these implications of His love are, let's apply them to extremes. First, He loved Adolph Hitler. Second, He loved him as much as He has loved or ever will love anyone, including Moses, the Apostle Paul, Mother Teresa, or any other person of whom we can think. And third, He loved Adolph Hitler as much when he died as He did when he was born. He didn't stop loving Him even when he was in the process of killing six million Jews and millions of non-Jews.

We can succinctly define the implications of "God is love" this way. It isn't in God's nature not to love a person, to love one person more than another, or to stop loving a person. He always loves everyone equally. That's because His love proceeds not from the objects of His love but from His nature.

It's essential of course that we personalize that. First, God loves me. Second, He loves me as much as He ever has or ever will love anyone. And third, He will never stop loving me as much as He does no matter what I become or do. That's the truth and we desperately need to grasp and internalize it.

Now that we know the origin of God's love and the implications of that, let's examine its scope. Paul describes its scope in a stirring text, Ephesians 3:17-19. As verse 14 reveals, these verses are part of what Paul prayed for the Ephesian Christians. In verses 18 and 19, he asks God to help these Christians comprehend and know the love that He has for them. Then, in the same breath, in verse 19, he declares that this love "surpasses knowledge."

This text has an Old Testament companion, Psalm 103:11-13. Putting the texts together, we learn this. God's love for us is so wide, long, high, and deep that we can't even begin to comprehend it.

That explains what some consider a puzzling truth. God doesn't actually love us. That He loves us is a figure of speech we use for the purposes of communication and understanding. His posture toward us isn't actually love. It's like love. Compare God's actual posture toward us to the best human love. God's posture is better than the best human love than the best human love is better than the worst human hatred. Think of the love that a mother has for her nursing child or the love that a good husband has for a good wife. God's love for us so far excels that love that those things are closer to hatred than they are to His love.

But even though we can't truly comprehend it, we do need to try. So, let's define what it means that God loves us. It's generally speaking two things.

First, it means that He always and only wills and seeks what is good for us, no matter what the cost is to Him. The words "always" and "only" necessarily exclude any possibility of He harming us. That is what John meant in 1 John 4:18 when he wrote that love casts out fear. Knowing that God never wills or seeks our harm, we're perfectly at ease in our relationship with Him. A theologian named Tilliston said, "This is true love to anyone, to do the best for him we can." That's exactly what God always does for us – the best that He can, no matter what the cost to Him is.

That God loves us means a second thing. He emotionally identifies with us. The word "emotionally" is what is called an "anthropopathism." God doesn't actually have emotions but emotions are like what He does have. So that's the word we use to describe it. Anyway, keeping in mind that it's an anthropopathism, that God loves us means that He emotionally identifies Himself with us.

Parental love, by way of analogy, gives us at least an inkling of understanding here. Consider two realities that characterize the experience of many if not most parents. First, as author Barbara Johnson says it, a child is a parent's heart walking around outside of him or her. And second, as James Dobson comments, most parents are only as happy as their unhappiest child.

Those two realities reflect emotional identification. Parents emotionally identify with their children. Their hearts are inseparably bound to their children until the very day that they die. And because they are, they rejoice when their children rejoice and weep when they weep.

It's the same with God and us. We need to grasp that He loves us and emotionally identifies with us because He does. He rejoices when we rejoice and weeps when we weep.

God does possess a quality called impassibility. There is a wide range of opinion as to what the nuances of impassibility are but essentially it means that God doesn't involuntarily suffer or experience passions as a consequence of what happens to His creation or what His creation does. He does empathize and experiences something like emotions but empathy and emotions don't come upon Him as they do us. They are willed by Him, not forced upon Him by something outside Him. He isn't controlled by them as human beings are but controls them.

God's impassibility, therefore, doesn't preclude Him from caring about us and identifying emotionally with us because He does. In a way that is beyond our understanding, He rejoices with us when we rejoice and weeps with us when we weep.

Think of the happiest moments in your life. Then think of the saddest moments in your life. God was there with you and shared your happiness and sadness with you.

Tozer, once again, astutely describes this aspect of God's character: "We have in previous chapters made the point that God's end in all things is his own glory – that he should be manifested, known, admired, and adored. This statement is true, but it is incomplete. It needs to be balanced by a recognition that through setting his love on human beings God has voluntarily bound up his own final happiness with theirs." That accurately represents what God has done. He has voluntarily bound up His own final happiness with ours. He emotionally identifies with us.

I've heard people say that God is like a parent or grandparent proudly showing pictures of his or her children or grandchildren to others. That's a cute and I would add correct portrayal of God. In a way that's known only to Him, his heart is bound up with us and our well-being and joy. He shares the ups and downs and the good times and bad times of our lives with us in a caring and empathetic way.

That then is what it means that God loves us. First, He always desires and pursues our well-being and joy no matter what it costs Him. And second, He emotionally identifies with us.

His love for us has many implications to us, one of which is this. It's the true source of our identity. Our identity refers to what we ultimately and objectively are.

When I say “ultimately,” I’m referring to the single most significant fact about us. The truth is that all of us are many things. We are conservatives or liberals, men or women, white collar workers or blue collar workers, sons or daughters, and so on. But none of those is the single most significant fact about us. What is the single most significant fact about us comprises our identity. That’s what our identity “ultimately” is.

When I speak about what it “objectively” is, I’m referring to what is actually so about us.

Everyone has a sense of identity. Our sense of identity is rooted in what we perceive to be the single most significant fact about us. What we perceive that fact to be may or may not be what it actually is. If what we perceive it to be is what it actually is, then we have a true sense of identity. If what we perceive it to be isn’t what it actually is, then we have a false sense of identity.

Many people, including professing Christians, have a false sense of identity. That’s because they’ve taken their identity from the wrong source. That wrong source might be something that they do or have or experience. Or it might be what others think of them. One woman I knew, for instance, takes her identity from the death of her child. In her mind, that’s the single most significant fact about her – her child died. She’s the person whose child died. Or a world class violinist took her identity from the opinion of her father. He had wanted her to be a surgeon and was deeply disappointed in her that she didn’t. In her mind, that was the single most significant fact about her – she didn’t become a surgeon. She’s the person who failed.

A wrong sense of identity diminishes our persons and lives. It negatively affects not only our emotional life but our decisions as well. Having a right sense of identity is crucial to well-being and joy in life.

So, what is our identity? What is the single most significant fact about us? It’s that God loves us as I’ve defined it. There isn’t anything about our lives or us that is as important as that is. The infinite and perfect Maker, Sustainer, and Redeemer of the universe always wills and seeks what is best for us and has a deep affection for us. And that is the source of our true identity. We are the beloved of God.

Getting our identity right is the key to getting everything else right. If our identity is wrong, our persons and lives will always be out of focus. Things in our persons and lives will never be as they should be. But if our identity is right, our persons and lives can be in focus. Things in our persons and lives can be as they should be.

So develop a true sense of identity. We develop that by doing three things. First, learn in detail how deeply God loves us by reading and studying what the Bible teaches us about that. Second, practice solitude. Get alone and silent with God. That allows Him to speak His tender feelings for us into the very depths of our souls. And third, periodically consider God's love for us as we move through our days.

Isaiah 49:15 illustrates what I mean. I read this verse one day and interpreted in detail what it means. I've said that, in my opinion, it's the strongest expression of God's love in the Bible. God's love for the Israelites and us exceeds the love of a mother for her nursing child. When I practice solitude, I bring that verse to mind and allow God to speak to me through it. Or I periodically consider that objective fact about me. I think to myself, "God loves me with a greater warmth and affection than a mother has for her nursing child." It's an astonishing reality that I like to keep routinely in landscape of my mind.

It's true then. God is love and you and I are the objects of it. We are His beloved and we need to think, feel, and act like it's so.

### #12 – God Is Good

The next attribute that goes to God's character is closely related to His love. God is good!

We sing a chorus that declares the goodness of God with the stirring title, "God Is So Good." You know how the lyrics go: "God is so good. God is so good. God is so good. He's so good to me." The Bible too celebrates His goodness in texts like 1 Chronicles 16:34; Psalm 107:1; Jeremiah 33:11; Hosea 3:5; Nahum 1:7; Mark 10:18; and Ephesians 5:8-9.

God's goodness of course is infinite and perfect. He's as good as it's possible to be. It's impossible to be more "good" than He is now. His goodness is also immutable or unchanging. He will never be less "good" than He is now. We can, therefore, count on His goodness. We can stake our lives on it, now and forever.

We can define God's goodness by way of analogy. That analogy is our common use of the word "good." We use it to describe a wide variety of things. My wife, for instance, invented her own coating for chicken, pork chops, and other dishes. It's incredibly "good," I often tell people. Or I heard someone say how "good" the weather is going to be this week. Or I overheard one person tell another how "good" the picture on her flat screen television is. And finally, many people have told me how "good" their dogs are.

What do we mean when we use the word "good" with regard to those things? We mean that the coating pleases our palate, the weather makes us comfortable, the television screen enhances our viewing experience, and that our dogs bring us joy without hassles. All of those things are good, in other words, because they bestow benefit or blessing upon us.

That helps us understand what it means that God is good. It means that He's always disposed to bestow benefit and blessing upon everyone and everything. His very nature compels Him to do well by whom and what He has made – to always act in their best interest. A.W. Tozer defines it with more precision this way: "The goodness of God is that which disposes Him to be kind, cordial, benevolent, and full of good will toward men. By His nature He is inclined to bestow blessedness and He takes holy pleasure in the happiness of His people." God really is so good!

And we must believe that He is – to us. That's the very thrust of that chorus we sing. God is so good "to me." We must believe that. We cannot live well if we don't. A mother whose teenage son was diagnosed with schizophrenia bitterly declared, "I'll never sing 'God Is So Good' again." She was referring to that chorus we sing. She believed that He isn't good and it was ruining her life that she did. As disciples or friends of Jesus, we want to love God with our whole being, have abundant life, and routinely do what is right. But we can't unless we're sure that God is good – that He has done right by our loved ones and us.

We need to be sure of that and we can be. 1 Chronicles 16:34; 2 Chronicles 5:13; 2 Chronicles 7:3; and Jeremiah 33:11 teach us how. Notice that each verse links two statements together. Each states that "Yahweh is good" and follows that with "His lovingkindness is everlasting." His lovingkindness has to do with the benefits and blessings He bestows upon us. Notice something about those. As the verses imply, they're causally connected to His goodness. Do you realize what that means? All the benefits and blessings (good things) we experience every day are empirical evidence that God is good. If He were bad, we wouldn't experience such things.

Many of course conclude that He is bad. They do so because they consider only part of reality and not all of it. That part of reality that they consider is the bad things that happen.

Harold Kushner, a Jewish rabbi, wrote a bestselling book titled *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. That title does reflect reality doesn't it. Recall the mother of the schizophrenic son I mentioned. She's a follower of Jesus and few things are worse than having a mentally ill child. She's the classic case in point about which Kushner wrote. She's a good person to whom something awful has happened. But there's far more to reality than that. Using Kushner's title, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, let's examine the "far more."

I knew a friend of Jesus who was given a huge promotion and raise at work. What about when good things happen to good people?

I am a friend of Jesus and have not had a car accident in 47 years of driving. What about when bad things don't happen to good people.

Or I knew a morally bankrupt law student who got a prized position in Akron's most prestigious law firm. What about when good things happen to bad people?

Or I knew an abusive alcoholic who had a horrible automobile accident and came out unscathed. What about when bad things don't happen to bad people.

Putting all of this together, we're face to face with five realities: (1) Bad things happen to good people; (2) Good things happen to good people; (3) Bad things don't happen to good people; (4) Good things happen to bad people; and (5) Bad things don't happen to bad people.

Now, most people have mental blinders on and take only the first of those realities into account. Bad things happen to good people. And they conclude, as a result, that God isn't good.

Their reasoning is this. Premise #1: If God is good, He wouldn't allow bad things to happen to good people. Premise #2: Bad things happen to good people. Conclusion: God isn't good.

But a few people have their mental blinders off and take the other four realities into account. Good things happen to good and bad people and bad things don't happen to good and bad people. And they conclude, as a result, that God is good.

Their reasoning is this. Premise #1: If God isn't good, then He is bad. Premise #2: If God is bad, He wouldn't allow good things to happen to good and bad people. Premise #3: Good things happen to good and bad people. Conclusion: God isn't bad.

Their reasoning is also this. Premise #1: If God isn't good, then He is bad. Premise #2: If God is bad, He wouldn't allow bad things not to happen to good and bad people. Premise #3: Bad things don't happen to good and bad people. Conclusion: God isn't bad.

That conclusion, God isn't bad, leads to another conclusion. Premise #1: If God isn't bad, then He must be good. Premise #2: God isn't bad. Conclusion: God must be good.

My point is that when we look around and consider all of reality, we conclude that God is good.

Part of that reality that we need to consider is eternal.

Many people make a tragic mistake in judging God's goodness or badness. It's that they base their judgment on what is temporal. An atheist I knew years ago raised the absurdity of believing in a good God. He mentioned a Viet Nam veteran we both knew who had been horribly disfigured and maimed. "Can you honestly look at Him," he asked, "And say with a straight face that God is good?" So many people challenge God's goodness in those terms. What about the horribly dreadful things that happen to people like being maimed, abused, tortured, or raped? If God is so good, how do we explain that?

I'll tell you. It's in terms of the eternal. The eternal is the breath-taking life in the breath-taking world that disciples and friends of Jesus experience forever after they die. There's something all of us desperately need to know. The meaning of events in human life is almost always found in a larger context. That larger context is the eternal.

Consequently, we should base our judgments about God's goodness on that. We look beyond the temporal world and life to the eternal world and life. We take the breath-taking eternal world and life into account in assessing God's goodness. So, we see the son's schizophrenia but also see the reality of his sick mind made whole in heaven. And we see the Viet Nam veteran's disfigured face and body. But we also see the reality of that face and body made whole in heaven.

There is an additional element in the eternal reality. Those upon whom tragedies and trials fall can experience something of the eternal now by engaging Jesus and His kingdom at hand. Psalm 16:11 articulates it well, "In Your presence is fullness of joy."

When everything is said and done, those of us who know reality in its totality and take that reality into account in our thinking and life understand, believe, and embrace the goodness of God. God is so good. He's so good to me.

### #13 – God Is Holy

Most people think of God's loveliness in terms of the last two attributes we examined, His love and goodness. But the remaining attributes comprise His loveliness as well.

God has a thirteenth attribute. He is holy.

The Bible is permeated through and through with the holiness of God. Texts teaching this remarkable attribute of His are: Exodus 15:11; Leviticus 19:2; 1 Samuel 2:2; Psalm 99:3; Isaiah 6:3; Hosea 11:9; Habakkuk 1:12; Luke 1:49; John 17:11; Hebrews 7:26; 1 Peter 1:15-16; and Revelation 4:8.

The Hebrew word translated "holy" means "separated or cut off from." God is separated from two things. The first is creation. He's different in kind than anything else that exists. I explained that in detail in our examination of His transcendence. God is separated from a second thing and it's this with which holiness is most often linked. He's separated from evil. His separation from evil is about purity. His purity is His moral condition or state and has two aspects.

One is that He's totally devoid of evil, that is, of what is morally wrong. Psalm 5:4, for instance, teaches us that He doesn't take pleasure in wickedness and that no evil dwells within Him. This separation from evil is total in the sense that no evil of any kind or to any degree no matter how slight is in Him.

Human holiness, by way of analogy, helps us understand this. Take Mother Teresa, for instance, who was a paragon of virtue. Imagine her walking by an abandoned and starving child on the streets of Calcutta, India and beating him or even killing him. We can't imagine that because she was, in her nature, separated from murder. It wasn't in her, at all, to kill out of malice or contempt. Now consider the "teeniest, tiniest" evil you can think of, like telling a little white lie. God is less inclined to tell a little white lie than Mother Teresa was inclined to maliciously or contemptuously kill someone. He is in fact not inclined at all to tell a little white lie. As Paul says it in Titus 1:2, He "cannot lie." He's incapable of doing that evil or any evil no matter how slight. He never thinks, feels, or does what is wrong because He can't.

God's purity has a second aspect. He's morally right or good. This moral rightness is total in the sense that all moral rightness is in Him and it's in Him to the highest possible degree.

Let's go back to human holiness again. Imagine Mother Teresa being honest and paying for all the groceries in her cart. We can imagine that because she was, in her nature, honest. Now consider the greatest good you can think of, which according to Jesus is to give your life for another. God is more inclined to do that than Mother Teresa was inclined to pay for all of her groceries. He is in fact fully inclined to do that and in Jesus, did. He always and thoroughly thinks, feels, and does what is right because He cannot do otherwise.

I'd quickly point out that the analogies I just used are inadequate. That's because God's holiness isn't just human holiness bettered or perfected. It's so much different in nature than human holiness in fact that we know nothing even remotely like it. But we understand the best we can and the purpose of the analogies is to assist us in doing that.

I'd sum up this attribute of His with a final analogy. He is 100% morally pure. All of us value purity in almost everything, especially food. That's why the FDA establishes guidelines for food. Take one of my favorite foods as an example, apple butter. The FDA guideline is this. If the mold count is 12% or more or if it averages 4 rodent hairs per 100 grams or if it averages 5 or more whole insects (not counting mites, aphids, or scale insects) per 100 grams, it cannot be sold. We want our food and almost everything else to be pure don't we?

The apple butter guideline helps us define pure. Something is pure when it's in an uncontaminated state. It's food without mold, rodent hair, insects, and maggots. It's air without fumes. It's gardens without weeds. It's soap without chemicals (like Ivory), and so on. Something is pure when it's uncontaminated by anything defiling.

In those terms, God isn't 99.44% pure like Ivory Soap is. He's 100% pure. He's utterly uncontaminated. He's all good and no evil, all right and no wrong.

God's holiness, like all of His attributes, has profound implications to our lives and us. The English word "holy" reveals one of those. It's derived from an Anglo Saxon word, "halig," which means "well" or "whole." That teaches us a fundamental truth of our existence. As Tozer points out, whatever is holy is healthy. And whatever is unholy is unhealthy. Moral purity makes us physically, psychologically, and spiritually well. Moral impurity makes us physically, psychologically, and spiritually ill.

The reason for that is the very nature of the universe itself. When God created it, all of His attributes were naturally expressed in the realities that made it up. Since He's holy, therefore, holiness is consistent with the realities of the universe and unholiness is inconsistent with them. Consequently, being and doing what is right makes things go well for others and us. But being and doing what is wrong makes things go poorly for others and us. Examples abound everywhere in and around us.

Take sex for instance. Since God invented and created it, it reflects attributes of His, including His triune nature. Two basic realities underlie it as a result.

One is psychological. Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 6:16 that sexual intercourse is a life-uniting act. We cannot touch a person's body in sex without touching his or her soul as well.

The other basic reality is microbiological. Microorganisms that can injure or kill us are passed by illicit sexual contact. Sexual holiness, therefore, makes things go well for us. Sex in marriage is fulfilling and safe. But sexual unholiness makes things go poorly for us. Sex outside of marriage is unfulfilling, even disturbing, and dangerous.

Or consider our motive for doing things. If we do them to get God's approval and His alone, we're acting consistently with His place as the unique and dominant reality of the universe. That is holy. But if we do things to get people's approval, we're usurping that place of His. That is unholy. And because it's unholy it's unhealthy. One of the most crushing burdens in human life is caring about the opinions and approval of others. But caring only about the opinions and approval of God frees us from that. It cultivates a defining peace in our lives.

Human experience demonstrates it countless times every day. Whatever is holy is healthy. Moral purity makes things go well for others and us. Conversely, whatever is unholy is unhealthy. Moral impurity makes things go poorly for others and us.

So, be holy. That's God's call to us. In Leviticus 19:2, He declares to the Israelites, "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy." Peter quotes God in 1 Peter 1:16 and applies His declaration to Christians, "You shall be holy for I am holy."

That's God's call to us and despite our fallen nature, we can answer it. Let me quickly point out that the holiness God desires in us is primarily a work of the Holy Spirit in us. We cannot conjure it up or develop it on our own. He and He alone can make us holy. But He isn't going to force holiness on us. He expects us to cooperate with Him instead.

Peter tells us how to cooperate with Him in a text from which we've already read, 1 Peter 1:13-16. Notice the word "prepare" in verse 13. That word, in the Greek, means literally "Gird up the loins." In the Middle East, men wore long gowns that were "girded up" when energetic effort was contemplated. So the equivalent in our world of girding up your loins would be "roll up your sleeves." Those who gird up their loins or roll up their sleeves are those who mean business and that's our part in being holy. We must mean business when it comes to holiness. We do two things in that regard.

First, according to verse 13, we "prepare our minds for action." We mean business in our minds.

The word "sober" in verse 13 helps us define that. It refers to alertness and connotes mindfulness. We need to be mindful of what is holy and what is unholy.

Sadly, many if not most professing Christians aren't. They unmindful instead. In *Knowledge of the Holy*, Tozer states it this way, "We have learned to live with unholiness and have come to look upon it as the natural and expected thing." That state of affairs is probably more widespread today than it was 60 years ago when he wrote that.

As a practical matter, it means that professing Christians have learned to live with things like pride, anger, malice, gossip, lying, resentment, materialism, and so on. Those things aren't really moral failures, they think. They're things all of us naturally do and thus, we should expect them. The classic case in point to which I often point is the remark I've heard many make: "I'll forgive you for hurting me but it's a different story if you hurt my children." Not forgiving those who hurt our children is unholy. But many think it's somehow holy.

We need to be alert and ever mindful of what is holy and unholy – both in the world and in us. We should mean business in our minds.

There's a second thing we do to mean business when it comes to holiness. According to 15, we must be holy in our "behavior." We have to mean business in the things we say and do. Meaning business in our behavior is a matter of intent. We intend to do what is right and not to do what is wrong and complete our intention with decision.

We achieve that in two steps. First, we learn what is right and wrong by studying the Bible. And second, we try and train the best we can to do what is right and not to do what is wrong. We call this purposeful obedience, which is one of the spiritual disciplines. I will define training in another part of our *Disciples 'R' Us* curriculum.

A classic example is rejoicing when others outshine us. I had two brothers, 14 and 16 years older than I was. They taught me as I grew to have what we call the competitive spirit and I did. I was driven to win and was crushed when I didn't. I often felt hostility in fact for those who had beaten me. But I did what I've just taught. I came to mean business about holiness. First, I rolled up the sleeves of my mind and recognized that desiring and seeking to beat others is unholy. The desire and effort to do my best is one thing. The desire and effort to overcome others is entirely another. It's morally wrong because it's contrary to the ethic of love. I came to grasp that. I also came to grasp that it's morally right, according to the ethic of love, to rejoice when others outshine me. Second, I rolled up the sleeves of my body. I trained to become the kind of person who rejoices when others outshine me. I practiced certain spiritual disciplines that allowed the Holy Spirit to transform me in this regard.

I said that God is 100% pure, morally, which raises this question to close out our discussion of holiness. How pure are you and I? Are we 50% pure or 70% pure or 99.44% pure? Perhaps there's a better way to ask it. Are we as pure as the Holy Spirit can make us? Let's mean business in our minds and behavior. The answer will be "Yes" if we do.

## #14 – God Is Righteous

The holiness of God gives rise to a related quality. He is righteous.

God's righteousness is an oft-repeated theme in Scripture. Texts that teach it include Ezra 9:15; Psalm 119:142; Isaiah 51:8; Jeremiah 12:1; Daniel 9:7; Micah 7:9; Matthew 6:33; John 17:25; Romans 1:17; 2 Peter 1:1; Revelation 16:5.

While God's righteousness is one of his most eminent qualities, it's also one of His most elusive. God's holiness, righteousness, and justness are so closely related that it takes precision to distinguish between them. In fact, the words "righteous" and "just" in our English Bibles translate the same Hebrew and Greek word. Sometimes the translators render the Hebrew or Greek word "righteous" and sometimes "just." Nehemiah 9:8 and 9:33 is an example of this. The same word that the NASB translates "righteous" in 9:8, it translates "just" in 9:33.

I'd define God's righteousness this way. It He acting so that His holiness is upheld. Theologian T.C. Hammond describes it this way. It's "the principle in God which gives rise to and upholds the moral order in the world." God is utterly holy, 100% morally pure, as we've seen and acts so that the world itself will be. His actions are always consistent with His holiness. He is righteous, in other words.

One of the mighty acts of His righteousness was the giving of the law. By the law, I mean the commandments or dos and don'ts that He gives us in Scripture. Giving the law to mankind was one of the most clear cut and significant acts of His righteousness. He gave it so that people would be holy or morally excellent. It is, therefore, an expression of His righteousness.

That reveals something about the law. The commandments that comprise it are moral absolutes. Moral absolutes are standards of character and behavior to which everyone ought to submit. They aren't subjective matters of right and wrong that are subject to people's opinion or approval. They are objective matters of right and wrong that are completely independent of people's opinion or approval.

I found a wallet two years ago at Poland's Independence Day celebration. It contained \$156 and the name and address of its owner. Let me ask you. Is keeping it morally right if I think it is? No it isn't. It's objectively right to return the wallet and objectively wrong to keep it. Why? It's because of what God commands in Deuteronomy 22:1-3. We must return lost property to its owner if we can. That commandment is a moral absolute and makes my opinion, what I think, irrelevant. That commandment makes it objectively right to return lost property and objectively wrong not to.

That illustrates what God's righteousness is. It's God acting to uphold His holiness. In this case, He did so by giving us the commandment in Deuteronomy 22:1-3.

That teaches us something about His righteousness. It has nothing to do with Him conforming to some outside standard of morality. No moral code exists outside of Him to which He conforms, thus making Him righteous. If there were, that standard would be superior to Him. His righteousness has only to do with His nature generally and His holiness particularly. He is righteous because He conforms to His own nature and holiness.

You realize what that means. His nature is the standard that determines right and wrong. I act rightly when I act consistently with His nature. I act wrongly when I act inconsistently with it. God's nature is the reference point of righteousness and unrighteousness.

### #15 – God Is Just

God's righteousness, as I've pointed out, is closely related to His justness. Scripture emphasizes that God is just. Texts that teach that He is include Deuteronomy 32:4; Nehemiah 9:33; Zephaniah 3:5; Zechariah 9:9; and Romans 3:26.

I'm going to define His justness narrowly as His competence in dealing with people's morality and immorality. He deals with that by judging them. By judging them, I mean that He assesses their morality and immorality and then rewards or punishes that accordingly. God is just in doing that. His assessments are always fully informed and his rewards and punishments are always fair. Or to say it another way, He always does right by us when He judges us.

The justness of God will be fully and finally displayed on the Day of Judgment. On that Day, after the Second Coming of Jesus, God will reward and punish every human being who has ever lived rightly.

Romans 2:12-16 illustrates God's justness in judgment.

He makes two categorical statements in verse 12. Those who sin without the law will perish without the law. Those who sin with the law will perish with the law. Those two statements reveal that God judges people based on the knowledge of Him and his written law that they have. He punishes people only for those acts they know or should know are contrary to His character and written law.

He would be unjust if He did otherwise. If He held people responsible for doing things they didn't know or couldn't know were wrong, then He'd be unfair and thus not just.

Yet, those who don't know God or His law will be judged and there will be a legitimate basis of their judgment. Paul tells us what that basis is in verses 14-16. It's conscience. Everyone, including the most primitive pagans, have a God-given sense of right and wrong. This God-given sense is fallen and subject to error but it's there, nonetheless, telling us what is right and wrong.

In *Mere Christianity*, for instance, C.S. Lewis asks us to imagine a society that admired and rewarded people for running away in battle or where people felt proud about double-crossing those who have been the most kind to them. We might as well imagine a society where two plus two equals five, he says. His point is that people know instinctively, within themselves, that those two things and many more are wrong. They also know, in the same way, that many things are right. Their conscience tells them so.

And God will judge them on the basis of that. He will punish them for having lived contrary to the moral code of their conscience. And conversely, He will reward them for having lived according to that moral code. People often ask me if pagans who have never heard the gospel will be saved. The answer is that they may or may not, depending on whether they obeyed or disobeyed their conscience.

That illustrates a larger point. God deals fairly with us all. He assesses us knowing everything there is to know about us and He rewards and punishes us fairly. Justice isn't always done in the courts of human beings. It is always and perfectly done in the court of God.

### #16 – God Is Wrath

To this point, we've discussed several attributes of God that are closely related to His holiness – righteousness and justness. There's a third that we're going to address now – wrath.

"Wrath" is an old English word that one dictionary defines this way, "deep, intense, anger and indignation." That's a good definition and precisely what the Bible teaches us about God. He is wrath in the same kind of way that He is love.

It's true that most professing Christians believe that. But it's also true that the words "God is love" are heard far more frequently in the church today than the words "God is wrath." When was the last time you heard a preacher in person or on television speak about it? When was the last time you read an article or devotional about it? Or when was the last

time you heard Christians converse about it? My point is that God's wrath is a forbidden subject today – not only in the culture but the church as well. Christians either downplay it or ignore it altogether. They think and talk very little, if at all, about it.

But it's different in the Bible. The Old and New Testaments, in one way or another, refer to it over 600 times. As A.W. Pink says it in his book *Attributes of God*, "A study of the concordances will show that there are more references in Scripture to the anger, fury, and wrath of God, than there are to His love and tenderness." That surprises, even shocks, most people but it's true. Here are a sampling of texts that reveal the wrath of God: Exodus 32:10; 2 Chronicles 12:7; Psalm 106:40; Isaiah 9:19; Hosea 5:10; Nahum 1:2; John 3:36; Romans 1:18; Ephesians 5:6; Colossians 3:6; and Revelation 6:16.

One of the reasons people downplay or ignore God's wrath is because they think that it's unworthy of Him. He is the most loving, generous, wonderful, and appealing being in the universe. And anger, they think, is inconsistent with that. They think that because they perceive divine anger in terms of human anger. You've all seen the bumper sticker that says, "I don't get mad; I get even." Another takes it a step further and says, "I get mad and even." Many people equate God's anger with that. They see in it the same hostility and pride that they see in human anger, which are in fact unworthy of Him.

Another reason that people downplay or ignore God's wrath is because they think that it's cruel. They usually equate it with hell and regard it as a vindictive overreaction to people's sins. I had a criminal client years ago who shattered a man's nose with a beer bottle for only slightly insulting him. Many people view God's wrath as being like that, a cruel overreaction to the insult of sins.

But that isn't what it is. It is instead the settled opposition of His holiness to sin. In terms of moral character, He is perfectly and utterly pure. Because He is, He always reacts and responds adversely to sin. The Bible calls that adverse reaction and response His "wrath."

We experience this to a degree ourselves. A man was starving his dog. His neighbor reacted inwardly when she found out. She was disgusted and appalled. She also responded outwardly. She called the police to have him arrested because he deserved it.

That reaction and response of ours is a pale reflection of God's moral purity. That moral purity compels Him to react adversely to sin. He is disgusted or appalled. It also compels Him to respond adversely to sin. He acts against what disgusts or appalls Him. The Bible calls that reaction and response His wrath.

God's wrath is always just. His reaction isn't too much or too little. He never overreacts or underreacts. His response isn't too harsh or too lenient. He never over responds or under responds. His reaction and response are always commensurate with the nature of the sin that is committed. His wrath is just.

But it's terrifying as well. That how the author of Hebrews says it in 10:31 of his book, "It's a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God." I know those are unpleasant words and we don't like hearing them but they're true. God always reacts and responds adversely to sin and it's a terrifying thing when He does.

We see why it is in Romans 11:22. In that verse, Paul reveals what God's wrath coming against us does. It "cuts us off." It cuts us off from Him and His kingdom and thus, from the foundational conditions of abundant life - true love, peace, and joy. That separation is partial in nature and depth in this life but total in the life to come. Jesus described it this way in Matthew 10:28. God is "able to destroy both soul and body in hell."

Listen to four comments that people I've counseled have made. "I feel so alone." "Nothing moves me." "I can never remember feeling calm." And "I can't remember the last time I was happy." Those comments represent the dynamics of hell, on earth, except that they are dramatically deeper and more pervasive in hell. They help us understand, by way of analogy, what God's wrath does. It cuts us off from the One whom we're psychologically and spiritually suited to be loved by and to love. The result is loss of love, peace, and joy. That loss is partial in earthly life now but total in the eternal life to come. You can see then why the Bible says what it does. God's wrath is "a terrifying thing."

Consequently, it needs to be turned away from us and Jesus did just that. Romans 3:25; 1 John 2:2; 4:10; and Hebrews 2:17 explain that via the word "propitiation." Propitiation connotes a remarkable reality - the pacifying of God's wrath by an offering.

What the Bible teaches about that, in a nutshell, is this. God is utterly and perfectly just. Because He is, His wrath must come against our sins. If it didn't, He wouldn't be just. His wrath, therefore, must be pacified. But there's only one way that it can be. There must be an offering to Him that satisfies all of the demands of His justice. And there is. That offering is Him.

That is how Biblical religion differs from pagan religion. In pagan religion, people pacify the wrath of their many temperamental gods by giving them offerings. The rule in that regard is the bigger the offering the better. The biggest offering of all of course is a person's life, which explains the practice of human sacrifice. You can see that propitiation,

pacifying divine wrath by an offering, is part of both pagan and Biblical religion. But the difference is this. In paganism, propitiation is the work of man. His action pacifies the wrath of the gods. But in the Bible, propitiation is the work of God Himself. His action pacifies His wrath.

The Bible makes clear what that action of His was. God the Son, Jesus, died on the cross for our sins. He took into Himself all of our sins and paid the penalty for them that we should have paid. That penalty was that Father God's wrath came against Him. Father God cut Him off completely from Himself and His goodness. Jesus, as a result, was totally devoid of what had been His very essence - love, peace, and joy.

Think of those four comments I mentioned earlier and the experiences they represent. Then make those experiences total and complete in nature and depth, like they are in hell. That's part of what Jesus experienced on the cross. It's what compelled Him to cry out, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me." A man once told me about his life with his wife, "It's hell on earth." We hear that comment a lot don't we - people in bad circumstances contending that they're going through hell on earth. But they aren't. The truth is that there's only one person in history who literally went through hell on earth. It was Jesus, on the cross.

That's what He did and 1 John 4:10 reveals the result. He was "the propitiation for our sins." The word "propitiation" communicates that our sins have already been punished. God pacified His wrath by offering Himself. He turned it away from us by turning it on to Jesus.

The wrath of God and the propitiation through Jesus demand a response from us. That response is that we must fear God.

All of us know by experience what fear is. It's nothing more than the anticipation of harm. To fear is to anticipate that something painful or detrimental might happen to us. Think for a moment about some of the things that we fear: drunk drivers, put bulls, inflation, electricity, police, cancer, tornadoes, parents, or walking down Hillman Street at night. Those things illustrate what fear is. It's the anticipation of harm.

Now, it's smart to fear some things. I talked with a man who lives in Arizona. He told me he never puts on a pair of shoes without looking inside them first. If he doesn't, he said, he might stick his foot into a scorpion and get stung. It's smart to fear scorpions. We discern they can harm us and act accordingly so they don't. But it's even smarter to fear God. Jesus teaches us just that in Matthew 10:28, "Do not fear those who kill the body but fear Him (God) who is able to destroy both body and soul in hell." Fearing God is the beginning of smartness. Don't misunderstand me. He isn't mean. On the contrary,

He's utterly and perfectly good. But He is dangerous. It's precisely His goodness in fact that makes Him dangerous.

Suppose that woman didn't care her neighbor was starving his dog and did nothing. Or even worse, suppose she didn't care he was starving his child and did nothing. She wouldn't be good. It's precisely her goodness that gave rise to her wrath. It's the same with God. It's His goodness that gives rise to His wrath and makes Him dangerous. He is the most dangerous reality in the universe. We're smart, therefore, if we fear Him.

To fear Him means to discern He can harm us and to act to avoid that harm. So, act to avoid that harm! How? Jesus tells us in the verses after Matthew 10:28. It's by apprenticing ourselves to Him.

I'd explain it in these terms. There are three possibilities when it comes to Jesus. First, to some people, He is nothing. They don't take Him into account at all in their thinking and living. Second, to some people He is something. They are what Oswald Chambers called "the half-converted, the average Christian." They take Jesus into account in their thinking and living in those parts of their lives where they think they need Him – but not at all in those parts where they think they don't. And finally, third, to some people, He is everything. Some people take Him into account in all things. Oswald Chambers defined that this way: "You must yield yourself totally to Christ, remain in Him, and obey His commands." Or as I just said it, we apprentice ourselves to Him. We make the decision to be with Him in order to learn and do all that He says. We then arrange our affairs around carrying out that decision. Of those three possibilities, only the third is a sure thing. So make Jesus everything. You'll never experience God's wrath if you do.

I'd sum up in closing what God's wrath implies to us with a few lines of verse written by Frederick Faber: "O how I fear Thee, living God! – With deepest, tenderest fears, - And worship Thee with trembling hope, - And penitential fears." God's wrath is just as real as His love is. So act to avoid it. Apprentice yourself to Jesus.

### #17 – God Is Gracious

The counterpart of God's wrath is His grace. God is gracious. Numerous texts convey that He is including the following: Exodus 22:26-27; 2 Chronicles 30:9; Nehemiah 9:17; Psalm 86:15; Joel 2:13; Ephesians 1:7-8; 1 Corinthians 1:4; 1 Timothy 1:12-14; and 1 Peter 5:10.

What those texts together teach us is this. God is gracious and lavishes His grace upon us. More specifically, He is kind and thus routinely gives us good things that we don't deserve and doesn't give us bad things we do deserve. That is grace.

God is gracious to non-Christians. Proverbs 29:13 declares in that regard, "The poor man and the oppressor have this in common; The LORD gives light to the eyes of both." God gives light, by way of the sun, to the righteous and the wicked alike. Jesus picks up on this thought and reiterates it in Matthew 5:45, "for He (God) causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." God sends sun and rain on the crops of the wicked farmer just as surely as He does on the crops of the righteous farmer. The unrighteous don't deserve the sun and rain but God gives it to them anyway. We call that the "common grace of God."

That's one of the reasons why I don't rail against the prosperity of the wicked. Consider Hugh Hefner, for instance, who is a pervert and yet is blessed with health, wealth, and fame. One response to that is to decry the injustice of his good fortune in light of his wickedness. But another is to rejoice that God is so gracious, because that's exactly what it shows. While he obviously doesn't realize it, Hefner is a living and breathing testimony to the grace of God if we have eyes that see.

We know of course that God's common grace ends with the Second Coming of Jesus. At that time, the ethic of love and grace is suspended and those who rejected Jesus will get the bad thing they deserve. They'll be cut off forever from God and His kingdom and the love, peace, and joy that go along with it. Hefner enjoys God's common grace today. He will suffer God's wrath then.

There's a second kind of grace called "special" or "saving" grace. Paul teaches in Ephesians 2:8 that we're saved "by grace." Saving grace refers to three actions of God that we don't deserve.

One is that He convicts and enlightens us through the work of the Holy Spirit in our interior dimensions. He breaks through the layers of thought and feeling that make us resistant to following Jesus and gives us understanding and desire that we didn't have before. That in turn enables us to make a decision for Jesus.

The second action of saving grace occurs when we make the decision to follow Jesus. God gives us what we don't deserve, salvation. Because we've sinned against Him, we deserve damnation and He doesn't have to apply the finished work of Jesus to us. But because He's gracious, He elects to apply it to us and save us. Our faith in Jesus doesn't save us. God's grace in accepting it as a basis of salvation does.

God's saving grace then continues as we carry out the decision to follow Jesus. The parable of the workers and wages in Matthew 20:1-16 teaches us just that. A landowner hired laborers to work in his vineyard at 6:00 am and agreed on a wage. He then hired more laborers at 9:00 am,

noon, 3:00 pm, and 5:00 pm. When the evening came, the landowner gave the first laborers the agreed upon wages and the remaining laborers the very same. The first laborers then grumbled about the others getting as much as they did for less work. The landowner then chastised them for begrudging the generosity he showed to the others.

The interpretation of the parable is an inspiring one. The landowner stands for God. The laborers stand for those who enter His kingdom. The wages stand for the rewards He gives them for doing so. The parable's point is how great God's generosity and goodness is to those who enter the kingdom. We receive benefits and blessings that reach far beyond what we deserve – now and forever.

I read just this past week about two men who gave their cheerful waitress a \$6000 tip. That was a lavish tip that went far beyond what the waitress deserved. But it's nothing compared to the lavish blessings God bestows upon us for deciding to follow Him. As I've said it many times before, discipleship to Jesus is the greatest bargain in human life and God's grace is the reason it is.

### #18 – God Is Joyful

The last attribute of God that we'll discuss is one that few people associate with Him, but which is just as vital as any of the rest. I've never read even one theology book that associated this quality with Him. I've also never heard a sermon or Sunday school lesson about it. For some reason, people have a problem equating it with God, but they shouldn't. He is just as much this as He is love, for instance. That quality is that He is joyful.

In the movie *Polyanna*, Polyanna tells a preacher about what she called the "happy texts," by which she meant the ones that call us to rejoice, laugh, and be glad. There are over 360 such texts in the Bible, she told him, and she was right. There's one for each day of the year. Those texts are significant because they reflect the God who wrote them. They make clear that He is joyful.

We see God's joy in Jesus Himself. John 15:11 and 17:13 reveal a penetrating insight into His person and life. He was by nature a joyful person and fully so. That partially explains why John the Baptist had questions about Him in Matthew 11 and why the Pharisees accused Him of being a glutton and drunk in Luke 7. People had never seen anyone as joyful and happy as He was.

We can be sure that Jesus wasn't the slow moving, slow talking stuffed shirt that so many movies make Him out to be. Certainly, He was a man of sorrows as Isaiah 53 says it who grieved over the brokenness of the brutal first century world in which He lived. But at the same time, He

was an enthusiast who had a highly developed sense of humor and simply delighted in the countless wonders of the people and world around Him.

Jesus shows us God. That clearly means that the Father and Holy Spirit are just as joyful as He is. The triune God is in fact the most joyful, passionate, and fun-loving being in the universe.

Human beings of course are made in His image. We reflect imperfectly and finitely perfect and infinite attributes of His, one of which is His joy. That joy of His is reflected, I believe, in our sense of humor and capacity to laugh. As Aristotle pointed out, human beings are the only creatures who laugh and as far as I know, he was right. We can't tickle our dog, for instance, but we can our child. Remembering what I said about anthropomorphisms, we can accurately say that we have a sense of humor and laugh because God does. He experiences something like we experience but His experience is perfect and complete.

I've said before that God's hilarious description of the Ostrich in Job 39:13-18 – dumb, ugly, and eccentric – illustrates His joyfulness. It makes clear that He made the ostrich for His entertainment and ours. Its declared purpose is to make Him and us laugh. It reveals the divine sense of humor, the childlike playfulness within Him.

What I've said shows that God gets joy from the same things that we do but to a much greater degree. One reason He does is that He's able to experience the universe and everything in it in ways that we can only wildly dream of.

Think of it this way. Human beings are constantly "losing" themselves in a host of activities, experiences, and events. That's how we say it. They're "losing" themselves in things. Those things include baseball, electric trains, nature walks, the Internet, dog shows, antique cars, traveling, astronomy, reading, video games, and so on. But God can lose Himself in things immeasurably greater and more exciting than those.

Consider the pictures of the Eagle Nebula that the Hubble Space Telescope sent back in the 1990's. Index "Eagle Nebula" on the Internet and you'll see them. They're phenomenal. They show clouds of gas and microscopic dust reaching six trillion miles from top to bottom. Hundreds of stars, bigger and hotter than our sun, were emerging here and there in them. Imagine being right there in the center of that and what we'd experience if we were.

Or consider the ocean with all the splendid landscapes and the creatures that inhabit and fill it. Aquariums excite us but imagine being submerged in the ocean and able to take in all the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and feelings of what is happening there.

Or consider the happiest moments of your life: your graduation from college, your wedding day, the birth of your first child, your first big promotion at work, your surprise birthday party, and so on. Try to recapture the excitement, fulfillment, and joy of all of those events.

With all of that in mind, my point is that God experiences all of those things and things just like them all of the time and from every possible point of view. Dallas Willard explained it this way: "All the good and beautiful things from which we occasionally drink tiny droplets of soul exhilarating joy; God continuously experiences in all their breadth and depth and richness."

We sometimes tell people to "get a life." But we don't have to tell God that because He has a life and what an incredible one it is. As Willard points out, tides of joy are constantly washing through His being. He has an infinitely joyous consciousness and life.

We need to understand that God isn't a morose monarch, a frustrated petty parent, a detached and disinterested creator, or an angry and vindictive cosmic policeman on the prowl. He is instead the most joyous, happiest, and most enthusiastic being in the universe who lives an indescribably passionate and ecstatic life.

And so should we. That's what this quality of God speaks to us. Followers of Jesus should be the most joyous and passionate people on earth. We should do four things.

First, we should laugh. We see that in psalm 126:2. The psalmist writes about God breaking through to bless Israel, "Then our mouth was filled with laughter and our tongue with joyful shouting." Kingdom people who are friends of Jesus can't help but laugh. Laughing is a product of God's presence and power. Laughter really is the best medicine. It makes our load lighter and our Christianity brighter and we need to do it.

Second, we should play. John Wesley said, "He that plays when he is a child will play when he is a man." Wesley grasped the importance of play to adults and we should too. Play and the laughter that goes along with it aren't only essential to sanity and health but to courtesy and kindness as well. The great G.K. Chesterton once said, "The playground is a place for humanizing those who might otherwise be tyrants, or even experts." It's true. Play has a therapeutic effect on us that makes us people with whom it's easier to live.

Play is nothing more than having fun. There are different ways of playing of course because there are different ways of having fun. We can have fun with eating, drinking, games, adventure, reading, writing, language, toys, relating experiences, and much more.

I myself play all the time. I have a cap gun at home that I sometimes shoot off just as I did as a boy. I play hide and seek with my grandsons and dogs. I bounce a rubber ball off my garage door wall and pretend I'm a Yankees shortstop fielding ground balls. I fly those little toy airplanes. I shoot spit wads through straws at my grandsons, and so on.

I purposely find ways to play and so should you. As Chesterton said, it humanizes us when we do and makes life brighter in the process.

A third thing we should do is joke around. By joke around, I mean kid each other about the incongruities, oddities, and superficial sufferings in our character and lives. When Don Renzenbrink was elder of stewardship years ago, he received several letters at church mistakenly addressed to "Reverend Don Renzenbrink." I never have used the title "Reverend" but I did apply it to Donald for some time after that. I'd call him "the Rev" and we got a good laugh from it.

Joking around is a necessary and natural part of healthy relationships and of the community of prayerful love that the Holy Spirit creates among us.

There's a fourth thing we should do. Enjoy the divine comedy. A printer once made the mistake of leaving the "s" out of a word. Instead of writing "cosmic" like he intended, he wrote "comic" instead. G.K. Chesterton found a great truth in that mistake. He said, "Whatever is cosmic is comic" and he was right.

The universe is a divine comedy. I mean by that, God has filled it with humor. Observe and think objectively about people walking around on their two legs and all the different gates they have in doing so. It's a funny means of transporting our bodies around if you think about it. Or give rain deeper thought. People often have fun with each other by putting a bucket of water over a door through which someone is walking or putting a rubber band around the sink hose. The object of both is to have fun by getting someone wet. That's how I think of rain. It's God having fun by getting us wet. You get the idea. The universe is a divine comedy and our call is to see and enjoy that comedy.

Those then are four ways we can be passionate and joyful like God is: laugh, play, joke around, and enjoy the divine comedy. Believe it or not, doing those things pleases Him as much as anything else we do. Martin Luther said it well: "It is pleasing to the dear God whenever thou rejoices or laughest from the bottom of Thy heart." Why is that? It's because God is the most joyful and passionate being in the universe.

### Summary of God's Attributes

#1 – Spiritual: He isn't made up of matter (atoms and molecules). He has the highest possible powers of consciousness and activity without a body and brain.

#2 – Self-existent: He has the power of being within Himself and thus, has no origin (wasn't caused).

#3 – Eternal: He has always existed, exists now, and always will exist and thus transcends time. He experiences the past, present, and future at the same time as a never ending present.

#4 – Triune: He is one being with three persons who form a community of personal beings with limitless and perfect love.

#5 – Omnipotent: He has limitless power and can do anything that is logically possible.

#6 – Omnipresent: Metaphorically, He is everywhere present with His entire being all at once and occupies all the space in the universe. In reality, all things that exist are "in Him."

#7 – Omniscient: He is all-knowing. He now knows literally everything that there is to know whether it's past, present, or future.

#8 – All-wise: He has the limitless and perfect ability to know and the inclination to choose the best and highest goal in every situation and the surest means of attaining that goal.

#9 – Transcendent: He is the only one of His kind. He is an utterly different and superior kind of reality than everything else that exists.

#10 – Immutable: He is devoid of change in His nature. As His attributes are now, they have always been and always will be.

#11 – Love: He always and only wills and seeks what is good for us (and creation) and emotionally identifies with us.

#12 – Good: He is always disposed to do what is most beneficial and helpful to everyone and everything including Himself.

#13 – Holy: He is ethically spotless and fully pure. Moral purity is His essence and is totally devoid of any evil to any degree.

#14 – Righteous: He is disposed to act so that His holiness is upheld. The giving of His commandments is one of the critical and clear-cut of His actions in that regard.

#15 – Just: He is utterly competent in dealing with morality and immorality. His rewards and punishments are always fully informed and fully fair.

#16 – Wrath: Because He is holy, He has a settled opposition to sin. He always reacts and responds adversely to it.

#17 – Gracious: He is “for” us. Consistent with His holiness, He gives us good things that we don’t deserve and doesn’t give us bad things that we do deserve.

#18 – Joyful: He is the most enthusiastic, passionate, and fun-loving being in the universe.

We can summarize these qualities of God in terms of competence and character. All of His attributes are both infinite and perfect. Infinite means that they are limitless. Perfect means that they are fully developed – are without defect or flaw. Because they are that, He is, in terms of competence, utterly capable and in terms of character, utterly lovely. He is, as a result, beyond comparison or contrast. He is, as the Bible describes Him, “awesome.”

### Knowing God

At this point, we need to get our bearings and place the vision of God that we’ve just built into its overall context. The title of this first part of our *Disciples ‘R’ Us* curriculum is *The First Aim*. Our first aim or chief objective in life should be to love God with our whole being. But as we discussed, loving Him is a process that involves three steps. First, we understand God. Second, we know Him. And third, we love Him as a result of understanding and knowing Him. We have now completed the first of those steps. We understand God.

That gives us the foundation we need for taking the second step, knowing Him. Those who build a purposeful vision of Him as we’ve done know Him rationally. But what I’m discussing now is knowing Him experientially. Knowing Him rationally doesn’t lead naturally to loving Him. Knowing Him experientially does. So, let’s examine what it means to know Him experientially and what our part in that is by examining a psalm that teaches us both of those things, Psalm 63:1-8.

In 1893, Francis Thompson published one of the most influential religious poems in history, *The Hound of Heaven*. It pictures God pursuing each of us as a hound pursues a hare, persistently and patiently, seeking to draw us into relationship with Him. But as Psalm 63:1-8 instructs us, we must reciprocate to know Him. We must be hounds of earth who pursue Him.

The title of this Psalm tells us where David was when he wrote it. He was in the wilderness of Judah, which the last line in verse 1 describes as parched and cheerless. 2 Samuel 15-16 recounts what he was doing there. He was fleeing from Absalom, his son, who had dethroned him and was attempting to kill him. It was one of the worst times in David's life. But thankfully for us, it drove Him to pursue God and to tell us about it in Psalm 63.

Notice the Psalm's very first words, "O God, You are my God." "My" is a pronoun that personalizes things. *Yahoo*, for instance, advertises *My Yahoo*, which personalizes our home page. That's exactly what the pronoun "my" before the noun "God" in verse 1 does. It personalizes Him to us. He was David's God. He is my God. He is your God. That reveals the most staggering fact of our existence. We can have a personal relationship with the dominant reality of the universe, the One who made it, God. That relationship involves two things.

The first is found in verse 7. David uses a lovely metaphor here, "the shadow of Your wings." There are 12 references in the Bible to God's "shadow," which represents His invisible but very real presence. He is with us always and everywhere, just as our shadow is. David writes about that in verse 7 that, "I sing for joy." God's presence gives him joy and there's only one reason it can - because He senses it.

That reveals the first thing relationship with God involves - a sense of His presence. We have a strong feeling or impression of Him being with and in us.

So called "smart" weapons of warfare are a good analogy here. Some of those weapons are so "smart" that they're actually able to detect being watched by radar. So, the F-15 fighter pilot knows that someone is watching or tracking his plane. Weapons that aren't "smart," however, aren't able to detect being watched by radar. They don't know that someone is watching or tracking them.

It's like that with people and God. God is with them always and everywhere. He's listening to and looking at everything they say and do. But most don't sense that. They're like "non-smart" weapons that don't detect being watched or tracked. Some, however, do sense that. They're like "smart" weapons that do detect being watched or tracked. They have a strong feeling or impression of Him being with and in them.

Stop for a moment and think about how much time you spend outside the presence of human beings every day. I know something when I do. Objectively, I'm not alone. God is right there with me. Subjectively, I rarely feel alone. I usually sense God's presence with me as strongly as I do my when a person or people are with me.

Relationship with God involves a second thing, in verse 8. In the first line, we do something – cling to God. In the second line, He does something – upholds us. What we have here is what commentator Derek Kidner calls “divine-human interplay.”

Interplay is the essence of relationship isn't it. In my relationship with my wife, for instance, I speak and listen *to* her and she speaks and listens *to* me. And I act *in relation to* her and she acts *in relation to* me. We're deeply involved in each other's lives so that there's constant interplay, interaction, between us. It's the same, or at least can be, with God and us.

“The Lord told me to share the gospel with a friend of mine.” “God said that I need to quit being so sensitive.” “The Holy Spirit led me to this church.” Those are all things that I've heard Christians say and I believe them. The Lord did *tell*. God did *say*. The Holy Spirit did *lead*. God does speak to us.

Last week, on January 19, I preached a sermon titled *The Starting Point* that the Holy Spirit definitely led me to preach and assisted me in preparing. Or I used to have a desire for admiration and praise that I don't have now because the Holy Spirit removed it from me. My analysis is a correct one. God did *assist* me in preparing that sermon and did *remove* that desire from me. God does act in relation to us.

Those things illustrate that in our relationship with God, we speak and listen *to* Him and He speaks and listens *to* us. And we act *in relation to* Him and He acts *in relation to* us. We're deeply involved in each other's lives so that there's constant interplay, interaction, between us.

That then is what a personal relationship with God involves: a strong sense of His presence and constant interplay with Him. Now that we know what a personal relationship with God is, let's take a look at what it requires of us. It's three things.

The first, in verse 3, is that we must value God and what He offers. Notice the words “lovingkindness” and “life” in this verse. The word “lovingkindness” represents what God offers. The word “life” represents what the world offers. Now, what God offers is invisible and subtle. In contrast, what the world offers is visible and vivid. Most people, therefore, are drawn far more strongly to the latter than the former. That explains why, for instance, most people rise in the morning far hungrier for bacon and eggs than they are for God.

But while the world and what it offers are visible and vivid, God and what He offers are far more valuable. David's assessment in verse 3 makes that perfectly clear. He says that God and what He offers are “better” than the world and what it offers.

How does he know that? The words "have seen" and "To see" in verse 2 tell us. It's because He examined the true nature of both. He gave detailed analysis and thought to both – and so should we.

Examine, for instance, the nature of what the world offers, peoples' admiration and praise. Also examine the nature of what God offers, His admiration and praise. People's is short-lived and unaffecting. His is permanent and enriching inwardly and enhancing outwardly. Knowing that, I value God's admiration and praise far more than I do people's.

Or examine the nature of what the world offers, friendship with people. Also examine the nature of what God offers, friendship with Jesus. Because they're flesh and blood, people don't have the capacity to care for us in our depths. They can't enter into the core of our being and touch us there. They can't be with us in finality no matter how much they love us. But Jesus, just because He's spiritual, can. Knowing that, I value friendship with Jesus far more than friendship with people.

Those two examples show that anyone who objectively examines them will conclude what David did in verse 3. God and what He offers are far more valuable than the world and what it offers.

That then is the first thing that having a personal relationship with God requires. We must value Him and what He offers the most.

Doing so naturally leads to the second thing it requires, desire. What we value the most, we desire the most. Look at the second and third lines of verse 1 in that regard. David uses two words here, "soul" and "flesh." Those two words together represent the whole being of a person. Notice what he writes about that. With his whole being, he "thirsts" and "yearns" for God. Those are strong words aren't they and teach us this. We must desperately desire God.

A young man named Siddhartha wanted to find God but didn't know how. So he went to a wise old sage in a mountain retreat, whom he heard could tell him. After talking with Siddhartha and discovering what he wanted, the sage took him to the edge of a lake where they sat down and talked some more. Suddenly, he grabbed Siddhartha by the throat, plunged his head in the water, and held him there. Siddhartha tried desperately to escape the sage's iron grip but to no avail. Finally, exhausted from the struggle, he gave up to die. But then the sage pulled him out of the water just as suddenly as he had plunged him in it. Siddhartha immediately gasped for breath and finally got himself under control. Whereupon he began to protest angrily but the sage raised his hand and silenced him as he did. "When you want God as desperately as you have just wanted breath," he firmly instructed, "Then, and only then, will you find Him."

He was right. That's what verse 1 conveys. We must want God as desperately as a drowning man wants breath.

We must want that because desire is the source of action. If we desire something badly enough, we'll take whatever action is necessary to achieve or experience it. If we don't desire it badly enough, we won't. That's especially true of having a personal relationship with God. If we desperately desire Him, we'll do whatever it takes to have that. If we don't desperately desire Him, we won't. It's as simple as that.

"Whatever it takes" is found in verse 1. David declares, "I shall seek you earnestly." That's the third thing that relationship with God requires. We must seek Him earnestly or as I'd say it, pursue Him hotly.

The words David uses to describe his pursuit reveal how we do that. Verse 3 - "My lips will praise You." Verse 4 - "I will lift my hands in Your name." Verse 5 - "My mouth offers praises with joyful lips." Verse 6 - "I remember You" and "I meditate on you." Those declarations teach us what it means to hotly pursue God. We purposely and persistently engage Him with our minds and bodies. We purposely and persistently direct our thoughts and actions to Him.

There are in that regard central activities of mind and body by which we engage God. Let me identify and explain the most important of those.

The primary activity of mind is what is called "practicing the presence of God." A 17<sup>th</sup> century French Carmelite monk named Brother Lawrence coined that expression and perfected the practice it expresses. He spent the last 25 years of his life working in his monastery's kitchen. But it wasn't drudgery for him because he learned how to practice God's presence. He wrote in that regard: "The time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer; and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees at the blessed sacrament." That statement of his reflects what he did. He continually opened his consciousness to God everywhere and in everything he did.

And that's what it means to practice God's presence. The mind is the place of our widest and most basic freedom. Of all the things we do, we have more freedom with respect to what we will think of than anything else. We can choose to think about whatever we want to think about for as long as we want to think about it and whenever and wherever we want to think about it. This freedom we have is a direct freedom. It isn't dependent on anything else. We simply think of whatever it is that we choose to think of.

So, we engage God by choosing to think about Him. When our minds aren't necessarily occupied, we choose to place them on God. We bring Him before our minds in thought and keep Him there as much as we can. in all the activities and experiences of our lives. We use the vision of Him that we've built in this part of our *Disciples 'R' Us* curriculum to achieve that.

Frank Laubach wrote a wonderful little pamphlet titled *The Game with Minutes* that teaches us how to do that. It's easy reading that offers a practical methodology for thinking about God as much as we can. Essentially, we take what we've learned about Him and purposely apply it and look for it in the everyday activities, experiences, events, and circumstances of our lives. The best way to explain it is to illustrate it.

My son Moses bought me a collector's set of Laurel and Hardy DVD's for Christmas. As I'm watching those, I think about God's sense of humor and the joy that He himself experiences watching them with me.

I hear someone set a date for an activity or event and think of God's eternal nature. I received an e-mail from our denominational head quarters reminding me of an Executive Board meeting on February 6. I thought as I read the e-mail that February 6 isn't future for God as it is for me. It's present instead because He's eternal and transcends time because He is.

I eat dinner and don't thank God as much before it as I do through it. I savor each bite and the flavor reminds me of His goodness to us. He could have created us without taste buds, so that we just eat to live. But He created us with taste buds instead so that we could enjoy and experience pleasure as well. Rarely do I eat a meal without reflecting on God through it.

I walk through a grocery store and think of all the time, energy, and money that goes into sustaining my existence. That leads me to then think about God as the great "I am," the self-existent one. Unlike me, He has the power of being within Himself and needs nothing outside of Him to sustain Him.

Those illustrations teach us the primary activity of mind by which we engage God. We practice His presence. We place our minds on Him as much as we can. Doing so trains them. At first, bringing Him before them requires conscious effort. But persistently doing that eventually trains them so that they do it automatically. A compass always points north when it's outside the influence of the nearer magnetic fields. In a similar way, when our minds are trained long enough by our practice of God's presence, they will automatically turn to God when they aren't necessarily or intensely occupied with something else. We find ourselves naturally, thinking about Him.

We must be patient and wait for this to happen. Brother Lawrence claimed it took 10 years of practicing the presence before his mind was trained. It likely won't take that long for you, but however long it takes, be patient and continue doing it. The rewards, believe me, are worth it.

Now let's move to the central activities of the body by which we engage God. Most of these are activities of both engaging God and disciplining our bodies as well. They not only bring us into contact with God but transform our bodily habits as well.

One central activity of engaging God is solitude and silence. This is one of the most radical of all activities. It and it alone creates the possibility of a deep relationship with God that can withstand all the external events, good and bad, up to the point of our deaths. A.G. Sertillanges explained it this way: "Retirement is the laboratory of the spirit; interior solitude and silence are its two wings. All great works are prepared in the desert, including the redemption of the world. The precursors, the followers, the Master Himself, all obeyed or have to obey one and the same law. Prophets, apostles, preachers, martyrs, pioneers of knowledge, inspired artists in every art, ordinary men and the Man-God, all pay tribute to loneliness, to the life of silence, to the night." How right he was.

To practice solitude means to abstain from human interaction by withdrawing and being alone for a period of time. We close ourselves away and purposely deny ourselves human companionship.

Silence is the partner of solitude. They're inseparable in fact. Having closed ourselves away from human companionship, we close ourselves off from sounds as well. I'm talking here about sound of any kind – words, music, traffic, and even the sounds of nature if we can.

What we do in this aloneness is dwell on our experience of isolation. We don't spend our time alone thinking about our golf game or our Sunday school lesson or what our spouse is doing. We place our minds on the aloneness and silence that surround us and the living God who is immersed in that silence. We focus on just being there in the aloneness of the moment with Him, listening for Him to speak to or act on us.

The length of time that we'll spend in solitude and silence varies with the settings and the opportunities we have. Almost every day offers periods of time when we can be alone and silent if we choose. We also schedule it by devoting time in our weekly calendars to it. One Christian I knew set aside half of his lunch hour every work day to be alone and silent in his office. The other half of it he devoted to Bible study or prayer. My point is this. We need to have regular times of solitude that we supplement with longer periods when the opportunity arises to do that.

Solitude, along with prayer, was the most noticeable discipline in the life of Jesus. He often combined the two in fact, prayer followed by solitude or vice versa. Consider these passages. In Matthew 4:1-11, He inaugurated His ministry by spending 40 days alone in the wilderness. In Luke 6:12, He spent the night alone on the desert hills before choosing the 12 disciples. In Matthew 14:13, He withdrew from everyone to a lonely place after receiving the news that Herod had killed John the Baptist. In Matthew 14:23, He went up into the hills by Himself after feeding the 5000 with five loaves and two fish. In Mark 1:35, He went out to a secluded place before everyone else got up. And finally, in Luke 5:16, Jesus is said to have often slipped away by Himself to the wilderness.

I've taken the time to mention these verses because of what they teach us. Solitude was one of the central activities of Jesus. It was indispensable to the depth of His relationship with God the Father and to the strength of His person, ministry and life. If it was so for Him, how much more must it be so for us? If Jesus needed solitude and silence, then we certainly do too.

Anthony Bloom tells the story of an elderly woman who had been working at prayer with all her might but without sensing God's presence. When she asked her archbishop about that, he wisely counseled her to do this: "Go to your room each day and for fifteen minutes knit before the face of God. But I forbid you to say one word of prayer. You just knit and try to enjoy the peace of your room." So that's what the elderly woman did and in time, she began to enter into the silence created by her knitting. She described her experience this way: "I perceived that the silence was not simply an absence of noise, but that the silence had substance. It was not the absence of something but the presence of something." As she continued her daily knitting, she ultimately discovered that "at the heart of the silence there was He who is all stillness, all peace, all poise."

That story illustrates what happens in the quietness and isolation of our solitude. We experience and hear God. I know that's true because I experience it. My closest and most meaningful times with God are in solitude. Theresa of Avila said it so well, "Settle yourself in solitude and you will come upon Him in yourself."

A second central activity by which we engage God is fasting. To fast means to abstain in some significant way from eating food and perhaps drinking water for a specified period of time. There are three kinds of fasts.

One is a partial fast. We don't abstain from eating but just restrict what we eat. We give up eating one or more of our favorite foods for a determined period of time.

The second kind of fast is a normal fast. In this kind, we abstain from eating any food, solid or liquid, which include things like broth, grape juice and so on. The only thing that we consume is water. That's apparently what Jesus did during His forty days in the wilderness. We can infer that from Luke 4:1-4. Verse 2 says that "He ate nothing" but doesn't say that He drank nothing. We can also infer from the temptation, which was to turn stones into bread, that He wasn't thirsty. Otherwise, the devil would have tempted Him in that direction as well.

There is a third kind of fast – the absolute fast. In this kind, we abstain from both food and water. There is total abstention from nourishment of any kind. In Esther 4:15-17, for instance, Esther called the Jews to a total fast declaring, "fast for me; do not eat or drink for three days." Paul practiced a total fast following his Damascus Road experience. According to Acts 9:9, "And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank."

Active human beings cannot normally live without water for more than three days. So an absolute fast that goes beyond that period of time would also be a supernatural fast. God Himself would have to keep the person alive. Examples of absolute fasts that are also supernatural are the fasts of Moses and Elijah on Mount Horeb in Deuteronomy 9:9 and 1 Kings 19:8 respectively. We see here that the absolute fast is exceptional not normal. If we do it, it must be commanded by God and last no longer than three days.

However we do it, fasting primes us to feast on God.

In John 4:31-34, the disciples tried to persuade Jesus to eat food. They did so because He apparently had been fasting and hadn't eaten for awhile and they were concerned about his physical condition as a result. But He responded in verse 32 that He didn't need to eat because He had "food to eat that you do not know about." He then explained in verse 34 what that food was – doing the will of Father God.

These verses teach us that there is a source of physical nourishment other than food. That source is the power of God that can actually sustain us bodily just as food does. We experience that power as we do His will generally and fast particularly.

As Richard Foster says it, "Fasting is feasting!" As we fast from food, we feast on God and His power. A Christian poet Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote a poem that articulates this truth so vividly. It goes like this: "I drank at every vine. The last was like the first. I came upon no wine so wonderful as thirst. \*\* I gnawed at every root. I ate of every plant. I came upon no fruit so wonderful as want. \*\* Feed the grape and the bean to the vintner and the monger; I will lie down lean with my thirst and my hunger."

That poem expresses what those who fast experience. God sustains them and gives them both physical and spiritual nourishment. I've never once noticed, for instance, even after 24 hours without food, any diminishment in my energy levels or strength. I feel hunger but not weakness. I feel well physically and spiritually as I feast on God and His power.

Study is a third central activity by which we engage God. We can and should study a host of verbal and non-verbal realities, but depth of relationship with God requires study of His written word, the Bible.

To study the Bible means, generally, two things.

First, we concentrate on and comprehend it. Our objective here is to correctly interpret the text before us. Our concern isn't "what it means to me" but what the author actually meant when he wrote it.

Second, we reflect upon and apply what we comprehend to the persons and lives of others and us. We determine what the meaning of the text implies to the persons and lives of others and us.

Interpreting the Bible is something that all of us can and must learn. Doing so requires studying a discipline called hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is about learning and applying the right principles for interpreting the Bible. Hermeneutics isn't just necessary for seminary students and preachers. It's necessary for anyone who wants to correctly learn and apply the Bible. That's why our *Disciples 'R' Us* curriculum contains a section of study titled *Wordworms*. This section teaches the principles for correctly interpreting and applying the Bible, which are the activities that comprise study.

There are two other approaches to the Bible that we can use as means of engaging God.

One is *lectio divina*, also called spiritual reading. The purpose of this approach is to meet God in the text before us and to be transformed in the process. We do five things.

First, we choose a text that is long enough to stretch our thoughts but short enough to cover in the time we have.

Second, we read the text all the way through without pausing, taking in what we read with a sense of expectancy. We expect that we will meet God and that He will speak to us and work in us through the text.

Third, we read the text again, slowly, taking the time to highlight, underline, or write down any word, phrase, or idea that seems to come off the page to us. We trust that God is making them to do so.

Fourth, we quietly reflect on the parts of the text that we highlighted, underlined, or wrote down. We're alert to something as we do – any connections God may make between that and the particulars of our own persons and lives. We may even whisper a prayer asking Him, "What do you want me to see here?"

And finally, fifth, we speak to God about what He revealed to us through the text. What He revealed determines the content of our conversation with Him. We confess, repent, express thanks, rejoice, express relief, and so on as His revelation to us prompts us to.

There is a third approach to the Bible that we can use as a means of engaging God. It's meditation. Meditation has to do with narratives that describe what someone experienced or did. Using our imagination, we place ourselves in the narrative. We imagine what it would be like if we were there – what we would see, hear, smell, feel, or taste. We ask God before we do to meet with us as we meditate on the text before us.

Engaging the Bible in the three ways that I've explained – study, *lectio divina*, and meditation – is a central activity for engaging and thus coming to know God.

To this point, we addressed three practices by which we engage God: solitude and silence, fasting, and study. A fourth practice is prayer.

The essence of prayer is request. We ask God to do or give something. Prayer isn't praising or thanking as good as those things are. It's asking.

Andrew Murray wrote a classic book titled *With Christ in the School of Prayer*. Jesus was the most accomplished pray-er who ever lived. But as Murray's title conveys, He was also the most accomplished teacher on prayer who ever lived. So, let's learn what He teaches us about it in His classic text on the subject, Luke 11:1-8.

Verse 1 records the circumstance from which this text arose. The disciples had watched Jesus pray and were so impressed by what they saw that they requested, "Lord, teach us to pray." That request reveals something about prayer that all of us need to know. It's learned behavior. We talk about people being born singers, born artists, born athletes, and so on. But no one is ever a born pray-er. Prayer is something we must learn and keep on learning.

I say "keep on learning" because no one ever masters it. I've prayed thousands of prayers, both public and private. But I still have more to learn about it. Thomas Merton said it this way: "We do not want to be beginners. But let us be convinced of the fact that we will never be anything else but beginners all of our life." He's right. We all have something in common. We have more to learn about prayer.

Jesus teaches some of the most important things we need to know in Luke 11. We might call this text "Prayer 101" because in it, He teaches us the basics about it.

The first two basics, in verse 1, are about when and where to pray. That verse says, "Jesus was praying in a certain place." He prayed at certain times and in certain places and so should we.

Don't misunderstand what that means. Jesus teaches elsewhere that we should pray without ceasing. We should pray at *all* times and in *all* places as we're able. That's true. But it's also true that we should pray regularly, at least daily, at a *certain* time and in a *certain* place.

As for the time, we should pray when we're at our best. Jesus often prayed early in the morning while it was dark. Perhaps that's why many advise us to make our regular prayer time in the morning. It's the best way to start our day, they claim. That's all well and good but what if morning is our worst time of day. People are different in that regard. Some of us are morning people and some of us aren't. It may be that you aren't. It may be that even God wouldn't want to talk with you in the morning. So, give Him our best time, the time of day when we're best able to pray clearly and enthusiastically – whatever that is.

The same is true of the place. We should not only pray *when* we're at our best but *where* as well. Again, we can and should pray everywhere. But we also can and should pray regularly in a specific place. Alluding to Matthew 6:6, we call that place our "prayer closet." That term refers to a specifically chosen place that supports not hinders our attempts to pray.

For Jesus, who was constantly traveling, it was often out of doors in a place of beauty and peace – on the side of a mountain, by the sea, in a garden, and so on. For us, it should be a place that is likewise conducive to prayer – in front of a window that has a view, by a garden in our backyard, in a comfortable corner of our office, and so on.

I read about a businessman who made the corner of his office his place of prayer. He placed relics there including a crown of thorns and a shepherd's staff and often holds one when he prays.

There's a distinct advantage to using the same place over and over again for prayer. Doing so lends sanctity to it. A couple I know has a favorite booth at a particular restaurant. That booth has become their special place over the years, one that enriches their experiences together. In the same kind of way, meeting with God regularly in one place makes it our place – His and ours. It becomes sacred over time and enriches our experience there. It actually helps us enter more deeply into prayer.

Those then are the first two basics we learn in Christ's School of Prayer. We should pray when and where we're at our best.

Luke 11 teaches us a third basic – what to pray about. Notice the three requests in verses 3-4. First, give us our daily bread. Give us the things we need. Second, forgive our sins. Have pity on us when we do bad things. And third, lead us not into temptation. Don't let bad things happen to us. Those three requests reveal what we should pray about – things that actually matter to us.

What we do here is to pray what *is* in us, not what *ought to be* in us. We should pray about weather, health, tests, finances, or anything else that matters to us. God is our Father and loves us. So, what matters to us, matters to Him, which allows us to address it in prayer.

That's the best way I know of to deal with a wandering mind. I have that problem sometimes and possibly so do you. We try to get focused in prayer but our minds wander to other things: a costly repair on the car, our desire to write a book, a good time we had with our children or grandchildren, a critical word that someone spoke, someone's gruff treatment of us, a worrisome medical test, and so on.

Most Christians view those wandering thoughts as barriers. But maybe we should start viewing them as stepping-stones instead, stepping-stones to prayer. When our minds wander, it may be wandering to what our heart needs to speak to God about the most. So, we do just that. We speak to him about the thing or things to which our minds are wandering.

I was beginning to pray, for example, and my mind wandered to something that annoys me, the utter fiscal irresponsibility of our President and Congress. So, I spoke to God about that. I asked Him to give me a heart of compassion for the President and particular congressional leaders as individuals. I also asked Him to make their minds clear and their hearts responsive to what is good, right, and true.

Anyway, praying about things that truly matter to us is critical. The circle of our interest grows in the largeness of God's love as we do. The loftier and nobler things that don't matter to us eventually come to matter to us.

Having prayed verses 3-4 over the years, I eventually found myself drawn to praying verse 2 as well. Verse 2, in fact, mean more to me than verses 3-4 do. What I want and pray about the most are that God be hallowed (esteemed by the world) and that His kingdom come (His will be done everywhere on earth, like Congress for instance).

There's a fourth basic that this text teaches us – how to pray. The little parable Jesus tells in verses 5-8 instructs us to pray persistently.

The Greek word translated "persistence" in verse 8 can also mean "shamelessness." Both are true here. We should pray persistently. We should keep at our request until it's resolved one way or another. We should also pray shamelessly. We reason with God in detail about our request.

Some of the Bible's best prayers are just that, persistent and shameless. I think of the greatest intercessory prayers ever prayed, that of Moses in Exodus 32 or Abraham's in Genesis 18. Commit a week of devotional time to those two prayers, studying and contemplating them. They flesh out in real life the persistence and shamelessness that the parable teaches.

So many Christians equate the "how to" of prayer with the polite monologues they hear in church. But the stuff of prayers offered in real life is far different than that. Walter Wink's commentary on Abraham's prayer in Genesis 18 captures the essence of this. He argues that the moral of that prayer is that it pays to haggle with God. He writes in that regard: "Biblical prayer is impertinent, persistent, shameless, indecorous. It is more like haggling in an oriental bazaar than the polite monologues of the churches."

Most Christians are uncomfortable with that but they shouldn't be. Don't get me wrong. God is our Maker and Judge and we should fear Him. But we should also welcome His invitation to come freely and openly to Him. We should never presume on His grace in prayer. But at the same time, we should recognize and act on it.

I had a devout Christian friend whose business was on the verge of bankruptcy. So, I prayed and asked God to bless His business and make it successful. I reminded Him as I did that this man worked hard and lived simply, that his faith was widely known to his unsaved employees and business associates, and that they would likely relate his struggles to his faith. "You know what they're going to think, Yahweh," I said, "If that is the way God treats His friends, I don't want to be one." I then called His attention to verse 2 here and the request that He be hallowed after which I said, "My greatest desire is that his employees and business associates will esteem you. Please empower and prosper this man's business so that they will."

I've learned the "how to" of prayer. I take God seriously because He's dangerous. But I take His invitation in verses 5-8 just as seriously. I pray, therefore, persistently and shamelessly.

We've now taken Prayer 101 from Jesus. We've learned when to pray (when we're at our best), where to pray (where we're at our best), what we should pray about (the things that matter to us), and how we should pray (persistently and shamelessly). Now, let's make and carry out the decision to live out what we've learned.

There's a fifth bodily activity by which we engage God. It's worship. I can't exaggerate how critical worship is to our relationship with Him. It can be argued that it's the grandest and noblest thing a human being can do. It reaches not only into heaven but also into the very heart of God Himself. There is nothing as significant and noble as that!

There is confusion today over what worship is. So let's be precise in defining it. Two activities comprise it. First, we direct our thoughts to the person and works of God, which in turns stirs our emotions. Second, we then express to Him and sometime others what we think and feel about Him.

We can and should do this alone, all week long. I routinely worship Him as the circumstances of life prompt and allow me to. Some activity, experience, or event occurs, which leads me to think and feel something about His person or work. I then express what I think or feel to Him.

I was reading about the incredibly complex and numerous molecular mechanisms that eyesight involves. My mind soon turned to God the inventor and creator of those and I put down the article and worshipped Him. I began to mentally praise and adore Him for the mind-numbing intelligence and power behind those mechanisms. I even recited out loud the words to the chorus we sing, "To Him who sits on the throne and unto the Lamb, be power and glory and honor forever." That is private worship.

But our worship should also be corporate. The Bible pictures God's people gathered to corporately worship Him. That is the primary purpose of our gathering together here on Sunday morning. Together, as a body, we direct our thoughts to God's person and works. We then express the awesomeness of them together as the body of Christ.

There are many forms by which we can achieve the expression part of our worship. Some churches employ high liturgy and others low liturgy. A Lutheran church, for instance, will be much more formal than an Assemblies of God church. It will also use much more ritual and symbol than the Assemblies church.

But that's okay because the Bible nowhere prescribes a particular form for worship. It gives us great freedom in that regard. It teaches us that the forms are not the worship. As Foster points out, they only lead us into the worship. So we can worship in many different ways, which explains all of the worship styles that we see in churches.

Many churches today, for example, worship through choruses or praise songs sung over and over again. My home church, for instance, sings for half an hour and then the pastor preaches and that's pretty much it.

Those are the two forms of their worship. I personally don't like that, singing several choruses over and over again. I like a service that has singing but also readings, testimonies, and more. Neither form is right or wrong. Both are acceptable and we choose the one that enables us to best minister to God.

Psalm 95 teaches us what worship is really all about. From ancient times, the church has used this psalm widely as both a call and a guide to worship. So let's examine what it teaches us about that.

I begin with verse 6 and the word "worship." Ezekiel 44:15 tells us what the essence of worship is. It's ministering to God.

I know that sounds odd to a lot of people. They normally think of ministering in terms of human beings. We minister to human beings not God. After all, He's self-sufficient. He doesn't need anyone or anything including you and me. That's true.

But something else is also true. God's heart isn't made of stone. His heart is in fact the most sensitive and tender of all, which explains what worship is. It's touching God's heart. It's you and I, finite human beings, moving and pleasing the infinite God. Wow, what an incredible thing that is.

And it shows us the priority of worship. Worship comes before work. Ministry to God comes before ministry to man. We talk about people who worship but don't work and serve. That is hypocrisy. But people who work and serve but don't worship are even worse. That is idolatry. It is deifying service and work.

Now that we know what worship is, let's examine how we should do it. The Bible gives us a guiding principle in that regard. We should worship with our whole being. No aspect of our being should be excluded. That means three things.

First, we must worship rationally. You can see that in verses 3-5, which focus on the person and works of God. Our mind must be engaged. We not only have to think about God and His works. We also have to think correctly about them.

Jesus makes that very point in John 4:24. He declares there that we must worship God in spirit and in truth. Worship requires thinking rightly about God and His works. And to think rightly about them we must study and learn them in detail. Our worship must be worthy of Him and it can only be if we truly understand His person and works.

That's one of the reasons we did what we did – built a purposeful, thorough, and objective vision of Him. We must know in detail who God is before we can love Him. But it's also true that we must know in detail who God is before we can worship Him in truth. The study of God and His word and world opens the way for worship.

Anyway, our worship must be rational. Our minds must be engaged and focused on the person and works of God. That necessarily means of course that if we're sleeping or daydreaming during a worship service, we aren't worshipping. Being in a worship service doesn't automatically make a person a worshipper.

Worshipping with our whole being means a second thing. We must worship emotionally. Notice the two different moods of worship in Psalm 95 – the passion and joy of verses 1-2 and the reverence and awe of verses 6-7a. Those moods involve deep-seated emotions and desires that arise *from* God and *for* God. His nature and works are so wonderful, so awesome, that we absolutely esteem and admire Him. And that attitude of ours generates the emotions and feelings that characterize our worship. Our worship is, thus, *from* Him.

Notice that it isn't *from* the ambiance in which we do it. When it's the music or the singing or any other sensory stimuli that generate our emotions in worship, then it isn't genuine worship. The dynamics are more like those in a sporting event or music concert than those in the worship we see in the Bible. Our emotions and desires must arise *from* God and not the milieu in which we're worshipping.

But our emotions and desires are also *for* Him. We want Him to know how much we esteem and admire Him and achieve that by expressing it in worship.

Worshipping with our whole being means a final thing. We must worship bodily. We must not just think and feel. We must act as well. God wants us to give our body its fair share in worship.

That certainly involves our tongues. We must express verbally what we think and feel about Him and His works. That is primary in worship. We make known what we think and feel by praying, singing, testifying, publicly reading, and other activities of the tongue.

But God wants us to involve the rest of our body as well. We do that by making it have postures that are consistent with what we're thinking and feeling. Verse 6 reveals two of those postures – kneeling and bowing down. Others include *standing* in Deuteronomy 29:10,15; clapping hands in Psalm 47:1; lifting hands in Psalm 63:4; lifting up the head and eyes in Psalm 123:1; and one that we Quakers don't usually do, dancing in Psalm 150:4.

So that is the guiding principle of how to worship. We should worship God with our whole being – rationally, emotionally, and bodily.

Now, Psalm 95 teaches us three other principles about worship that we need to grasp and upon which we need to act. Let's look at each.

The first is found in the words "let us" in verses 1, 2, and 6. Those words imply that worship is something that we do, not something that God does and that's true. Worship isn't God acting with regard to us. It's we acting with regard to Him. That means that we are worshipping even if God does nothing.

I've heard pastors say and I've said it myself that we go into worship anticipating what God will do. There is nothing wrong with that as long as we recognize that what God will do has nothing to do with our worship itself. What we should do instead is to go into worship anticipating what we will do. Our concerns should be focused on worshipping as I've explained it today – with our whole being.

There's a second principle that Psalm 96 teaches us and it's a natural corollary of the first one. Worship is about God not us. I counted all the names, personal pronouns, and metaphors that refer to God in these 11 verses. Would someone like to guess how many there are? There are 26. God dominates this worship psalm and appropriately so. That's because worship is about Him not us.

Most churches and Christians act as if that isn't so.

I've seen several church ads, for instance, inviting people to come to worship services. The emphasis of those ads is how uplifted and inspired people will be if they come. Then there's a church I know that has a separate worship service for its young people on Sunday morning. The youth leader explains that service this way: "We want our young people to have a good worship experience. So we gear our service to what they want and like."

Those ads and that service illustrate something. The worship services of most churches are about people not God. Most pastors, and I was as guilty as anyone for most of my life, are more concerned about the impact of the worship services on people than on God. The pressures in that direction are great. We know that if people are pleased, they will come to the services. But if they aren't pleased, they won't.

So, we do two things. First, we plan worship services to please people primarily and God secondarily if at all. And second, we judge their success or failure in those terms. We deem them successful if the people are pleased. We deem them a failure if they aren't pleased or are displeased.

What normally pleases people in that regard is having an experience. That is probably the primary objective of modern American worshippers – to have an experience. Having a worship experience in fact has become the defining objective or goal Christians today. That is so important to Christians that they actually define spirituality in those terms. We're spiritual people if we have a worship experience on Sunday. We aren't spiritual if we don't.

But that is crooked thinking. Again let me say that it is a valid desire to have an encounter with God, an experience, when we worship. But it is invalid to define the success or failure of worship in those terms. We must grasp that worship is about God not people and act as if that is so.

That means two things. First, we should plan our worship, both individual and corporate, to please God. And second, we should judge the success or failure of our worship in those terms. If our worship displeases the people but pleases Him, it's successful. If it pleases the people but displeases Him, it's a failure.

To know what pleases Him of course, we must study His word, especially the Psalms, and figure it out. We should then worship that way.

What I said about bodily postures illustrates what I mean. I am a reserved individual and found raising my hands in worship, individually and corporately, an unnatural and uncomfortable thing to do. So I never raised my hands in worship. But then I studied the book of Psalms and learned what I taught you about bodily postures. Since raising my hands in worship pleases God, I did it even though it didn't please me. As I did that over the years, it became more natural to me and comfortable for me. It is something that comes easy to me now and pleases God.

Psalms 95 teaches us a third principle about worship. Worship arises from spirituality. That's the gist of verses 8-11 generally and the words "know My ways" specifically in verse 10. You know what spirituality is. It's purposely and relentlessly interacting with the spiritual realm. It's engaging our selves daily and constantly with God and the realities of His kingdom. Well, worship experience arises from that.

That doesn't mean though that people have to be spiritual to have the experience we discussed previously. Sometimes the church service itself provides a highly charged or deeply moving environment. The forms and mediums of the service itself excite or stir people. So they have an emotional experience and a powerful one at that – even though they aren't interacting with the spiritual realm.

I watched a movie about three neighbor ladies who had an intense dislike for each other. They quarreled, gossiped, and competed incessantly all week long. And yet, they went to the same church every Sunday morning and really got down praising the Lord. They had a dynamic experience there – that rose from the highly charged atmosphere that the service itself created.

What a contrast true worship is. In true worship experience, environment is important but secondary. It hinders or assists our passion and joy or reverence and awe but doesn't create it. What does create it is engaging our minds with God and His works. And that creates it because we have an overall life of interaction with Him.

The bottom line is this. True worship experience arises from spirituality not environment. So, let's purposely and relentlessly interact with the spiritual realm. We'll have true worship experiences individually and corporately if we do.

I've said a great deal about worship. If you and I grasp what has been said and live it out, we will worship well.

A sixth activity of engaging God and His kingdom at hand is linked with worship. That activity is celebration. Celebration completes worship by dwelling on the utter competence and utter loveliness of God as shown in His goodness to us.

There isn't anything complicated about the practice of celebration. In it, we enjoy things or get pleasure from things by taking God's greatness and beauty of character into account. We can do that in isolation of course but it's often done with others.

Scripture records God's people celebrating. In Exodus 15:20-21, Miriam led the Israelites in singing and dancing to express their joy over God's deliverance of them from Pharaoh's army. In Judges 5, Deborah and Barak celebrated their divine victory over the King of Canaan by singing. In 2 Samuel 6:12-16, David celebrated by leaping and dancing before Yahweh with all of his might.

God Himself impressed upon the Israelites the importance of celebration in Deuteronomy 14. God commanded them to take a vacation trip to Jerusalem to tithe money or goods to Him. In verses 26, He commanded them what to do with the tithe when they arrived: "You may spend the money for whatever your heart desires: for oxen, or sheep, or wine, or strong drink, or whatever your heart desires; and there you shall eat in the presence of the Yahweh your God and rejoice, you and your household." Do you grasp what God not only endorses here but commands? It's that His people celebrate sensually and robustly. It's that they experience pleasure and joy together.

God intends that we purposely and routinely celebrate – as we're able. In his book *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster suggests six ways that we can celebrate.

#1 – Sing, dance, and shout. There are appropriate occasions to sing, dance, and shout and when those occasions arise, we should do it.

#2 – Laugh. I preached a sermon on this activity some weeks ago. We look for and embrace opportunities to laugh.

#3 – Accent the creative gifts of fantasy and imagination. I have a basketball hoop in my driveway and use my imagination to put myself in different game situations, like 5 second left in the NCAA championship game, my team is behind by 1 point and I take the last shot. Fantasy and imagination can be the source of much celebration.

#4 – Relish the creativity of others. Enjoy the creative efforts of others in music, art, play production, writing, and more.

#5 – Make family events into times of celebration and thanksgiving. We can celebrate rites of passage like birthdays, graduations, marriages, anniversaries and lesser ones as we see fit.

#6 – Take advantage of the festivals of our culture and use them to celebrate. Those festivals include the nation's holidays. We can also create our own festivals as we see fit.

Those are Foster's suggestions. But more generally, we can celebrate by sucking the marrow out of life as poet Walt Whitman said it. We identify and joyfully embrace the best that everyday activities, experiences, events, and things present to us. We take God into account as we do, relating what's before us to His greatness and goodness.

You might think I'm strange but I do that with food. I don't just eat Whoppers and Reese Cups for instance. I celebrate eating them. I savor every bite attributing the pleasure I get in doing so to God.

Celebration is a vital ingredient in achieving the abundance of life God wants for us. Dallas Willard explains why: "But this world is radically unsuited to the heart of the human person, and the suffering and terror of life will not be removed no matter how 'spiritual' we become." He's right. We aren't suited to the injustice and pain of our fallen world. We cannot therefore have a vibrant and joyful faith in God without routine and heartfelt celebration. When you and I experience any healthy and moral pleasure, we're on God's ground. Celebration is an antidote for the sadness that can so pervade our lives and gives us a sense of perspective. It helps us grasp that it isn't just bad things that happen to good people, but good things that happen to them as well.

We engage God and His kingdom at hand through a seventh bodily practice. That practice is fellowship. Fellowship refers to engaging other disciples and friends of Jesus through common activities like worship, study, celebration, service, eating, and more. We're in the presence of disciples and friends of Jesus, in other words, and are doing things with or to them. This can involve assembling together in large groups or in small ones like ours tonight.

You're familiar I'm sure with the celebrated statement of Jesus in Matthew 18:20, "For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst." Is Jesus with you and me when we're alone? He obviously is. So why does He state what He does in verse 20 as if it's different than that? It's because it is different than that. Something special happens when disciples and friends of Jesus are gathered. Their gathering elicits a sustained manifestation of His presence that those attuned to Him can sense.

We need to grasp that God designed our salvation to be a communal experience. Each of us as individuals does have our own unique relationship with God that we must cultivate and sustain. But depth of relationship with Him requires regular conjunction with others who also have it. In fact, the quality of individual relationship with Him is significantly diminished when we fail to have that.

Consider Paul's celebrated metaphor that the church is "Christ's body" as he calls it in 1 Corinthians 12. That whole chapter drips with the essential nature of followers of Jesus engaging each other and acting on each other's behalf. The Holy Spirit gives each follower spiritual gifts that are to be used to benefit other followers in interaction with them. This dynamic reveals people lovingly reciprocating in needs and ministries, which creates dynamic human relationships that are second only to relationship with God.

As a practical matter, we practice fellowship by gathering with disciples of Jesus as we can. Our 8:30 unprogrammed and 10:45 programmed worship services offer opportunities to do so. Our Sunday school classes, discipleship classes on Wednesday nights and Saturday mornings, and men's and women's groups during the week do as well. In a hectic world, we need to make time for fellowshipping with followers of Jesus.

Doing so reinforces our faith that the secular culture all around us challenges on a daily basis. American Christians today comprise a cognitive minority. A cognitive minority is a group of people who adhere to a generally rejected worldview. To sustain that worldview requires being together with people of like mind, which generates the courage and strength to maintain it. Few are the people who will remain devoted to the radical truths of Scripture absent a consistent experience of fellowship.

Fellowship also enhances our lives with God. Each of us desires high levels of love, peace, and joy in our lives with Him. Fellowship is required to achieve and sustain those levels. Our horizontal connection with disciples of Jesus is linked to our vertical connection with God, and supports the Holy Spirit's work of creating the conditions of love, peace, and joy in us.

Fellowship is linked with a eighth activity by which we engage God and His kingdom at hand. That activity is confession.

To confess means that we communicate to some person or group of persons our weaknesses, failures, or sins. We tell it like it is to others, the "it" being what we are and do. We let them know who we really are without holding anything important back. We become completely transparent before them. As Dallas Willard says it, "We lay down the burden of hiding and pretending, which normally takes up such a dreadful amount of human energy." Doing this engages others and allows us to be engaged by others in the most profound depths of our souls.

This discipline functions hand in hand with fellowship. I say that because the people to whom we need to confess should be Christians whom we can trust and whom we know love us. Confession to the wrong person or group can be a damaging thing.

I do need to make a quick point before we go any further. The kind of confession that I'm discussing now doesn't replace private confession. Before the Protestant Reformation, the Catholic Church bound people by making them think their confessions had to be to a person, specifically a priest in the confessional. One of the significant contributions of the Protestant Reformation was to make people realize that we don't ultimately need a human mediator. That we can confess directly to God and have our sins forgiven. That was a dramatic breakthrough that liberated people from the bondage the church had put them under. Thus, whenever we sin, and there are no exceptions to this, we must confess first and foremost to God Himself.

But confession to another person or persons does have its proper and helpful place. Even the Father of the Protestant Reformation itself, Martin Luther, believed in mutual brotherly confession. He wrote about that, "Therefore when I admonish you to confession I am admonishing you to be a Christian." Besides that, brotherly confession has historically sparked genuine revivals of personal piety and holiness. The Asbury Revival in the early 70's, for instance, began when a student publicly confessed his sins in a chapel service. Confession, to others, is a highly charged spiritual activity that makes it a mainstay in our spiritual lives.

The Biblical basis for confession is found in James 5:13-16, focusing on verse 16. Reading between the lines in this passage, it seems that unconfessed sin can be an agent of destruction in people's physical, psychological, and spiritual lives. But the discipline of confession is able to neutralize or eliminate it as a such a reality.

I used to fill pulpits as a guest speaker when I was practicing law. After preaching one Sunday morning in a Friends Church, the organist came up to me and asked to speak with me. She then confessed that she had committed adultery with one of the elders of the church and that no one except he and she knew about it. I asked her if she had confessed her sin to God and she replied that she had. She was still greatly distressed though, she said. She went on to also say that she "just needed to tell someone else what I did." I counseled her that telling me was a start but that she needed to think seriously about whether or not there was anyone else she should tell. The moral of that story is that sometimes, just confessing to God isn't enough. It's beneficial in at least five ways.

One is that it can alleviate the subjective guilt that repentant people sometimes feel even after God has forgiven them. The Christian receiving the confession is able to make God's presence and forgiveness real to the confessing person. In his classic book *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer devotes the last chapter to confession and communion. He writes about confession: "A man who confesses his sins in the presence of a brother knows that he is no longer alone with himself; he experiences the presence of God in the reality of the other person." It is said that confession is good for the soul and so it is.

Proverbs 28:12 reveals another benefit of confession. Notice that the wise man links confessing transgressions with forsaking them. In a close and transparent community of people, nothing is more supportive of right behavior than open truth. Persisting in sin is unsupportable in such a community unless it's hidden. Apart from that, the expectation of confession in a close community is profoundly motivating. It is able to force evildoing out of our lives and compel us to righteousness.

A third benefit of confession is the humility it builds. We recognize our place among our brothers and sisters in Christ. Our confessing to them and their confessing to us makes us realize that we're no better than they are. It gets us off of our spiritual "high horse" and goes along way toward seeing ourselves as we really are, which is humbling.

Confession is beneficial in a fourth way. It creates in us a sense of being loved. To be fully convinced that we're accepted and loved, we must be fully convinced that we're accepted and loved at our worst. When we are in a close and caring community, share our sins, and are still loved, that love becomes a transforming reality in and to us.

A final benefit of confession is that it creates deep fellowship among God's people. Confession alone in fact is able to do that. Every local church desires to build koinonia or the supernatural fellowship of the Holy Spirit but that can't happen without confession.

Genesis 1 and 2 reveals that God created us to be part of a close-knit community in which we know and are known. Imagine being so at ease with others that we know and are known without being ashamed. The creation account makes clear that is one of the greatest joys and deepest needs of the human race, of you and me.

It also make clear that such a community requires openness and truth. Obviously, knowing others requires that they reveal themselves to us, not conceal themselves from us. And others knowing us requires that we reveal ourselves to them, not conceal ourselves from them. That means that confession cultivates koinonia and concealment destroys it.

Those benefits make it clear. It's imperative that we belong to a close and caring community of people, a community in which the discipline of confession operates freely and effectively. Only then can it be the loving, caring, and transforming community that God wants it to be. I close out this spiritual activity by quoting Bonhoeffer again. He wrote: "In the presence of a psychiatrist I can only be a sick man; in the presence of a Christian brother I can dare to be a sinner."

An ninth activity by which we engage God and His kingdom at hand is frugality.

Few professing Christians would consider this activity as even related to our lives with God let alone vital to it. But it is. Paul intimates just that in his classic statement in 1 Timothy 6:10, "For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs." James concurs in 5:1 of his letter, "Come now, your rich, weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you." It isn't because they're rich that James condemns them. It's because, according to verse 5, "You have live luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure." Paul and James of course are only parroting the teachings of Jesus Himself. In Luke 8:14, He warned us about "being choked with worries and riches and pleasures of this life" so that we're of no good to Him. Those texts implicitly endorse frugality as a relationship enhancing activity in our lives with God.

Frugality is abstaining from using money to gratify our desire for status, luxury, or glamour. Dallas Willard defines it well: "We stay within the bounds of what general good judgment would designate as necessary for the kind of life to which God has led us." That definition raises two critical issues that followers of Jesus must address.

The first issue is about what is, in conception and practice, the opposite of frugality. That opposite is extravagance. Extravagance means going beyond the bounds of what general good judgment would designate as necessary for the kind of life to which God has led us. The issue in that regard is this. Is extravagance moral or immoral? Is it good or bad? Is it right or wrong?

Unless we have our heads buried in the sand, we know what our culture's point of view is. One author sums it up aptly this way, "No extravagance is thought to be shameful." He's certainly right about that. I'd go a step further. The masses in America believe extravagance is admirable. People don't hide their extravagance, they flaunt it so everyone who wants to can see. And almost all of those who see endorse and applaud it.

HGTV's *Million Dollar Rooms* show illustrates quite vividly what I mean. A healthy culture would condemn those extravagant enough to indulge in a million dollar or more home let alone a million dollar or more room. But our sick culture actually lauds those who do so in shows like these. It's a throwback to the old television series, *The Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, which celebrated the lavish lifestyles of just those, the rich and the famous.

But the Bible heartily condemns extravagance as contrary to the word and will of God. Simply put, it's a great evil that God abhors. The prophet Amos, for example, decried the extravagance of the wealthy in Israel. In 3:13-15, he mentioned their summer and winter homes and prophesied that God was going to destroy them. In 4:1-3, he pronounced judgment on the "*cows of Bashan*." That phrase referred to the wealthy women of Samaria who lived luxurious lives. In 6:1-7, he pronounced judgment on the rich who lived lush lives while neglecting the moral and material ruin of Israel. If Amos were alive and prophesying to America today, he would castigate those million dollar room owners not praise them. Amos is just one of many Biblical voices that decry extravagance.

That necessarily means of course that extravagance drives a wedge between God and us. It's diminishing and even inhibiting of relationship with Him.

That raises a second issue. What is it that God wills? The answer is "frugality." He wills and calls us in texts like 1 Timothy 6:8 to stay within the bounds of what general good judgment would designate as necessary to the kind of life to which God has led us.

Some followers of Jesus contend that what is "necessary" is so subjective that we can't practically determine what is extravagant and what is frugal. I know that because many have told me just that.

But they're wrong. We can practically determine what is necessary for the kind of life to which God calls us – if we have Biblically informed good sense. Biblically informed means that we study the Bible and learn, in detail, what the Bible teaches about money and giving. Good sense means that we reason well. We apply good logic to what we've learned and determine its practical implications to our current circumstances and our world. We will examine this topic far more comprehensively in another part of our *Disciples 'R' Us* curriculum titled "You Can Take It with You."

Biblically informed good sense enables us to practice frugality. We practice it by determining on a case by case basis what is necessary for the kind of life to which God calls us. We then act in each case to stay within the bounds of that. We're practicing frugality when we do.

We practice frugality when buying clothing and food. We practice it in taking vacations and eating out. We practice it choosing entertainment and technologies. We practice it in buying homes and cars.

The example I often use is buying suits. I need suits for my profession and so practice frugality in the number I have and how much I pay for them. I bought my last suit to replace a worn out one and purchased it for \$79 at Boscov's. Or my wife and I eat out as an entertainment and won't spend more than \$10 for a meal. You get the idea. We use Biblically informed good sense to live consistently with what the Bible teaches about wealth and giving. That is frugality.

Frugality is essential in our lives with God. It's an activity that liberates us from the kingdom of the world and draws us to the kingdom of God. It enriches our relationship with Him simply because it pleases Him.

Engaging God and His kingdom at hand involves a tenth bodily activity. It's service. Service is using our spiritual, intellectual, emotional, physical, and/or material resources to promote the good of others. We act to meet people's needs or to fulfill their desires with the resources we have available to us.

Matthew 25:31-46 explains exactly why our service engages Jesus and His kingdom at hand. This text is about what Jesus calls in verses 40 and 45 "the least of these." The least of these, in this text, are the hungry, the strangers, the naked, the sick, and the prisoners. Those groups are representative of anyone who has a legitimate need.

Jesus articulates in those same verses, 40 and 45, one of the most startling truths in our universe. He declares, "To the extent that you did it or did not do it to the least of these, you did it or did not do it to Me." That clearly implies two things.

First, in some mystical way that's beyond our comprehension, Jesus identifies with the least of these. He so identifies with people in need in fact that He's somehow synonymous with them.

Second, since He is synonymous with them, what is done to them is done to Him. And what isn't done to them isn't done to Him. When we actively act upon and interact with those in need, we are acting upon and interacting with Jesus. We can be sure, based on what we know about Him, that He reciprocates and acts upon and interact with us.

Knowing that should both motivate us to serve and direct us in the serving itself. We keep in mind as we are serving a particular person that we're serving Jesus as well.

Now that we know what we should do, let's consider how we do it. Let's go back to our definition of service. It's using our spiritual, intellectual, emotional, physical, and/or material resources to promote the good of others. We act to meet people's needs or to fulfill their desires with the resources we have available to us. All of us are presented with countless opportunities to do that in a variety of ways. Richard Foster identifies and discusses nine different acts of service in his book *Celebration of Discipline*. Let's examine those as a sampling of ways we can serve.

#1 – The service of hiddenness. We promote a person's good in a way that no one knows that we're the ones who did it. As the great Jeremy Taylor points out, "Hiddenness is a rebuke to the flesh and can deal a fatal blow to pride."

#2 – The service of small things. Dietrich Bonhoeffer explains this service well in his classic book *Life Together*. He writes: "The second service that one should perform for another in a Christian community is that of active helpfulness. This means, initially, simple assistance in trifling, external matters. There is a multitude of these things wherever people live together. Nobody is too good for the meanest service. One who worries about the loss of time that such petty, outward acts of helpfulness entail is usually taking the importance of his own career too solemnly."

#3 – The service of guarding the reputation of others. Nothing is viler than attacking the reputation of others by gossiping and slandering. So, we act to protect those reputations. On the one hand, we ourselves don't say or do things that diminish them. On the other hand, we don't provide an audience for others to do the same. Guarding the reputation of others is and I quote Foster, "a deep and lasting service."

#4 – The service of being served. Jesus said that it is more blessed to give than receive. So, we allow persons that blessing by letting them serve us. We overcome our pride and graciously and thankfully receive the good that they do for us.

#5 – The service of common courtesy. This refers to the rituals of relationship that are found in every culture including ours. Those rituals have to do with introduction and acquaintanceship. Missionaries know the importance of such rituals and so should we. We acknowledge people's presence, for instance, by cheerfully asking, "How are you?" Or we actually reply when we're sent RSVP responses. Or we send letters or cards of appreciation. Whatever the courtesy is, we use it to acknowledge people and affirm their worth.

#6 – The service of hospitality. Hospitality was vital to the spread of the gospel in the 1<sup>st</sup> century world. 2 and 3 John, for instance, which are one chapter each, address that very issue. While not as necessary today, it is nonetheless a service we can offer people. We can open our homes to them and offer them amenities that not only affirm their worth but bring pleasure to them.

#7 – The service of listening. In *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer called listening "the first service" that we owe to each other in the Christian community. And I would say "outside it" as well. Nothing affirms people's worth more than someone listening attentively to what they say.

#8 – The service of bearing the burdens of others and rejoicing with others. People need people when they're sad and glad – to share what they're experiencing. So, we do that. As Paul said it, we rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. Joy shared is double joy. Sorrow shared is half a sorrow.

And #9 – The service of sharing the word of Life. In my view, there is no greater service to people than sharing life changing principles or truths with them. Someone asked me an instructive question. If you could meet any one living person and spend time with him or her, who would it be? I replied without hesitating that it would be Dallas Willard, who was living then. That's because, along with my mother, he's influenced me more profoundly than any other person through His writings. I often think about what my character and condition of being would be if he hadn't share the word of Life with me in his books. He doing so was one of the greatest acts of service that anyone has ever done for me.

There are many other acts of service but those are enough to make the point. We have countless opportunities to serve the people that we know and meet every day.

So, let's discern and pursue those opportunities. That's our call because doing so engages Jesus and His kingdom at hand profoundly.

We come now to the eleventh, and for our purposes, final activity by which we engage God. That activity is the memorization of Scripture. Memorization is a subdivision of study but is so critical to our life with God that I wanted to address it separately and finally.

The Bible itself calls us to memorize it. Examine passages like Deuteronomy 6:6-9, Joshua 1:8; Psalms 1:1-3; and Proverbs 7:1-3 and you'll see what I mean.

Take Deuteronomy 6:6-9 for instance. God commanded the Israelites to bind His word delivered through Moses as a sign on their hands and as frontals on their foreheads and to write them on the doorposts of their houses and on their gates.

The Israelites took these commands literally. They took this passage along with Exodus 11:13-21 and Exodus 13:1-16 and wrote them on small scrolls. They then placed them in small leather containers called phylacteries and bound them on their forehead and left arm on special occasions. They also enclosed the passages I mentioned in a small container and attached them to the doorposts of their houses.

But God never intended them to do that. He meant these commands in verses 8 and 9 to be taken metaphorically. He wanted the Israelites to keep His word in their minds and recall them as often as they could during the course of their everyday lives. That was the practice that He called for in those verses.

What God wanted the Israelites to do with their written word, the Law of Moses, so He wants us to do with the entirety of His written word, the Bible. This requires of course that we memorize the Bible. We memorize it and then recall it, bring it to mind, as often as we can as we move through the routines and responsibilities of our daily lives.

We do need to memorize verses. Some verses state salient principles and truths concisely and can be easily memorized. Proverbs 18:21, for instance, declares, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue." That verse is short and to the point and discloses one of the most defining dynamics in human relationships – and I was able to memorize it easily. Or Romans 12:21 instructs us, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." That is the divine conspiracy in which God wants us to partner with Him in overcoming the daily evils we face with good.

Notice two things about those verses. First, they're life and relationship defining. Allowing the principles they teach to direct us daily would dramatically affect our relationships and lives for good. Second, they're easy to remember. Proverbs 18:21 and Romans 12:21 illustrate the need we have in our lives with God to memorize verses.

But we also need to memorize passages. There are some passages that are so rich and deep that they need to be memorized as a whole. Jesus' picture of what a kingdom person looks like in Matthew 5-7, the great ethical section in Ephesians 4:17-6:9, the high priestly prayer of Jesus in John 17, the love chapter in 1 Corinthians 13, and the resurrection chapter in 1 Corinthians 15 are examples of what I mean. The profundity of these passages in engaging God and His kingdom can't be overstated.

Most of us aren't able to recite passages verbatim like we can the verses we memorize. But we can become so familiar with them that we know in detail what they teach. I, for example, have mastered the contents of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. I can't recite all the verses verbatim but I can recite for you the subject matter of each of the divisions that make it up and its message. I know, for instance, that 5:33-37 are about not manipulating people, that 6:1-18 are about seeking God's praise and not man's, and that 7:1-11 is about influencing people for good and how we do that. You get the idea. We don't have to memorize the passages verbatim. We just memorize what they teach.

Bible memorization does take time and effort but it's time and effort well spent. Start small with baby steps if you have to. Make as your goal memorizing just one verse. Take as long as you have to in order to do that. Then move on to another verse and another and so on. Once you're comfortable with that, add a passage to memorize here and there as I defined it above.

Don't try to be heroic and do more than you can. Do as much as you can and build on that. Your ability to memorize Scripture, enhanced by the Holy Spirit, will grow. The key of course is repetition. Recite the verse over and over again or if it's a passage, read and study it over and over again. Repeat it as many times as you have to in order to master it. Don't worry about quantity but quality. Once again, do what you can and build on that.

Memorizing verses enables us to do what God commands in the texts we read earlier. It's to routinely place our minds on the Bible. Once we've memorized verses and passages, we recall them or bring them to mind as the circumstances of our everyday lives either dictate or allow. Circumstances sometimes dictate the verses or passages we recall. Those verses or passages relate to the circumstances. Sometimes circumstances allow them. We're have the leisure to mull over inspiring or meaningful verses or passages in our minds.

Suppose someone criticizes me, for instance, and I begin to feel defensive because he did. So, I recall a verse I memorized, Proverbs 9:8b, "Reprove a wise man and he will love you," and apply it to my circumstance. I should be grateful to my critic, not angry, because he's giving me an opportunity to learn.

Or suppose I think my employer isn't paying me as much as he should and I'm tempted to work half-heartedly. So, I recall a verse I memorized, Colossians 3:23, "Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men."

Or suppose I'm waiting for someone to pick me up or I have 15 minutes between appointments, or I'm stopped at a stop light. So, I mull over a verse or passage that I've memorized.

You get the idea. Once we've memorized verses and passages, we bring them to our minds as the opportunities of everyday life dictate and allow. You can infer from what I've said that Bible memorization is something all of us can do. And it's something that all of us should do.

Bringing verses and passages we've memorized to mind and applying them connects us with the presence and power of God and alters the way we think and act. Our relationship with Him grows deeper as we do.

The value of mastering and memorizing Scripture and placing our minds on it cannot be overemphasized. Listen to the dramatic statement of Dallas Willard in that regard. In his book *The Great Omission*, he writes: ***"Bible memorization is absolutely fundamental to spiritual formation. If I had to – and of course I don't have to – choose between all the disciplines of the spiritual life and take only one, I would choose Bible memorization. I often point out to people how much trouble they would have stayed out of if they had been muttering Scripture."***

He goes on to say that memorizing Scripture is actually more important than a daily quiet time. He argues that when we fill our minds with its verses and passages, quiet time actually takes over the entirety of our lives. Our entire day is a quiet time in other words.

Those are radical things to say but an argument can be made for them. Whether you agree with Willard or not, his essential point is true. Memorizing Scripture and placing our minds as constantly on it as we can enhance our relationship with Jesus and empower our spiritual lives.

We've now finished some of the central activities by which we engage God. We routinely direct our minds and bodies to Him in the ways we've discussed. He responds to us as we do, speaking, guiding, encouraging, informing, assisting and so on. That is relationship and we know Him.

## Loving God

Knowing God, as we learned before, is the prerequisite for loving Him. Loving Him flows naturally from knowing Him. Loving God, therefore, is an indirect freedom. We can't love Him directly just by choosing to. We have to do something else first. Know Him. Knowing Him then gives us the freedom to love Him.

But what does it mean to love Him? Love for God has two aspects.

One is purposeful obedience. Both the Old and New Testaments directly link obeying Him to loving Him. Jesus Himself identifies and emphasizes that link in John 14:15, 21, and 23. Anyone who loves Jesus will keep His word. The beloved disciple John heard and understood Jesus clearly and reiterates what He taught in 1 John 2:3-6. The phrase "**love of God**" in verse 5 is better translated "**love for God.**" The degree to which we love Him is in direct proportion to the degree that we obey Him.

That only makes sense doesn't it? To love someone means always and only to seek his or her benefit and gain. God is benefitted and gains when we obey Him. Thus, if we love Him, we'll obey Him.

Love for God has a second aspect – affection. We emotionally identify with Him. We delight in Him and have passion for Him. He moves us so to speak. Richard Foster uses a descriptive phrase in that regard that I've made my first aim. He talks about having a "**white hot love**" for God. That is the depth of affection for Him that we should seek. We should feel deeply about Him.

Those two aspects make up our love for God. We seek His benefit and gain by obeying Him and have a deep affection for Him. The person who does that will be at home in the universe.

To be at home in the universe means to thrive in it. It means to experience and be characterized by pervasive and habitual love, peace, and joy. That is the ultimate consequence of achieving our first aim. It's the abundance of life that every human being in every generation in history has sought. It's being at home in the universe.