

THE FIRST AIM (A Study in Understanding, Knowing, and Loving God)

Introduction

The first thing that I want to do in our study is to impress upon you the significance of what you're going to learn in it.

The best way to do that is to share my own point of view in that regard. I have had ten years of post high school education and three degrees. I obviously learned a great deal about our universe and life in it during those ten years, much of which has benefited me greatly. But I can honestly and sincerely tell you this. I wouldn't trade the information that you will learn in this study for all the information together that I learned in those ten years. If I had to choose between knowing what I learned in college, seminary, and law school or knowing what you will learn in this study, I wouldn't even hesitate. I'd choose the latter. I'm not saying that for dramatic effect. It is simply true.

In fact, I'd be so bold as to say this. What I will teach you in this study is the most important information that you have ever heard about the most important matters in human life. It will dramatically alter the person that you are and the life that you live. It will prepare you to live abundantly now in this life and eternally in the life to come. It has done that for me and can do that for you as well.

That is a conditional statement of course. The condition is that you must understand, remember, and apply what is taught. If you come, listen, go home, and forget, it will benefit you but to nowhere near the extent that it can. So, listen carefully to, concentrate on, and go over what is taught. Then go out into the routines of your everyday life and apply it. You will live abundantly now and forever if you do.

I speak from personal experience in telling you that. It has done that for me and will do it for you as well.

The First Aim

Our study is about what I call "the first aim." You know what an aim is. People call it by various names – vision, objective, goal, aspiration, or dream. Whatever we call it, every person, without exception, has aims in his or her life. They have objective or goals that they want to achieve.

It can be argued that the aims we have are the most vital part of our life. That's because they determine almost everything that we do. Absent compulsion, almost everything we do is directed toward an objective or end of some kind.

I'll go home tonight and eat probably four or five chocolate chip cookies. I'll do that because of an aim I have. That aim is to experience the pleasure of taste. An anorexic of course wouldn't do that. He or she would have a different aim. That aim is to be as thin as he or she can possibly be. If the pleasure of taste is your aim, you'll eat the chocolate chip cookies. If extreme thinness is your aim, you won't.

Many aims are big enough that they dictate not just isolated actions here and there but the general course of our life. Such aims of course are decisive. They determine the kind of person that we become and the kind of life that we live.

The former chaplain of the Senate, Richard Halverson, understood the ultimate implication of this as well as anyone. Listen to what he said in a meditation he shared with the Senate on July 25, 1983: *"Your priorities in life aren't just marginal options. They are life determining. Your personality is molded inescapably into the image of what you give priority. You become like what is most important in your life. Man becomes like the God he worships."*

Priorities are just another word for aims. Our aims aren't just marginal options. Our personality is molded inescapably into the image of the objectives we pursue. We become like the objectives we pursue. That is one of the most profound insights about ourselves that we will ever learn.

Tony Campolo, for instance, claims that the primary objective of many if not most people is to get through life with as little pain and suffering as they can. That is a decisive aim that shapes and molds the personality of those who pursue it. They become self-centered, cautious, cowardly and insecure.

You can see then that aims in our life really are decisive. They determine the kind of person that we become and the kind of life that we live – either for better or worse.

That leads me to a question of examen that each of us needs to ask and answer. What is honestly and objectively the first aim in my life right now? I mean by that, what is the chief objective that I'm pursuing?

I certainly can't answer that question for you. Only you can. But I can answer a second question that flows naturally from the first. What should be the first aim in my life right now? What should be the chief objective that I am pursuing?

I know that answer to that because the Bible tells us what it is – in Mark 12:28-34. This is the thematic passage for this study. It reveals to us quite plainly I think what the first aim, the chief objective, in our life should be.

The scribes were experts in the Mosaic Law, which was the first five books of the Old Testament – Genesis through Deuteronomy. These five books, as you know, contain the commandments that God gave Israel and for the most part to us. There are many such commandments, hundreds in fact.

This scribe asks what I believe is a valid and vital question about them. Which one is foremost or first? That means, which one is the most significant?

Some might challenge the premise of this scribe's question. They might argue that no one commandment is more important than another – that all of the commandments are equally important.

But Jesus doesn't challenge the premise because it's true. There is one commandment that is more important than all the rest. That commandment, He argues in verse 30, is Deuteronomy 6:5. It is, ***“And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.”***

We will come back later to what it means but right now the point is that this is the first or most important of all commandments that God has given us. It is prior to all the rest. It is so for two reasons.

One reason is that it's the hub of all the other commandments. The person who keeps it will just naturally want and try to keep all the rest. That explains a sequence or order that we find in both the Old and New Testaments. Read the following Scriptures when you get time: Exodus 20:6; Deuteronomy 5:10; 7:9; 11:1; 30:6-8,16; Joshua 22:5; Daniel 9:4; and John 14:15, 21-23. These verses make clear that obeying God or keeping His commandments is an inevitable product of loving Him.

There's a second reason that loving God is the first of all commandments. It's because love is absolutely the most appropriate response to His person and works. He is the only utterly lovely and utterly competent being in the universe. And utter loveliness and utter competence are deserving of total love. The most unbecoming and inappropriate thing that a human being can do is not love God.

That reveals then what our first aim in life should be. It should be to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Each and every one of us should purposely and decisively make that the chief objective, the paramount pursuit of our lives.

I have done that. Several years ago, I got alone with God and admitted to Him that I didn't love Him like I should. I then established as my primary goal in life, above all others, to love Him as much as I possibly can before I die.

I still don't love Him as much as I should, but I am seeking and striving to. In fact, I can honestly say that loving Him occupies my mind and pursuits more than any other aspiration or aim that I have. The result is that my love for Him is growing.

Let me ask you a question. Do you love God as much as you should? If you don't, I challenge you right now to make doing so the first aim of your life. Make and carry out to the best of your ability the decision to love Him as much as you possibly can before you die. Do whatever is necessary to accomplish that.

"Whatever is necessary" is what this study is about. It will teach you what you need to do practically, in your everyday life, in order to love God. This study isn't about scholarship or just learning. It is about relationship and loving. You will learn what is necessary to love God.

As you will see, doing what is necessary will require some radical changes in the way that we think and live. We cannot go about business as usual and expect to love God with our whole being. When I say "business as usual," I mean life as middleclass Americans normally live it.

I would never attempt to lead anyone on. Listen carefully to what I'm going to say. Coming to love God with our whole being will require forfeiting some things that human beings normally seek. It isn't that these things are bad or wrong. It's just that they interfere with doing the "whatever is necessary" to love God.

But what we gain will greatly outweigh what we forfeit. That is so because loving God with our whole being is the "one thing."

How many of you saw the movie *City Slickers*? In it, Billy Crystal plays a confused and discontented thirty something character. He fears that life is passing him by and so goes on a cattle drive to get things together. There he meets the crusty but wise old boss of the drive whose character is played by Jack Palance.

In an unforgettable scene, Palance's character asks Crystal's character if he wants to know the secret of life. "*It's this,*" he says, holding up his index finger. "*The secret of life is your finger?*" asks Crystal's character. "*No,*" Palance replies, "*It's one thing. The secret of life is pursuing one thing.*"

He's right about that. The secret of life really is pursuing one thing. But what Palance's character didn't realize is that it has to be the right thing. Well, that right thing is pursuing God. The secret of life is pursuing one thing, loving God with our whole being.

Let me explain to you why that is the secret to life.

A philosopher once said that the problem with life isn't that it's a tragedy but that it's a bore. That reminds me of the absurdism of the atheist philosopher Albert Camus. He once declared that *"life is a bad joke."* It also reminds me of what is called "Marie Antoinette's fever." She explained her fever this way, *"nothing tastes,"* which describes metaphorically a life that is meaningless and dull. Tragically, all of those lines describe the condition of most people on planet earth. There is an emptiness in their lives that nothing seems to fill. There is an apathy and lethargy that nothing seems to stimulate.

There is a reason for that. It's because people need something really big to fill the vacuum of their soul. J.I. Packer discusses that very issue in his incredible book Knowing God. Listen to what 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."*

He's absolutely right and the only objective or aim that we have that's big enough is loving God with our whole being. This is the most compelling goal in human life. Coca Cola has the goal of literally every human being on earth knowing its name. Robert Schuller has the goal of a billion dollar trust fund whose income will fully fund his television ministry every year. Paul Crouch has a goal of reaching every person on the planet with the gospel of Jesus. But none of those goals is as compelling as a person's goal of loving God with his or her whole being. That's the only aim I know that's big enough to give our lives purpose, meaning, and joy.

So, make that your first aim!

The Sequence of Loving God

Now, let's suppose that we do that. We decide to love God with our whole being and to do whatever is necessary to accomplish that. The question then becomes, *"What is necessary?"*

Most pastors and thus their congregations make a fatal mistake in that regard. They assume that loving God is an one-time event.

To some, the event is a choice we make. They believe that we can choose to love Him and at that same moment in time will. That's how most preachers talk and it's a frustrating thing for those who hear. I've had many preachers in churches I attended tell us to love God with our whole being and stop at that, giving no further instruction. I logically inferred therefore that all I had to do was choose to love Him and I would. So, I tried that but it didn't work. No matter how hard I willed to love Him, I didn't, not like I knew that I should at least.

Loving God is a one-time event to some in a second way. That second way is a supernatural act of God through the Holy Spirit. It's the idea that if we go to the altar for it or just pray for it, the Holy Spirit will spontaneously zap us so that we love God. I've tried that as well. I went to the altar several times in my home church seeking such a touch of God. But again it didn't work.

There's a reason for that. It's because loving God with our whole being isn't an event. It's a process. Please understand that. It's a process and not an event.

And it's a process that involves a sequence or order. This isn't a sequence or order that I dreamed up or learned in a textbook. It's one that is simply built into the fabric of personality and relationship. It's just the way things are. I know from examining my own experience and observing the experience of others that there is a sequence in the process of loving God.

That sequence involves the following actions – understanding, knowing, , and loving. We understand God. Because we understand Him, we are able to know Him. And because we know Him, we come to love Him.

Sometimes, people try to take a shortcut around the sequence. They try to know Him without understanding Him or to love Him without knowing Him. We try to take a shortcut but it doesn't work because there is none. If we want to love God with our whole being, then we have to go through the sequence of the process.

It's a simple fact of life. We can know God only to the degree that we understand Him. And we can love Him only to the degree that we understand and know Him. There is a causal connection between understanding, knowing, and loving that we just have to follow.

This sequence gives us the outline for our study together. I am going to address two essential issues – understanding and knowing God.

First, I am going to address understanding Him. I am going to build a detailed a thorough vision of God.

I will do that by teaching you what are called His qualities or attributes. I did this before in a study entitled *The God Who Is Here*. But I've learned and experienced many more exciting things about Him since I taught that study and I'm going to share those with you. If you pay attention and remember what is taught, you will have an understanding of God that very few professing Christians, including pastors, have.

Understanding God will then enable us to address the second essential issue, knowing Him. In human relationships, there is what you might call an activity of knowing. We must do certain things in order to know people. It's the same way with God. There is an activity of knowing Him. We must do certain things to know Him and I will teach you what those things are.

At that point, you will have a decision to make. Will you or will you not do those things.

If you do decide to do them and carry out that decision with intensity, something will eventually happen that is the key to loving God.

How many of you know Jay Alford. Jay is a pastor and well-known figure in the Mahoning Valley. He has accomplished many things to make our Valley a better place including almost single handedly keeping legalized gambling out of it. What he has done is impressive indeed.

But if I had to identify his defining quality, it wouldn't be any of those things. What defined Jay Alford is this. God is as vivid and real to him as the material world is. And because He is, Jay loves Him with His whole being. In my view, that's what sets him apart from normal people and makes him a special human being.

Well, that same thing will be true of us if we do what Jay has done and is doing – the things that we have to do to know God. If you learn what I will teach you about knowing God and apply it with intensity, He will become as vivid and real to you as the material world is. And when that happens, you will find yourself loving Him with your whole being.

That then is how we will proceed. Following the sequence of understanding – knowing – loving, we will address the issues of understanding and knowing God.

I am using five sources in teaching you what I do. The first and primary of those of course is God's written word the Bible. The next three are incredible books: The Divine Conspiracy by Dallas Willard, Knowing God by J.I. Packer, and The Knowledge of the Holy by A.W. Tozer. The fifth and final source is my own study of Scripture and experience with God. I have experienced more of God in the past two years of my life than in the first 55 combined – primarily because I've learned and applied what I'm teaching you. I will draw on my own learning and experience in the course of our study.

Understanding God

WHAT WE THINK ABOUT GOD

I begin our study of understanding with a question. What is the single most significant thing about us? There are many significant things but I'm asking about the most significant. I mean by that, what about us impacts our person and life probably more than any other?

People certainly disagree about the answer to that question. But I think the answer is this. The single most significant thing about us is *what* and *how much* we think about God. I'll explain why later.

Notice that there are two parts to this answer. The first is what we think about God. The second is how much we think about Him. All of us need to examine our thought life and ask and answer two questions about it. What do we think about God? And how much do we think about Him?

Understanding has to do with the first of those questions. What do we think about God? What is the content of our thought about Him? What do we think He is like? How do we perceive or envision Him to be?

I would quickly point out that true atheists don't think anything about God. They believe that He does not exist and never has. Thus there is nothing about Him to think about.

But the vast majority of people, in America at least, aren't atheists. So, almost everyone that we know and meet everyday think something about God. They perceive or envision Him in a certain way.

I knew a secularist, an attorney, named Dan quite well. We were talking about spiritual things one day and he commented that he believes that everyone including himself will go to heaven. I asked him why he believed that. The gist of his reply was that God is all loving and there isn't a "mean streak" in Him at all. Consequently, He will save everyone.

His comments illustrate the very point that I'm making. Almost everyone that we know and meet thinks certain things about God. They perceive or envision Him to possess certain qualities or traits and to act in certain ways as a result of those.

You immediately recognize what the issue is of course for them and us. Are we thinking correctly about Him? Is He truly the way that we perceive Him to be? What things that we think about Him are true? What things that we think about Him are false?

THINKING INCORRECTLY ABOUT GOD

With that in mind, let me ask you a question about the attorney with whom I talked. Is He thinking correctly about God? No, he isn't. He's thinking incorrectly about Him. So how is he thinking incorrectly about Him?

We can make one of three mistakes in thinking about God.

First, we can attribute to Him qualities that He does not have.

I counseled a woman years ago who believed that God is aloof just like her father was. Aloofness is not a quality that He possesses.

Second, we can ignore or deny to Him qualities that He does have.

That was the attorney's mistake. He denied that God has two qualities that He actually has – justice and holiness. God is as just and holy as He is loving. But that attorney thinks and acts as if He is not.

Third, we can identify His qualities accurately but misunderstand the nature of one or more of them.

I once counseled a broken man who was wracked with guilt because of a horrible sin he committed. He actually believed that God didn't love Him anymore. He believed that because He misunderstood the nature of God's love. He did believe that God is love as the Bible says. But he misunderstood its nature. He believed that it proceeds from something in the objects of it. Something in us makes God love us in other words. But that is wrong. That isn't the nature of His love. His love proceeds from nothing in us. It proceeds from something in Him. There isn't something about us that makes Him love us. There's something about Him that makes Him love us. This man did not understand that.

Whatever mistake they make, the fact is that many if not most people today think wrongly about God to some extent. That has been the state of affairs not just in the culture at large but in the church as well for several generations. And it still is.

Listen to what two of our sources for this study say about that.

The first is A.W. Tozer in The Knowledge of the Holy. He writes: *"It is my opinion that the Christian conception of God current in these middle years of the twentieth century is so decadent as to be utterly beneath the dignity of the Most High God and actually to constitute for professed believers something amounting to moral calamity."*

The second source is J.I. Packer in Knowing God. He writes: *"The uncertainty and confusion about God which make our day are worse than anything since Gnostic theosophy (philosophy of God) tried to swallow Christianity in the second century."* The Gnostics perceived and taught a God who is wholly unlike the God of the Bible. That in turn caused great uncertainty and confusion among Christians about what He is like. Packer claims our uncertainty and confusion today approaches that. Those are dramatic statements that we need to evaluate. If they are exaggerations, then we can continue going to on our merry way without changing what we're doing to any great extent. But if they're realistic, we need to repent and radically change what we're doing. The church at large and many individuals are doomed if we don't.

I believe that those are realistic statements. Suppose we were to ask 100 Christians or even pastors to write down everything that they knew about God. Two things would likely characterize their final product if they did. First, it would be sketchy. They simply don't know much about Him. And second, it would be inaccurate - to a larger degree than it should at least. They are thinking wrongly or incompletely about too much of what they do know about Him.

That has to change with us.

When I say "us," I mean you and I who are here tonight as individuals. Do not be a typical 21st century American Christian.

But when I say "us," I also mean you and I as a church. May Bethel Friends not be a typical 21st century church. I need to do my part in accomplishing that but so do you. My part is to help you understand and know God and if you attend this class faithfully and learn, you will. Your part is then to help others inside and outside our church understand and know Him.

You need to be standard bearers in that regard. I as a pastor, alone, am not able to reach our people effectively with this message. That is largely because I'm the pastor. I've had more than one person in our church tell me that normal Christians in "real life" can't understand and know Him the way I can. If our people are going to be reached with the teachings of this study, you're going to have to be the ones who reach them. You have to be a walking and talking testimony that people can understand and know God in the way that you will learn.

THINKING CORRECTLY ABOUT GOD

What we're talking about know is the understanding part of that. Understanding God means thinking correctly about Him. God Himself calls us to do just that - in the Second Commandment.

God gives the Ten Commandments to us in two texts. One is Exodus 20:4-6. The other is Deuteronomy 5:8-10. Deuteronomy 4:15-18 is a companion passage that is essentially God's commentary on the commandment.

I learned a great deal about the Second Commandment in seminary, much of which is found in chapter four of Packer's book, Knowing God. Let me explain it to you using the Deuteronomy texts – 5:8-10 and 4:15-18.

The gist of the commandment is that we should not make what the KJV calls "a graven image" that represents Yahweh, the one true God.

The Hebrew word translated "graven image" means wood, stone, or any other material that is chiseled or carved into the likeness of something.

5:8 reveals what in general that something might be – *"what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth."* 4:16-18 gets more specific and mentions *"male or female, any animal that is on the earth, any winged bird that flies in the sky, anything that creeps on the ground, and any fish that is in the water below the earth."*

So, the Second Commandment prohibits drawing pictures or making statues of anything that represent Yahweh for any purpose including worshipping or serving Him or inspiring people to be devoted to Him.

Two vivid Biblical examples of this are found in Exodus 32 and Judges 17:1-7. In Exodus 32, the Israelites made a golden calf that represented Yahweh and used it to worship Him. In Judges, a family had a silversmith form 200 pieces of into an image and then used it to worship Yahweh.

The bottom line is that the Second Commandment prohibits making any image or picture that represents Yahweh for any purpose period.

Christians have debated whether or not this rules out using pictures and statues of Jesus in order to train or inspire people. On the one hand, pictures and statues of Jesus portray Him as having a body, which He did for 33 years. But on the other hand, Jesus wasn't just an ideal human being, which is what the images of Him clearly imply. He wasn't an ideal man. He was the God-man, a truth which images of Him can't convey.

Packer believes that we should not use pictures and statues of Jesus at all and I am inclined to agree with that.

I myself have never been comfortable with pictures and statues of Him or even people portraying Him in movies and plays. I wasn't able to articulate what it was that made me uncomfortable until several years ago. It's that pictures, statues, and portrayals diminish Him to me.

So, I don't use pictures and statues of Him and don't watch portrayals of Him. But I realize that the impact of those things may not be same for others as they are for me. So, I don't make an issue out of it. Prayerfully and carefully think about it and come to your own conclusion.

Now, God's commandments are never arbitrary. As I've explained before, they are pictures of reality. They reflect the way things are. There is always a good reason for them in other words.

The application to what we're discussing now is obvious. God has a good reason for commanding us not to make images of Him. That reason is that all images of Him always give false impressions of what He is like. They always, without any exceptions, portray Him inaccurately.

All images (by which I mean statues, carvings, and pictures) of Yahweh convey three things about Him that aren't true.

The first thing is that God has form.

Images by their very nature have form, meaning they are made up of matter, atoms and molecules. Images of God therefore convey that He does as well.

But as Deuteronomy 4:15 declares, He doesn't. He doesn't have form. Or as John 4:24 says it, He is "spirit," small "s." He isn't made up of atoms, molecules, or any other material "stuff." He has the highest possible levels of consciousness and activity without a body and brain.

So that's the first thing that images of God convey about Him that isn't true – He has form or is matter.

The second thing is that He is localized. Since images have form or are matter, they are localized. A particular image can't be in two places at once let alone every place at once. Images of God therefore convey that He can't. They give the impression that he is only where the image or picture is.

But God isn't localized. One of His most amazing qualities that we'll discuss is that He's omnipresent. He is everywhere with His entire being all at once. Space is a creation of His. It doesn't limit or bind Him.

Here then we have another thing that images of God convey about Him that isn't true – that He is localized.

The third thing is that He creaturely. Images are created. Someone made them. Someone had the image in his or her mind and acted to make it a reality. Images of God therefore convey that He is made and thus creaturely.

But as all of us well know, He isn't. He is the transcendent creator. Creator means that He made everything that exists. Transcendent means that is infinitely higher and more glorious in nature than what He created. Think about how much higher and glorious in nature Michael the archangel is than a slug in your garden. God is far higher and more glorious in nature than His created world than that. He is infinitely higher and more glorious in fact.

That then is why God prohibits making images of Him. It conveys things about Him that aren't true.

That helps us understand what the Second Commandment prescribes.

All of the Ten Commandments that prohibit, meaning call us not to do something, also prescribe, meaning call us to do something. The negative always has an implied positive in other words.

The positive side of the Second Commandment is this. Think about God correctly. Perceive or envision Him as He really is.

People tend to make one or both of two mistakes in that regard.

One is that they tend to make God in their own image. The great mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote, "*God made man in His own image and man returned the compliment.*" That is so true isn't it? All of us are greatly tempted to do that – make God in our own image.

Emile Durkheim was one of the founders of modern sociology. He wrote a classic book titled The Elementary Forms of Religious Life. In it, he contends that people perceive God as having traits that their society and they value the most. They perceive and teach Him not as He really is but as they want Him to be.

Durkheim wasn't a Christian but he was right about that. One of our greatest temptations is to perceive God not as He really is but as we want Him to be. We perceive Him in a way that endorses our own values, desires, needs, and behaviors.

I knew a professing Christian years ago who committed sexual sin on a regular basis. It didn't bother him much though because as he says it, "*God will always forgive.*" He viewed God as a sort of indulgent who really doesn't take the behavior of His children all that seriously.

Why did He view Him that way. It's because viewing Him that way accommodated his behavior. He viewed Him not as He is but as He wanted Him to be.

All of us are tempted to do that. The truth is almost all professing Christians perceive God as they want Him to be to one degree or another.

People tend to make a second mistake in the way that they perceive God. They tend to make Him in the image of others. They project on to God the same kind of qualities and characteristics that human beings have.

Sometimes, they think that He is like people in general are. I knew Christian years ago who talked frequently about sinners dying and going to hell. He spoke of their eternal destiny there in vivid terms – fire, brimstone, misery, and pain. And He seemed almost hostile and hateful as he did. When a person pointed that out to him one time, he replied that he was hostile because God was. He began talking about God's wrath and declared that he is angry with sinners because God is.

Do you see his mistake? He projected on to God the wrath of human beings. As we will eventually study, God's wrath is not laced with the animosity and pride that people's wrath is. We will see that His wrath in the Bible is always judicial.

The point is that God's wrath is hardly anything like the wrath of human beings. And it is a mistake to think that it is. We should project on to God the qualities of human beings in general.

We should also not project on to Him the qualities of human beings in particular. The most common scenario in that regard is people perceiving God as they do their earthly fathers.

I talked with a young woman one time who had done just that. She had an angry condemning father and for most of her life perceived God as being just like him. And because she did, she could never love God, she said. But the Holy Spirit finally freed her from that misconception. She finally realized that God is an ideal heavenly Father who is nothing like her horribly flawed earthly father is. That realization in turn made her capable of loving God, which she now does.

Those are the two mistakes that people normally make when it comes to God. The Second Commandment calls us not to make them. It calls us instead to think correctly about Him instead.

The Bible teaches that God actually exists. He is an objective being who is just as real you and I are.

Now, all objective beings have certain qualities or traits. You and I do. I am 5'6" tall, for instance, and weigh 140 pounds and according to the Myers-Briggs personality test I am a "T", thinking, not an "F," feeling. You and I have objective qualities and traits. We are as we are in other words.

And so is God. Because He's an objective being who actually exists, He has certain qualities or traits. He is as He is in other words. Some recovery programs encourage people to look to God "as they perceive Him to be." That is a bad strategy because it's against reality. The reality is that God is as He is and not as we perceive Him to be.

A lawyer friend of mine named Dan believes that. We were talking about God one day and as intelligent as He is, he said one of the dumbest things I've ever heard. He said that God is as he perceives Him to be.

Suppose that something is wrong with your eyesight and you see me as being 6'4" tall and weighing 225 pounds. Does your perceiving me that way make me in reality be 6'4" tall and weigh 225 pounds? The clear answer is "no." It doesn't matter how you perceive me. I am in reality still 5'6" tall and in reality still weigh 140 pounds.

Or suppose that you value feeling over thinking and think pastors should be that way. So you perceive me as an "F" instead of a "T." Does your perceiving me that way make me an "F?" No, it does not. I am in reality still a "T."

It's the same way with God and that's what I told Dan. He is as He is not as you or I or anyone else perceives Him to be.

The call of the Second Commandment is to make those two things one and the same. Make God as He is and how we perceive Him to be one and the same. Think correctly about Him in other words. Perceive and envision Him as He objectively and actually is – as much as we can do that at least.

That's our calling and we need to address and resolve two issues in order to answer it.

WHY WE NEED TO THINK CORRECTLY ABOUT GOD

The first issue is why we need to think correctly about God. People will not pursue an objective or goal unless they believe that there is value in doing so. In fact, the value in doing so must outweigh the cost of pursuing it or they won't pursue it. Thus, I want to make it perfectly clear to you what the value of envisioning God correctly is.

Remember the question I asked you last week. What is the single most significant thing about us? Also remember what the answer is. It's what and how much we think about God. The "what" is the subject of our discussion now. It's what we think about Him. It's what we perceive Him to be like.

Most people think that what we're going to be doing the next two or three months is nothing more than esoteric or academic exercise. Building a vision of God seems like nothing more than seminary "stuff" to them – dry stale theology that has nothing to do with raising children, getting along with spouses and co-workers, dealing with financial problems, staying healthy and fit, and so on. It has nothing to do with the practical activities, experiences, and challenges that make up the real world of our everyday lives.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Listen to what Packer writes in Knowing God: *"Knowing about God is crucially important for the living of our lives . . . We are cruel to ourselves if we try to live in this world without knowing about the God whose world it is and who runs it. The world becomes a strange, mad, painful place, and life in it a disappointing and unpleasant business, for those who do not know about God. Disregard the study of God, and you sentence yourself to stumble and blunder through life blindfolded, as it were, with no sense of direction and understanding of what surrounds you. This way you can waste your life and lose your soul."* Those last two statements are not exaggerations. Those who do not know what they need to know about God will waste their life and lose their soul.

I would say it boldly this way. Nothing impacts our daily person and life as much as what and how much we think about God. The more correctly and consistently that we think about Him, the better that life will go. The less correctly and consistently that we think about Him, the worse it will go.

There's a reason for that. It's because our perception of God conditions how we view and interpret all the people and things in our everyday life. It also conditions how we react to, choose, and experiencing things.

Take worry for instance. Two days ago, a woman called asking for help with rent. She lost her job, can't find a new one, and has to come up with \$350 or be evicted from her apartment by the end of the month.

What is the decisive factor in determining whether or not she worries about that? The decisive factor is what and how much she thinks about God. The great Oswald Chambers once said, *"All worry is caused by calculating without God,"* by which he meant not taking God into account. He's absolutely right about that. Those who take God into account, think rightly and enough about Him, won't worry. Those who don't, will.

My point is that what we're doing the next three months isn't just an esoteric or academic exercise. We aren't just learning theology. We are learning the most person and life impacting truths that we can learn.

HOW TO THINK CORRECTLY ABOUT GOD

There's a second issue that we need to address and resolve in order to think correctly about God. The first was "Why do we need to do that in the first place?" The second is "How do we do that?"

The answer is simple and clear. We do that by building a purposeful, thorough, and objective vision of God.

First, we build a purposeful vision of God. As we've already discussed, everyone who believes in God has a vision or perception of Him. But hardly anyone has a purposeful vision of Him. Most have just picked up the vision they have of Him randomly over the years from things that they've heard and read. But that needs to change. We must intend and decide to build a careful and well thought out vision of Him.

Second, we build a thorough vision of God. That means two things. First, we make our vision of Him comprehensive. We aim to know all the qualities of Him that He reveals to us – not just some or most but all. Second, we aim to know all of the things that He reveals about all of those qualities.

Third, we build an objective vision of God. No one is 100% objective in that regard but we try to be. We lay aside all the biases and prejudices that can distort how we perceive Him. That includes, as we saw earlier, our own desires, needs, values, and behaviors. It also includes any presuppositions that we have about Him now. Our guiding principle is envisioning God as He really is, not as we want Him to be.

That then is how we think correctly about God. We build a purposeful, thorough, and objective vision of Him.

But are we able to do that? Are we being prideful and even ignorant in believing that we can? The answer is "no, we are not." The truth is that God wants us to do that. He Himself, in fact, enables us to. He enables us to by revealing what He is like to us. He does that in three ways.

First, He discloses Himself to us in what we call nature, that is, the created world around us. Paul teaches us just that in Romans 1:20. He states: ***"For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made."*** The created world, in other words, reveals at least three of God's qualities or traits to us. It teaches us that He is powerful, intelligent, and personal.

Second, God discloses Himself to us in the makeup and nature of human beings. Genesis 1:26-27 and other verses teach that God made man in His own image. That means that some, not all but some, of our qualities or traits are reflexes or expressions of some of God's qualities or traits. Those that are tell us something of what He is like.

Those first two disclosures are called General Revelation or Natural Revelation.

God discloses Himself to us in a third way. That way is by speaking or acting in our lives. My nephew, for instance, had a vision and heard God's audible voice expressing love to Him. A woman in a former church I attended was prayed for and healed of cancer when she was just hours from death. We can conclude things about God from those experiences.

I would note that one of our resources for this study, J.I. Packer, would probably discount what I've just said about God speaking and acting miraculously in our lives. I believe that He's wrong though.

The fourth way that God discloses Himself to us is the most important. That way of course is through His written word, the Bible. In this book that He wrote, God reveals specifically and in detail what He is like. The Bible is the primary and most helpful source of our knowledge of God.

Those last two disclosures are called Special Revelation. They are special in that they are supernatural. God specifically speaks or acts in a way that reveals Himself to us.

You can see from what I've said about General and Special Revelation that we are able to build a purposeful, thorough, and objective vision of God. We are able to know what He is like in detail. I would go even further and say that we are obligated to know what He is like in detail.

In my view in fact, this should be the very first activity to which we devote ourselves. Let me drive home what I mean by that with a question. Suppose a person makes the decision to follow Jesus and you are put in charge of discipling him or her. What is the very first thing that you would do in that regard? If it were me, the very first thing I would help them do is to build a purposeful, thorough, and objective vision of God.

So, if you have never done that, you need to do it. Like me, you should have done it years ago but as the old saying goes, "***better late than never.***" So do it now. This class is a major step forward in helping you do that. We are going to build such a vision of God. Then after we do that, you will hopefully continue to learn more and more about the awesome God you serve until the day that you die.

Now that we know that we should build a vision of God, the question is *"How do we do that?"* It's simple really. We will study the Bible, nature, the qualities of man, and the personal experiences of others and us with God. Then using the minds that God has given us, we will purposefully, thoroughly, and objectively conclude from those things what God is like.

That's our strategy and we're going to now proceed with it. We are going to examine and address one by one the qualities or traits of God that He has revealed to us.

Theologians do classify these qualities in a variety of ways. Packer, for instance, classifies them as powers and perfections. T.C. Hammond classifies them as natural qualities and moral qualities. Others classify them as related qualities and unrelated qualities.

Such classifications do lend to clarity but all of them are inadequate and to some extent even misleading. So, I'm not going to classify them. I'm just going to examine and address each quality or trait one by one in the order that seems, in my opinion, the most helpful.

THE QUALITIES OF GOD

Spiritual

The first quality that we examine and address is that God is **spiritual**. I touched on this briefly in discussing the Second Commandment but it demands much more attention than we gave it there.

Recall Deuteronomy 4:15. Explaining why the Israelites shouldn't make images of Him, God declared, *"You did not see any form on the day the Lord spoke to you at Horeb."* The beloved disciple, John, alludes to that verse in his first letter. In 1 John 4:12, he writes, *"No one has seen God at any time."* Why is it that no one has ever seen God? It isn't because He's hiding from us and won't let us see Him. It's because He can't be seen.

In John 4:24, Jesus explains why He can't be. He tells the Samaritan woman at the well and us, *"God is spirit."* Notice that the word "spirit" is small "s". It isn't referring to the person of the Holy Spirit but to the very nature of God's being. He is spirit.

The best way to explain what that means is to examine it's opposite, which, in this case, is the material world. That's what we call our universe. It is the material world. The word "material" suggests that the universe and everything that comprises it are made up of atoms, elements, and molecules. That includes us of course.

I shared a fascinating point in the sermon two weeks ago that just dawned on me as I was preparing it. You know the Second Law of Thermodynamics. Apart from God's intervention, matter can be neither created nor destroyed. The word "matter" there refers to atoms. Atoms can be neither created nor, absent fission, destroyed. That means that the atoms that make up our bodies were part of the original creation in Genesis 1:1. Look at the fingernail on your right hand. It is made up of atoms, each of which God made in the beginning of Genesis 1:1. Unless I'm missing something, that means that the atoms that make up our bodies are anywhere between 10,000 to 25,000 years old.

Anyway, everything in the universe, including us, is comprised of atoms, elements, and molecules in that order in that order of progression. Water, for instance, is made up of two hydrogen atoms bound together with one oxygen atom to form a molecule – H₂O.

But God is the opposite of that. He is the opposite of the material. He is spirit or spiritual. That simply means that He is not made up of atoms, elements, and molecules. To state it in relation to human beings, He has no body and brain.

Yes, He has no body and brain and doesn't miss them. He has the highest possible levels of consciousness without a brain and the highest possible levels of activity without a body.

He, of course, is not the only spiritual being. There are others, specifically the angels and demons, including Satan. They also are not made up of atoms, elements, and molecules. They have high levels of consciousness and activity without brains or bodies.

Now, if God is spiritual, then why does the Bible speak of Him as if He has body parts? Verses like Exodus 33:20, Deuteronomy 33:27, Proverbs 15:3, and Isaiah 59:1 mention the face, arms, eyes, hand, and ear of God. If God isn't material, why do these verses speak as if He is?

The answer is a simple one. This is figurative language. This figurative language is called anthropomorphism. Anthropomorphisms are descriptions of God's powers and activities in terms of body parts or movements. Their purpose is to make those powers and activities more understandable and more vivid and real. Like all figures of speech, they are not to be taken literally. As we've seen, God does not have body parts. He does not have a face, arms, eyes, hands, ears, and so on.

This first quality of God raises an issue and has an implication. Let's address the issue and examine the implication.

The issue is this. Since God is spiritual, defined as non-material, and we are material, can we interact with, engage, and know Him?

Some Christians get upset when they hear what I've just taught. Several have told me that hearing it diminished their faith in God. They've always perceived Him as having a body, which made Him seem more real to them. But now, perceiving Him as not having a body, He seems less real to them. I respond by saying two things.

First, remember what we're trying to do here. We're trying to build an objective vision of God. We're trying to perceive Him as He really is, not as we want Him to be. When I say that He doesn't have a body and brain, I'm just telling you what the Bible teaches and thus the way that He is. I'm telling you that He doesn't have a body and brain because He doesn't. He is in reality spiritual not material.

I respond by saying a second thing. When it comes to interacting with, engaging, and knowing God, it's to our great advantage that He is spiritual and not material.

Few Christians grasp that. Most think just the opposite in fact. They think it's to our disadvantage that He's spiritual.

I've told you the story before. A father's little daughter is afraid to sleep in her bedroom alone. So the father tells her not to be afraid because God is with her. To which she replies, ***"But I want someone with a face."***

That's what most Christians seem to want – a God with a face, that is, a material and bodily God. They think that we can interact with, engage, and know Him better if He is.

But that isn't so. On the contrary, we can interact with, engage, and know Him better if He isn't material – if He's spiritual. Listen to what Jesus says in 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."*** That is a spectacular promise. Yahweh, the God of the universe, will come and make His abode with us.

Consider two things. First, No human being, just because he or she is material, can do that. And second, God, just because He isn't material but spiritual, can.

God can be a constant presence not just with us, which He is, but in us as well. No human being can do that. First, no human being can be a constant presence with us. And second, none can ever be a presence in us. My wife, for example, can never know or touch me in the core of my being just because she is material. But God, just because He is spiritual, can. Because He is spiritual, He is able to inhabit and work in my mental, emotional, volitional, and bodily processes.

The problem isn't that God is spiritual. 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. You will learn how to interact with and engage the spiritual, God, in this study and in others that we'll offer this year.

That then is the issue that this first quality of God raises. Since God is spiritual, defined as non-material, and we are material, can we interact with, engage, and know Him? The answer is "yes, if we learn how."

Now let's examine the implication of this quality of God to us. That implication is that we too will one day be spiritual and not material.

You and I have a bodily and material existence now, on earth, and will have again, in heaven after Jesus comes again. But what about the period between the time when we lose our earthly body, at death, and the time that we get our resurrection body, at the Second Coming. That period is called the intermediate state.

In that state, those of us who have followed Jesus will be spiritual like the angels are. God will secure our existence without a body and brain just like He does the angels. And in that state, we will have levels of consciousness and activity that dwarf the levels that we have now. As I often say it, quoting Dwight L. Moody, we will be alive as never before.

So that is the first quality of the awesome God that we serve. He is spiritual, defined as non-material. He has the highest possible levels of consciousness and activity without a brain and body.

Self-existent

A second quality that He possesses is that He's self-existent.

Act 17:24-25 reveals the self-existence of God. Notice a critical phrase in verse 25, "*as though He needed anything.*"

You and I as human beings need things. We need things outside of us in order to exist.

Suppose, for instance, that I made this room that we're in airtight and locked the door so that none of us could get out. What would be our condition or state next week at this time? We would be dead.

Or consider the earth going out of its orbit and moving away from the sun. I saw an old *Twilight Zone* episode when I was a boy that was about just that – the earth moving away further and further from the sun. What would eventually happen if it did? We would be dead.

Those two scenarios illustrate that something about us. We don't have the power of being within ourselves. We need something else outside of us, like oxygen and sun, in order to live.

But God does not. It's incomprehensible to us but God is self-existent. That means that He has the power of being within Himself. He needs nothing outside of Himself in order to exist or live. He has the possession of life, with consciousness and the power to act, in Himself.

Can He live without air? Yes! Can He live without sun? Yes! Can He live without water? Yes! Can He live without anything in the universe? Yes! Can He live without anything period? Yes! Why? Because He's self-existent. He has the power of being within Himself.

That quality of His implies something about Him that boggles our minds. As Novatian, an early theologian said it, "*God has no origin.*" Or to say it another way, He is self-caused.

Nothing about God is more difficult for us to grasp than that. That's because we're creatures of cause, source, and origin. In our minds, everything has to have a cause, source, and origin, a beginning if you will. Everything has to come from something other than itself. That explains the age-old question that people, children and adult alike, ask. Where did God come from?

That question, like many, can't be answered because it has a flawed assumption. It assumes that God came from something, which He didn't.

We see that in the Bible's classic statement of God's self-existence in Exodus 3. Most of you know this story. God wanted to reveal Himself to Moses and the people of Israel. So He did that in two ways.

The first way was a phenomenon in verses 1-2. That phenomenon was the burning bush, a bush on fire.

Let's think about fire for a few moments. Fire needs something material outside of itself to feed on or it ceases to exist. When that something else is a bush, when the bush is finally consumed, the fire goes out.

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

The burning bush was a symbolic phenomenon. The fire clearly represented Yahweh. And it not needing the bush to feed on represented that fact that Yahweh needs nothing outside of Himself to exist. It represented that He is self-existent in other words. That's the quality about Himself that God revealed to Moses.

There was a second way that God revealed Himself to Moses and through him to the Israelites. That way was a name. God chose a personal name for Himself and in verse 14 revealed to Moses what that was. It was "Yahweh." Yahweh is a Hebrew word that our English Bibles translate in one of two ways. It's either "*I am who I am*" or "*I will be whom I will be.*" As most of you know, that is God's personal name.

But why did God choose that name for Himself? It's because of what it conveys about Him. It conveys that He has no origin or cause. He's self-existent and because He is was not caused. He has always been and will always be because He has the power of being within Himself.

This quality of God has a powerful application to human life. That application is that human life is dependent on Him. It's dependent on Him in two ways.

First, He caused it or as we say it created it. Think of this now in its detail.

Look at the fingernail on your right thumb again. At one time, each atom that makes it up didn't exist. Then God willed that particular atom to exist and it suddenly did. Each atom in our bodies and the universe was caused or as we say it created by God. Obviously, we would not have human life without the atoms that make us up and we wouldn't have the atoms that make us up if God hadn't created them.

Human life is dependent on God in a second way. He sustains it. One of our favorite verses around here teaches us that, Colossians 1:17. It says that in Jesus all things hold together. He is the glue of the universe in other words. The continued existence and properties of the atoms, elements, and molecules in the universe depend on the nurturing and sustaining work of Jesus. Hebrews 1:3 teaches us that very thing. It says that Jesus "*upholds all things by the word of His power.*"

As you can plainly see, human life is dependent on God, which reveals the root cause of humanity's problems. Think about all the problems that we face on this planet in terms of human behavior. The root cause of all of those problems is this. People live as if they aren't dependent on God. They think and act as if they are totally independent of Him, as if they don't need Him and I mean at all. That is the root cause of all the sins and all the behavioral problems on this earth.

Do you realize what that means? Sin is an affront first and foremost to God's self-existence. As Tozer says it, when we deliberately sin, we are rejecting God as the ground of existence. We're challenging His selfhood in relation to our own.

Tozer goes on to make a statement in his discussion of this that is one of the most profound insights that I've ever learned. He defines what the essence of sin is and I've never heard anyone put it in these terms. I even wrote "*Wow!*" beside it in the book. According to him the essence of sin is this: "*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.'*" The word "AM" is in capital letters. He's referring back to Exodus 3:14 in other words and the self-existence of God.

To quit sinning and become holy requires many things on our part. Perhaps the very first of those is coming to the realization that we are caused and sustained. We aren't utterly independent at all no matter how hard we try to be. On the contrary, we are absolutely, positively, totally, completely, and utterly dependent on God, the uncaused cause.

Failing to keep that in mind is a harmful thing. Keeping it in mind is a helpful thing. So, keep it constantly in mind.

Eternal

God has a third quality that flows naturally from the second. He is eternal. Many verses teach that. They include the following: Deuteronomy 33:27; Psalm 9:7; 135:13; Isaiah 57:15; Jeremiah 10:10; Romans 1:20; 1 Timothy 1:17; 6:15-16; Revelation 1:8. These are just a few of the numerous verses that teach us that God is eternal.

That God is eternal is an easy thing to explain. It means quite simply that there has never been a time when He was not and there will never be a time when He will not be. He has always existed and will always exist. Or as the Bible says it, He is the alpha and omega, the beginning and the end. That's what it means that God is eternal and as you can see, it's an easy thing to explain and even to understand.

But its implications are mind-boggling. We are able to articulate its implications but not understand them. We are able to understand though the implications of those implications to us. That in turn increases our capacity to love and fear this awesome God that we're getting to know better. Let's examine the implications of God eternal nature.

Let me ask you a question. Did time, defined as a succession of moments that we call seconds, always exist? No, it did not. Time had a beginning. It began.

Let me ask you a second question. When did it begin? It began in Genesis 1:1 when God created the material universe. Time did not exist. God spoke. Then time existed.

Time is a creation of His in other words. We absolutely must understand that if we want to understand Him. Time is a creation of His. Let me explain that.

You and I are creatures of time aren't we? Time governs us. We are totally and completely at its mercy.

What is it that you and I possess or have with regard to time? Do we possess or have the precise moment we call 6:30 p.m. on January 31, today? No, we don't. We possessed it 45 minutes ago but we don't possess it now. Do we possess 6:30 p.m. on February 1? No, we don't? We will possess it but do not possess it now.

What is it then that we do possess when it comes to time? The answer is "not much." Do you realize that we don't even possess the present second? With more precision technologies, there are now smaller measures of time than that. There is what is called a nanosecond for instance. Because you and I are creatures of time, bound by it, all that we possess is the present nanosecond, which isn't much is it.

But God is not a creature of time. He is the creator of it instead. It does not govern Him and I mean at all. But He does govern it and I mean totally and completely. God did not "begin" and will not "end" because "begin" and "end" are time words and time has no application to Him. He totally and completely transcends time.

God's own statement about Himself in Revelation 21:6 demonstrates this. He says, "***I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.***" To grasp the full meaning of what He says, we must understand that He means "simultaneously." He is the beginning and the end simultaneously, that is, at the same time.

The implication of that is this. The implication is that there is no past and future with God, only a never-ending present. There is no "before" and "after" with Him, only an everlasting "now." Time does not limit His perspective on and experience of things.

That means as a practical matter that He doesn't see the events of history or our own individual lives in success over a period of time. He sees all of those events all at once.

Think about the most significant events of a person's life: birth, graduation from high school, first day on the job, wedding ceremony, birth of first child, day of retirement, day diagnosed with cancer, and day of death. Time doesn't limit His perspective or experience. He sees all of those events in the person's life at once.

Perhaps the easiest way to explain it is this. Let's think about some significant date in history – July 4, 1776, for instance. For God it is July 4, 1776, January 31, 2007 (today's date), and July 4, 2007 all at the same moment in our time. July 4, 1776 is not past but present to Him. July 4, 2007 isn't future but present to Him.

So that's the implication of the objective fact that God is eternal. There is no past or present to Him, only a never-ending present. I'll say it once again. We can articulate that implication but we cannot understand it because we've never experienced it and neither has anyone else.

But we can understand the practical implications of the implication. So let's examine those implications that we can understand. The objective fact that God is eternal implies several things.

One is that He can hear and answer millions of prayers all at the same time. At any given moment in our time, there are literally millions of people praying to God. So how can he hear and answer all of those prayers at the same time.

That used to bother me. I'd sometimes pray and think that my prayer was getting lost in the shuffle of all the other prayers being offered at the same time. I didn't feel a personal connection with God in my prayer life as a result. I once saw 20 reporters trying to talk with Derek Jeter at the same time, which meant none of them could talk with him. That's the way I used to sometimes feel in my prayer life with God.

But I now know better. The key phrase is "at the same time." Can God hear the prayers of millions of people "at the same time?"

Our life comes to us moment by moment. One moment appears and there is room for very little until the next moment appears. This is our experience as creatures in time.

But God is not in time. His life does not consist of moments following one another. Thus, if a million people and I pray to Him tonight at 10:00 p.m., He doesn't have to listen to each prayer in the brief moment of time that we call 10:00 p.m. 10:00 p.m. and every other moment of time from the beginning of the world is always present for Him.

That means that He has all of eternity in which to listen to any specific prayer that you and I or anyone else prays.

Again, we cannot comprehend that as creatures of time. But we can comprehend what it means to our prayer life. It means that God has all the time in the world for hearing and even answering our prayer.

Imagine something. You are the only creature that God made and the only one therefore to whom He gives His attention. And when you pray or talk with Him, He listens utterly attentively to literally every word that you say.

The truth is that our experience with Him is just like that. God has infinite attention to spare for each of us. He does not deal with us in the mass. You and I are as much alone with Him when we pray, and actually all the time, as if we were the only being that He ever created.

That is possible because He is eternal.

That God is eternal has a second implication to us. Because God is eternal, He made us immortal. Immortality is different than eternity. Eternal means that God has no beginning and no ending. Immortality, applied to us, means that we have a beginning but no ending. We have not always been but we will always be.

Wow, what an astonishing thing that is, more so than most of us realize.

There's a human phenomenon that poses significant problems for us. That phenomenon is that realities and truths can become so familiar to us that they become unfamiliar. That means that they are extraordinary things objectively but we've gotten so used to them that they've become ordinary subjectively, that is, to us. As one rabbi put it, people trivialize the transcendent.

Don't let that happen to you. Give things deeper thought. Reflect on and ponder their true nature. See wondrous things for what they really are – wondrous.

With that in mind, there is no more wondrous truth about human beings than the one I just shared. You and I and everyone else who has ever been born are immortals. We all began but we will never end. Our person and life will continue on forever, those in a transformed state of one kind or another.

That is an absolutely staggering thing. It is so staggering in fact that it was a hindrance to C.S. Lewis' entrance into God's kingdom. He was afraid to embrace Christianity because of what it meant if he did. It meant that there is no "exit sign" in the universe. That's how he said it. Christianity teaches that once you begin to live, you can never cease to live and the very prospect of that terrified him.

It shouldn't terrify us like it did Lewis but it should grab our attention like it did his. It should impact just as profoundly (but positively) as it did Lewis. And it should alter the way we live. We should live as if every one around us and we are immortals – because we are.

First, we should live as if we are immortals. We should take care of our soul as if it will live forever because it will. People in our culture for sure are so concerned about taking care of their bodies. Health spas, fitness clubs, wellness centers and so on flourish because people value their bodies so much. People care so much about their "abs and buns." If only they cared that much about their souls. They should care about their souls and more so because our earthly bodies will live only 70 or 80 years but our souls will forever. So learn how to take care of your soul, to prepare it for the eternity that is coming. My next Sunday school class, in March, will teach you how to do just that.

Second, we should live as if others are immortals. Listen to what C.S. Lewis writes about that in his celebrated lecture on "The Weight of Glory": *"It is a serious thing to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. It is light of these overwhelming possibilities that that we should conduct all our dealings with one another. You have never talked to a mere mortal. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit – immortal horrors or everlasting splendors."* That is powerful stuff. You and I should conduct our selves accordingly with each and every person that we meet every day. We should conduct ourselves with the deepest of love and respect for them. Their very nature as immortals demands it.

You can see then that human beings are immortal and that this immortality is a logical consequence of God's eternity.

Triune

I talk all the time in my preaching and teaching about the triune God and that is the fourth quality of His that I'll address now. Yes, it's true and we absolutely must grasp this as fully as we can. God is triune. He is a trinity of persons in other words.

The Bible does not use the words "triune" or "trinity." A church father named Tertullian used the word "trinity" for the first time that we know in the 2nd century AD. It didn't find a place formally in the church until the 4th century AD.

But even though the Bible does not use the words "triune" or "trinity", it does clearly teach the reality that those words convey. A person who reads the Bible carefully and objectively will realize that it speaks of three persons who are divine. He or she will also realize that it speaks of them as if they are one and the same.

Suppose that we believe that there is a God but know absolutely nothing about Him. We are reading through the Bible to find out as much as we can about that and we come across the following verses: Matthew 28:19; 2 Corinthians 13:14; 1 Peter 1:2; and Jude 20-21; to name a few. We would conclude something from these verses and ask a question. What would we conclude? It's that there are three persons who seem to be supernatural in some sense. These are God, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. What would we ask? Who are these three persons.

Now suppose that we continue reading the Bible and come across these verses and understand these things about them:

2 Thessalonians 2:16-17: These two verses are one sentence. The subject of the sentence is "our Lord Jesus Christ and God our Father" in verse 16. The verbs to which the subject is directed are "comfort" and "strengthen" in verse 17. Our English translations translate them as if they are plural but they aren't. They are singular. A literal translation would be "Now may our Lord Jesus Christ and God our Father comforts and strengthens you." What does that show us. It shows us that Paul thinks of Jesus and God the Father as one.

Titus 2:13: The word "appearing" is never used of Father God in the Bible. That would indicate that the word "God" in this verse is not referring to Father God. Also the phrase "God and Savior" was always used by the pagans of Paul's day to refer to one God. Paul borrows this phrase and applies it to Jesus. What does that show us? It shows that Paul thought of Jesus as deity, as God Himself.

These are just samplings of verses that speak of Jesus as if He is God. Every time I come across a verse that does that, I write it down in the back of my Bible. At this point, I have 16 such verses or passages written down.

Picking up again on our hypothetical reading, suppose that we continue reading the Bible and come across these verses and understand these things about them:

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 search the depths of God? No simply because they are finite. What does that mean then about the Holy Spirit? He must be infinite. In verse 11, Paul uses an analogy to explain what the Holy Spirit does. The 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 thoughts of God are the Holy Spirit. Remaining consistent with the analogy, that clearly implies that God and the Holy Spirit are one in the same.

1 Corinthians 6:19: Paul uses a metaphor here – the temple of God, alluding to the Old Testament temple. What was the temple of God in the Old Testament? It was specifically the dwelling place of God. In this verse, Paul says that our body is the temple of God. Remaining consistent with the metaphor, that would mean that it is the dwelling place of God. But notice that Paul doesn't say that. He says instead that it's the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. That clearly shows us that he thinks of the Holy Spirit and God as one.

Now, let's go back to our hypothetical situation. We believe in God but know nothing about Him. But we have read the preceding verses and others and know what I've said about them. What we would conclude from that if we were objective pursuers of truth. We would conclude that there are three persons but for some reason the Bible speaks of them as if they are One in the same.

And you know what? That is in fact the case. God is Three but One. He is triune in other words.

What that means is this - and I'm defining it the way that Bible-believing Christians have been doing for 16 centuries. It means that God is one being, one substance, or one essence but with three persons who. Some theologians including 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. That means that they are three distinct persons not one person. But we should also not divide their substance. They are not three beings but one.

But what is their relation to each other? The Athanasian Creed articulated it with care this way: ***"In this Trinity, nothing is before or after, nothing is greater or less: but all three Persons coeternal, together, and equal."*** That has several implications to which we need to give some thought.

One is that none of the three persons is greater than the other two. Jesus did say in John 14:28, ***"the Father is greater than I."*** But that doesn't mean greater in authority, capacity, or personality. The old theologians said it this way, ***"Equal to His father, as touching His Godhead; less than the Father, as touching His manhood."*** That does express the reality. In His earthly body, Jesus was lesser than the Father. But now He is equal to the Father.

The best way to explain it is to say that each of the qualities or attributes that we are identifying and discussing belong to each of the three persons of the Godhead. The Father, for instance, is no more powerful than the Son or Holy Spirit is. All three are all-powerful.

This reveals a mistake that we as God's followers sometimes make. We sometimes think and act as if one of the persons is greater or more important than the other two. The truth is that we need to think and act as if each is as important as the other because that is in fact the case.

I had a Pentecostal acquaintance for instance who talked and acted as if the Holy Spirit were the chief person of the Trinity. I'll tell you what I told him. There is no chief or main person of the Trinity. They are equal.

But there is an order of relation among them. The Bible teaches that the son and Holy Spirit are subordinated to the Father. Some state it this way. The Son is begotten of the Father and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Son. This is a subordination of relation not nature. That's the best way I can say it but I have to admit that I don't really understand it.

Another implication of the relation of the three persons to each other is this. They are "together" as the Athanasian Creed says it. Tozer explains it this way in his book: ***"The Persons of the Godhead, being one, have one will. They work always together, and never one smallest act is done without the instant acquiescence of the other two. Every act of God is accomplished by the Trinity in Unity."***

We sometimes talk as if the three persons of God confer with each other and come to agreement about different matters. In *Paradise Lost* for instance, Milton pictures the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit discussing the redemption of man with each other. That implies that they could disagree or have different points of view about something, which is incorrect.

That's because they have a oneness of mind and will that is unlike anything we know. This oneness is instant and immediate without any motion or effort at all. One person does not think one thing and the other person another. They think the same thing all at once.

You can see from what I've said that no human being can actually understand the reality that I've discussed today. Jehovah's Witnesses contend because we can't that it isn't true. It's irrational, they say. But it isn't irrational, which means against reason. It's transrational, which means it's above reason. Just because we can't understand something doesn't mean that it isn't true. If that were the case, most of what we believe about God wouldn't be true because we can't truly understand it. That He is self-existent, for instance, is no more comprehensible than that He is triune.

It may not be comprehensible but it's true. God is triune. He is one being with three persons. God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are Three but One.

I want to make a statement at this point that all of us need to prayerfully ponder. We live in a triune universe.

Most Christians think that the triune nature of God is just theology that doesn't really affect our lives in any way. But nothing could be further from the truth.

That God is triune makes all the difference in the world and when I say "in the world" I mean that literally. We live in a triune universe. I mean by that, the triune nature of God is expressed and reflected in the universe itself and life in it. We cannot thrive in that universe and life, therefore, if we do not understand and respond to that basic characteristic of it.

The most noticeable expression of God's triune nature is found in human relationships and community. Let me explain this to you. If you grasp it and believe it, it will forever alter what you think and do in that regard.

Suppose that you are a Jehovah's Witness or Mormon. You do not believe in a triune God. You believe instead that He is one being and one person. Also suppose that I ask you this question. What did God do before He created something? Remember that He is eternal. At one time, there was nothing but Him. So, what did He do? Answer that as a Jehovah's Witness or Mormon would have to answer it. The Jehovah's Witness or Mormon would have to basically answer "nothing." He spent all of eternity past doing nothing.

But we are not Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons. We do believe that God is triune, one being with three persons. So, I ask you that same question with that in mind. What did God do before He created something?

John 17:24 helps us answer that question. Jesus gives us a glimpse into the timeless eternity before the creation of the universe. He tells us that God the Father loved Him. Jesus gives us the further insight in verse 21 of that same chapter that the Father and He are one. The 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 Son that they have with each other.

What that reveals to us about the triune God is this. He is and I quote Dallas Willard, *"a community of unspeakably magnificent personal beings of boundless love, knowledge, and power."* Notice the word "community." He is a community of unspeakably magnificent persons. God had a life in other words before the creation of the universe. It was a life of perfect and utterly fulfilling communion and love. It was the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit communing with and loving each other. Community and love are rooted in the very being of God Himself.

Neil Platinga describes that community and love 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."*

I would pick up on a word that Platinga uses, *"defer."* The persons of God defer to one another.

In an insightful essay, Frederick Bruner explains that deference in detail. He calls it shyness. Let me quote a paragraph from the essay: *"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 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."* It is the shyness of love.

Bruner goes on to John's discussion of the Spirit in His gospel. He points out and correctly so that the Spirit's ministry is to draw attention not to Himself but to the Son. He works to bear witness to and glorify the Son.

Bruner often acts out the Spirit's ministry this way when he teaches. He draws a stick figure on a chalkboard to represent Jesus. After that, he stands behind the chalkboard so that he can't be seen, reaches around with one hand, and points with a single finger to the image of Jesus. He then says: *"Look at Him; listen to Him; learn from Him; follow Him; worship Him, be devoted to Him; serve Him; love Him; be preoccupied with Him."* That is shyness – the shyness of the Spirit.

But the Bible teaches that the Son did the same thing with the Father and the Father did the same thing with the Son. We see this in John 13:31-32; 17:1,4-5,22,24. Notice that Jesus speaks of glorifying the Father and the Father glorifying Him.

But the Father and Son also defer to the Spirit. In Mark 1:12, for instance, Jesus submitted to the Spirit and went into the wilderness. He also made clear in John 14 and 16 that the Spirit would take His place in the lives of the disciples to do what He had been doing.

That helps us grasp the Trinitarian community. It is a community of persons who have a perfect and utterly fulfilling love for each other. It's a love in which each one defers to the others, in which each one seeks to glorify and do the will of the others. John Ortberg sums it up well in one of his books: *"God exists as Father, Son, and Spirit in a community of greater humility, servanthood, mutual submission, and delight than you and I can imagine."*

That Trinitarian community of course continues today and never ends. The Second Coming of Jesus and the beginning of our eternal life in heaven changes nothing between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They will continue to commune with and love each other as they have always done.

But so what? Why have I taken the time to explain this to you? Why is it relevant to us at all?

The answer is that it reveals that we live in a Trinitarian universe. That means that God's Trinitarian nature is expressed in that universe and life in it. So much of that universe and life is a reflex of the fact that God is one being with three persons. We must know that in order to live well.

Sex, for instance, is a reflex of the Trinity. God made sex when He made man because of His Trinitarian nature. If He weren't one being with three persons, He probably wouldn't have created the sexual aspect of human life.

Song of Songs 8:6 explains why I say that. Song of Songs is the one book in the Bible that addresses the issues of love and sex in marriage exclusively. 8:6 is the theme of the book. It speaks of love, meaning sexual love in marriage. It says that it is the very flame of Yahweh. That means that it comes from the very nature of God Himself. That's right, sex in marriage comes from the very nature of God Himself.

Notice the word "flashes" in this verse. That word in the Hebrew refers to intensity and energy. The intensity and energy of sexual love in marriage are the very intensity and energy of Yahweh Himself.

What that means is this. Life within the Trinity is the pattern for the marriage relationship and the sexual aspect of it. Let me ask you a question. Why did God create the institution of marriage with its sexual aspect in Genesis 2? It's because He is Trinitarian. When He created human beings and human society, He wanted something in it to reflect the intense and energetic love that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have for each other. That something that He conceived and created to do that was marriage with its sexual aspect.

Examine the dynamics of marriage.

In it, two human beings pledge themselves to a permanent and exclusive physical, psychological, and spiritual relationship with each other. The permanent and exclusive part is vital because it creates an intensity and depth of relationship that can't be attained with more than one person. It is impossible for me to have a depth of relationship with any of you that I have with my wife because 33 years ago we made and have carried out the commitment to that kind of relationship.

Genesis 2:24 describes the result of making and carrying out this permanent and exclusive commitment as "becoming one flesh."

Shakespeare wrote a poem about two lovers that captures the gist of this better than anything I know. It goes like this:

*They so loved that love in twain
Had the essence but of one.
Two distincts, division none;
Number there in love was slain.*

Now guys, if we read that to our wives on Valentine's Day to get them into a romantic mood, it probably wouldn't work because they wouldn't understand it. It needs explained in other words.

So let me do that. "Love in twain" and "Two distincts" mean that the two lovers are two separate individuals. "Had the essence but of one" and "division none" mean that their love had removed the barriers that normally divide people so that their mind, heart, and soul were one. "Number there in love was slain" means that normal mathematics no longer applied to them. John Ortberg calls this "the new math of God." That math is that $1+1=1$. The two are one just as in the Trinity the three are one. In the Trinity $1+1+1=1$. In marriage, $1+1=1$.

That is where sex comes in. The permanent and exclusive commitment that a husband and wife make creates the unique spiritual and psychological union between them that I just described. They then express that union through the most intense and energetic of all human acts. That act, the sex act, creates a literal physical union.

You can see then what the sex act in marriage is. It is the most intense and energetic of all human interactions, which expresses the deepest of all human relationships, one between two people who have made a permanent and exclusive commitment to each other.

That shows what the sex act in marriage ultimately and most significantly is. It's a testimony to the Trinity. It's the one thing on earth that most closely resembles what's going on in the Godhead between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Those persons are not physical of course but the sex act in marriage conveys the intensity of the love and union between them.

That is the reality of sex and it has many practical implications.

One implication is that sexual intercourse outside of marriage is a sin. It's a sin for several reasons but the primary reason is this. It defames God because it trivializes the Trinity. In the end, there is no such thing as casual sex. Sex outside of marriage has dramatic and destructive physical, psychological, and spiritual implications.

Another implication is that sex is a vital part of marriage. But it isn't the only part of marriage. It should be expressive of a deep and loving relationship between the husband and wife. Wives seem to grasp this more than husbands do. Husbands view it primarily as a biological act and wives more as a romantic act. The wives, in my view, are correct in this.

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

Jesus makes this perfectly clear in John 17:20-21. Jesus came not just to save individuals. He also came to form those individuals into a community of people that resembles the Trinitarian community. The church, in other words, is a reflex of and testimony to the Trinity just as marriage is. It is expressive of the union and love in the Godhead.

What that means as a practical matter is this. We are to be one with and love our brothers and sisters in Jesus just as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one with and love each other. The same spirit of deference, submission, and delight that characterizes the Trinity should also characterize the church, locally and universally.

We ought to take that quite seriously and the last line in John 17:21 explains why. After praying that His followers would be one like the Father and He are, Jesus declares why, ***"So that the world may believe that You sent Me."***

I wrote a little note in my Bible beside this verse. It says, ***"Unity is the final apologetic."*** Do you know what an apologetic is? It is something that persuades someone that God is real and that His word is right. In that regard, our most convincing apologetic as followers of Jesus is our unity and love.

The bottom line is that followers of Jesus loving each other in unity glorifies God. It persuades unsaved people, more than anything else does, that God is real and that His word is right. In contrast, followers of Jesus quarrelling with each other in disunity defames God. It persuades unsaved people, more than anything else does, that God is not real and that His word is not right.

I know of a large church in which the staff members, Administrative Council, and congregation are at odds with each other. When I say at odds, I mean that they are competing for power, gossiping, lying, and quarrelling with each other. What's going on is absolutely tragic because it not only saddens God but defames Him as well.

Our call is to prize unity and love. Doing or saying things that cause disunity and conflict should be unthinkable to us.

Why? Because it's a Trinitarian universe and God expects his followers collectively to be one of the most profound and vivid expressions of that fact. He is glorified when we are and defamed when we are not.

You can see then that the Trinitarian nature of God isn't just ivory tower theology. It is instead one of the most significant facts of our universe and life in it. We understand it to our benefit. We misunderstand it to our detriment. So let's understand it.

Omnipotent

The fifth quality of God is perhaps His most celebrated. That's probably because of what Paul observes in Romans 1:20. It's that the world around us so clearly and constantly displays this quality of His.

That quality is that He's omnipotent. That means that He is "almighty," a word that the KJV used 56 times of Him. He is all-powerful or as Paul says it in Romans 1:20 eternally powerful. His power is unlimited in other words.

Many passages reveal the omnipotence of God. Genesis 18:14; Job 42:2; Jeremiah 32:17, 27; Matthew 19:26; and Revelation 21:22 are samplings of those.

That God is omnipotent doesn't mean that He can do anything. The fact is that there are some things that He can't do. One of the mind-bending questions that is often asked is, "*Can God make a rock so big that He can't lift it?*" If the answer is "yes," there is something that He can't do – lift the rock. If the answer is "no," there is something that He can't do – make a rock that big.

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 is no longer love but compulsion.

This explains, partially at least, the presence of evil in the world. God cannot make creatures 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 in that is an obvious one. The creature may choose not to love and thus, evil is born, which is exactly what happened in the Garden of Eden.

Anyway, the larger point is that omnipotence doesn't mean that God can do anything.

What does it mean then? It means that He has limitless power.

Let's start at the bottom in that regard. Consider this thought. God, as the only self-existent creator of all that there is, is the source of all power. And since a source must be at least equal to anything that emanates from it, God is of necessity equal to all the power that there is.

Stop for a moment and think about all the power that there is. It's far beyond what we can imagine. But let me give you an example that might impress upon you the magnitude of that power.

That example is something that happened on March 9, 1979. On that day, nine satellites stationed at various points in our own solar system recorded a phenomenal occurrence. That occurrence was a powerful burst of gamma radiation that took place deep in space.

The astronomers who interpreted this occurrence's readings were flabbergasted and awestruck. That's because it was the most powerful burst of energy ever recorded to that time.

It lasted for only one-tenth of a second but in that instant emitted as much energy as the sun does in 3,000 years. Imagine that! In one-tenth of a second, it emitted as much energy as the sun does in 3,000 years.

Doyle Evans, an astrophysicist, explained it this way. The energy that the burst emitted was at a rate of 100 billion times greater than the energy emission of the sun if you can imagine that. If that burst had occurred in the furthest part of the Milky Way galaxy that we live in, it would have set our entire atmosphere aglow. If the sun suddenly emitted the same amount of energy, planet earth would vaporize instantly. It would simply disappear.

Now, here's my point. Since God is the source of that gamma radiation burst, He is at least as powerful as it is.

But that gamma radiation burst is just a drop in the bucket of all the power that exists in our universe, let alone other universes if there are any. And once again, since God is the source of all that power, His power is at least equal to that. It is at least equal to all the power that exists in the universe or universes.

But the reality is that His power is far beyond that – infinitely far in fact. One of God's qualities that we will discuss at the end of our study is that He is infinite. That means that He knows no bounds and is measureless. Since He is infinite, so is everything about Him including His power. His power is infinite. That means that it is without bounds. It is measureless. He is omnipotent in other words.

Tozer reveals two implications of that.

One is that all of God's acts are done without effort. Notice I said "all" of His acts. All of His acts are done without any effort on His part at all.

What is your favorite miracle, if you have one, in the Bible? There are so many possibilities aren't there? I think of the ten plagues that God brought upon the Egyptians, the parting of the Red Sea, the saving of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego in the fiery furnace, Jesus feeding the 5000, Jesus changing the water into wine, Jesus walking on the water, Peter and John healing the lame man in the temple, and so on.

My favorite miracle is found in Joshua 10:12-14. The Israelites went to battle with the Amorites and routed them. To assure that the victory would be complete, God caused the sun to stand still in the sky. You recognize what means. God actually made the earth stop rotating on its axis and orbiting the sun for a period of time. Imagine how much power it would take to accomplish that. God has that much power.

Now, watch as I do something. I'm going to raise my index finger in the air. How much power did it take for me to do that? The answer is very little. It's so very little in fact that my energy level, which is limited and small, was hardly affected by it at all.

Here's what I want you to see. Making the earth stop rotating and orbiting was easier for God than lifting my index finger was for me. God did what He did more effortlessly than I did what I did.

Since God's power is infinite, it took literally no effort on his part to do what He did. As small as my effort was in raising my index finger, I did have less energy and power after I did it, only a very little less but less nonetheless. After God made the earth stop rotating and orbiting, He had no less energy or power than before He did that.

Everything that He did, including creating the universe, was without effort or strain. Everything that He does, including sustaining the universe, is without effort or strain. That means that He can do anything as easily as anything else.

That God's power is limitless has a second implication. Nothing is too difficult for Him. 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.

I'd say 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 earth to stop rotating and orbiting and He had the power to do it. He willed to make the fire not consume Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego and He 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 that means this way. God is the absolute master of the ultimate foundations of all reality. He totally and utterly 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 – chemistry, physics, biology and so on.

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 Alex Rodriguez 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. Alex Rodriguez hits a long ball 450 feet and it comes down into the bullpen of Yankee Stadium. That's not 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 and orbits the sun 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 and orbiting 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 Alex Rodriguez hitting a fly ball that stayed in the air for six hours and then dropped.

Let's consider several other miracles.

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.

Or consider John 2:9 and the changing of the water into wine. Water and wine have different molecular configurations. Jesus, through the power of the Holy Spirit, caused the water molecules in the jars to reconfigure as wine molecules.

Or finally, consider Matthew 14:21 and my favorite miracle of Jesus – the feeding of the 5000 people with five loaves and two fish. In my view, the atoms that made up those loaves and fish had not existed. Through the Holy Spirit's power, Jesus actually created those new atoms in the right combination to make bread and fish.

The explanation for this is the $e=mc^2$. Energy equals mass times the speed of light squared.

Human beings have only the right side of the formula available to them. We can create energy if we have matter like oil, gas, and so on. But we can't create it without matter.

But God has the left side of the formula available to Him. He has energy, power, without matter and speed. He does not need matter or speed to produce energy.

That enables Him to create something out of nothing. That explains both the creation of the universe and the feeding of the 5000.

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. He has given you and I me right now have the power to respond to and interact with the material world around us.

Take this sheet of paper, for instance. I have the power to impact its molecules. I can tear it apart for instance, separating molecules on the edge that is torn. Or I can crumple it up, affecting the shape of the molecular configurations.

Or I can make this chair move from one place in space to another. I could also break it apart if I wanted to or even clean it off by spitting on it and rubbing it.

We have power over our material world and that is one of the ways that we are made in God's image. Our power is certainly limited but it is real power nonetheless.

Now, this power over the material world that God has given us will dramatically increase at the Second Coming of Jesus. When Jesus comes again, the Holy Spirit is going to give us new resurrection bodies and two things along with them – authority and power. Authority refers to the freedom to act. Power refers to the ability to act. In heaven, God will give us both of those to the degree that He can entrust us with them.

But however much power He gives us, it will dwarf the power that we have now. Compare the power of an earthworm to respond to and interact with the material world with ours. The difference is monumental. But as monumental as it is, it is much smaller than the difference between our powers now on earth and our powers then in heaven.

In my view, we will have the powers in our resurrection bodies that Jesus had in His. Jesus had great powers over the material world around Him in His earthly body. Those powers were then increased in His resurrection body. Our resurrection bodies will be not like His earthly body but like His resurrection body.

That means that we will have the power to do what Jesus did in His earthly body and more. We will be able to control weather patterns, change molecular structures, defy gravity, make things out of nothing, create new colors, create new elements, travel over great distances instantaneously and so on.

When it comes to His power, we are in the image of God now on earth. But we will be dramatically more so in His image in heaven.

Omnipresent

God has a sixth quality. He is omnipresent. Let me ask you a question. How many persons are here in this room? The answer is however many that we can see plus three – the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I say that because the triune God, Yahweh, is omnipresent.

Remember the God is infinite, which means limitless. Because He is limitless, so are all of His qualities. Thus, His presence is limitless. That leads us to the classic definition of God's omnipresence. He is everywhere present with His entire being all at once.

Scripture teaches the omnipresence of God with as much clarity as it does anything else about Him. 1 King 8:27 – it is literally true that the universe cannot contain God, meaning He is not confined to it. Psalm 139:7-8 – verse 7 is a rhetorical question that answer to which is that we can go nowhere where God isn't. Jeremiah 23:23-24 – God fills the heavens and the earth like water fills a glass that is completely full. Acts 17:24-28 – everyone on the face of the earthly always lives, moves, and exists in Him. These samplings of Scripture make God's omnipresence an undisputable quality of His. So let's try to understand it as best as we can.

I start with the word "omnipresent" itself. The word "present" means "here." The prefix "omni" refers to universality. Thus, omnipresent means that Yahweh is everywhere "here." I love that. Right now, as I speak, God is "here" everywhere in the universe.

Let's suppose that the phone rings and Alan goes out and answers it. It's my son Moses and He says that I won't be here tonight because I am with him and can't leave. Will you believe that I am with him? No. Why not? Because I am with you. But why does that exclude me from also being with him? Because I'm a human being and human beings can't be in two places at once.

But God can and in fact is. Remember what the Second Commandment teaches us. God is not localized. He is in every place at once. He is here in this room. He is in the fellowship hall with the children. He is in the sanctuary of New Life Church. He is in your living room. He is in the White House. He is in the core of the earth. He is on the moon. He is on the star that is furthest from us in the universe. He is in all of those places - right now as I speak. He is in every place on earth and in the universe at once.

We can even think of this in historical terms. Was God there when Julius Caesar said, *"And you too Brutus"*? Was He there when Christopher Columbus stepped foot on the American shore? Was He there when Martin Luther tacked his 95 Theses on the door of the castle church in Wittenberg? Was He there in Ford's Theatre when John Wilkes Booth shot Abraham Lincoln? Was He there when Neil Armstrong took that first step on the moon? The answer of course to all of those questions is "yes."

The point is that God always has been, is, and always will be in every place on earth and in the universe at once. But He isn't just in every place. He also fills every place.

In Jeremiah 23:24, for instance, He Himself tells us that He fills the heavens and the earth. Think about your presence and mine and this room. You and I are in the room but we don't fill it. We occupy however much space in it that our body takes up. God is not like you and me in the room. He is like the air in the room. Just as the air fills this entire room, so does God's presence.

And once again of course, it isn't just this one place, this room, that His presence fills. It's literally every place in the entire universe.

That fact reveals one of the great truths of our universe. As Dallas Willard says it, there is no such thing as empty space.

Space certainly is vast isn't it? I have read that the edge of the universe is about 14 billion light years away. That means that light traveling at a speed of 186,284 miles per second would take 14 years to get there. We actually can't even imagine how much space that is.

Now, most people conceive of that space as being essentially empty, except for the stars, planets, and so forth that inhabit it.

But it isn't. The fact is that God's presence occupies and overflows all of the billions and billions of light years of space that exists in the universe.

We've thought about space on a grand scale. Not let's think of it on a subatomic scale. As I understand it, you and I are made up mostly of space. We aren't primarily solid. We are primarily space. The reason that we seem solid is that the electrons are spinning around the nuclei of the atoms that make us up so fast that we seem solid. Anyway, however that works, there is no such thing as subatomic empty space. God's presence occupies and overflows all the subatomic space that exists.

The bottom line is that there is no such thing as empty space. God's presence fills all the space that exists.

Paul approaches it from a different angle though in Acts 17:28. He declares there, ***“in Him we live and move and exist.”*** The interpretive question is whether Paul is speaking literally or metaphorically in saying that. I believe that he is speaking literally. You and I live and move and exist in the air just like a fish lives, moves, and exists in the water. In the same way, you and I and even the fish lives, moves, and exists in the presence of God.

You grasp the unmistakable implication of that. God is our environment. Every square inch of our body is immersed in His presence. His invisible presence always surround every square inch of our body as we go about our day. So, we do everything that we do immersed in His presence.

And what is true of us is true of everyone and everything on earth. That is implicit in Jesus’ wonderful little saying about the birds in Matthew 10:29. Every time a bird lights on the ground, he or she does so immersed in God’s presence. The bottom line is that every one and every thing in the universe is immersed in the presence of God.

A gentleman named Hildebart of Lavardin said it this way: ***“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.”*** You grasp what he is saying. Every one and every thing in the universe is immersed in the presence of God.

That implies that God is not in every place. To say that He is makes the universe the focal point and God a specific part of it.

So, we shouldn’t say that God is in every place. We should say instead that every place is in God. That is the correct way of stating it. To state it that way makes Him the focal point and the universe something that is within His presence.

But so what? What does everything that I’ve said today about God’s omnipresence mean as a practical matter to me? It means, as Paul said it in Acts 17:27, ***“He is not far from each of us.”*** The better way of saying it is that God is always close to us. Remember the old Carpenter’s song *Close to You*: ***“Why do birds suddenly appear every time you are near? Just like me, they long to be close to you.”*** You and I don’t have to long to be close to God because spatially we are. We couldn’t be any closer to Him spatially in fact. He is as close to us and thus we are as close to Him as it is possible to be. If I stand toe to toe with you right now, God is spatially closer to me than that.

Because of what I’ve said tonight, I hope that you understand God’s omnipresence. But I hope that you do more than understand it. I hope that you act on it.

Paul tells us what it means to act on it in Acts 17:27. It means to *“seek God”* and to *“grope for Him and find Him.”* I love the language Paul uses there. We should seek and grope for God. That means that we reorient our thoughts and feelings toward Him. We purposely place our minds on the details of His omnipresence that we’ve discussed. We begin looking at the space around us differently, as the habitat of God, and come to sense His closeness to us.

Ole Hallesby explains it well. He says that the air that our body need envelops us on every hand. Because it does, all we have to do to receive it is to breathe. In the same way: *“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.”* And, I would add, our mind.

It really is as easy as Hallesby says. Just reorient our mind and heart. Deliberately think about and act as if God’s presence occupies and overflows all the space around us because it does.

Doing that will dramatically alter our persons and lives. When I say “alter,” I mean enhance and improve. We will become much better persons and live much better lives if we do. In the end, thinking about and acting on God’s omnipresence does at least three things.

First, it spurs us on to holiness.

I want you to suppose something. Suppose that Jesus appears to you in bodily form and tells you that He is going to be with you 24 hours a day for the next week. I have a question for you. Would you talk and act differently during that week than you normally do?

If you would, it means one of three things. You either don’t understand or believe in or care about the omnipresence of God.

The objective fact is that God is with us 24 hours a day. That’s the psalmists very point in Psalm 139:7-8. If there is something that we wouldn’t do or say in His presence, then we had better not do or say it because we are in His presence. Constantly keeping that in mind is a spur to holiness.

I usually think about this for instance when deciding to watch a television program or movie. If Jesus were with me in bodily form, would I watch this program or movie in front of Him? The answer to that then determines what I do because He is in fact with me.

Or consider how we talk to a person who insults us. If Jesus were with us in bodily form, how would we respond? The answer to that should determine how we respond because He is in fact with us.

But God's omnipresence isn't just a spur to holiness. It's an antidote to loneliness as well. Only those who have a strong belief in and sense of God's presence always with us can grasp this.

Stop for a moment and think about solitary confinement. In penal institutions, solitary confinement is used to break the strongest of wills.

Let me ask you two questions. Is it capable of doing that? Yes, it is. Why is it capable of doing that? It's because fallen human personality completely depends on interactions with others. And thus, the life alienated from God normally collapses when deprived of such interactions. This explains the aversion that most people have to aloneness and isolation.

But suppose that that there really is a personal God who loves us and who is always with us. And also suppose that we can interact with and communicate with Him best when we are alone with Him. That would mean that aloneness and isolation wouldn't break us. It would nurture us instead.

This explains why solitude is one of the central spiritual disciplines. Solitude means aloneness but not loneliness because we interact exclusively with God who is there with us. That's why Jesus withdrew alone to the wilderness for 40 days and nights before being tempted by the devil. That aloneness with the Father didn't weaken Him. It strengthened Him instead for the temptations that lie ahead.

It will do the same thing for us that it did for Him if we understand, believe in, and act on God's omnipresence.

God's omnipresence impacts our persons and lives in other ways but those are enough to make the point. We need to understand, believe in, and act on it.

Omniscient

We now come to what may be my favorite quality of God. He is omniscient.

I'd like to introduce this quality of His by having you do something. Tell me something that you know and when and how you came to know it. I know, for instance, that washing white clothes with dark clothes makes the white clothes dingy. I learned that my first semester in college. I washed my own clothes for the first time and as the weeks went by noticed my white shirts and t-shirts getting dingier and dingier. When I went home for Thanksgiving break, I asked my mother about it and she told me what I needed to know. But what about you?

That demonstrates two things. First, we at one time didn't know what we now know. 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 of the quality that we're going to discuss now. He is omniscient.

This quality has to do with the consciousness of God. Remember that He is spirit. Thus, He has consciousness without a brain and activity without a body. Omniscience has to do with the first of those, consciousness.

That God is omnipotent means that He is all-knowing. That is how we usually say it. He is all-knowing.

The Bible teaches God's omniscience in many verses including the following: Psalm 139:1-6; 147:4-5; Jeremiah 51:15; Romans 11:33-34; and 1 John 3:19-20.

Those passages reveal that God possesses perfect knowledge. He knows literally everything that there is to know about literally everything that exists in the material, spiritual, and whatever other worlds there may be. Anything that there is to know, He knows it. There isn't anything that there is to know that He doesn't know.

This is how Tozer explains it in his book: *"God perfectly knows Himself and, being the source and author of all things, it follows that He knows all that can be known. And this He knows instantly and with a fullness of perfection that includes every possible item of knowledge concerning everything that exists or could have existed anywhere in the universe at any time in the past or that may exist in the centuries or ages yet unborn."* Notice that God knows everything that there is to know about everything that is yet future. We can infer that from the fact that He is eternal.

God's omniscience makes clear that He has no need to learn. In fact, we can safely say that He has never learned and cannot learn. If God could receive even one piece of knowledge or information that He did not possess, He would not be omniscient.

Let's take a quick look at some of the things that God knows. These details help us appreciate the staggering nature of His omniscience.

Psalm 147:4-5 reveals that He counts the number of the stars and gives names to them all. The number of stars means that He knows every star that exists. The name means that He knows everything about those stars that there is to know. The same would be true of all the planets, asteroids, comets, and whatever other bodies exist in the universe.

This knowledge is mind-boggling when we consider the bigness of it all. Astronomers tell us that there are ten billion galaxies in the universe that we know of. They also tell us that there are approximately 100 billion billion planets in those galaxies. That is 1 followed by 20 zeroes. Besides that, some astronomers now believe that there is more than one universe although there is no evidence confirming that.

That helps us understand what verse 4 is saying. God knows that each and every one of those 100 billion billion planets exists and He knows everything that there is to know about each of them. He knows each of them like the back of His hand so to speak.

Verse 5 sums it up well. It says that God's understanding is infinite. It is limitless in other words.

Psalm 56:8 reveals something else that God knows. This is a lovely verse. It says that He puts our tears in a bottle. The psalmist is using a metaphor here. His point is that God knows even the smallest details of our lives. Referring to this metaphor, He knows every tear that has been shed, is ever shed, and will be shed. I saw a child fall in the parking lot and cry. God knew every tear that he shed.

Matthew 10:29-30 gives us two more examples of small details that God knows.

In verse 29, Jesus mentions sparrows lighting on the ground. Think of the billions of birds in the world and the hundred of billions of times that they light on the ground and then take off again on a given day. God knows every time that they do.

In verse 30, Jesus mentions the hairs on our head. God numbers them, He says. Think about the hairs on the heads of everyone in this room. What if I gave you the task of counting those hairs? How long would it take? What about the hairs on the heads of all the people in Poland or the United States or the world? If we lined them up one by one and brought them to you, how long would it take to count their hairs.

Jesus says that God knows the very number of hairs on all the heads of all the people in the world. This reiterates once again God's knowledge of even the smallest and most trivial details.

But it isn't just material things that God knows. We see that in Psalm 139:1-6. The psalmist declares that God knows these things: when we sit down and stand up (verse 2); our thoughts (verse 3); and the words we will speak even before we speak them (verse 4). Verse 6 records the psalmist's reaction to this. He is filled with wonder and appropriately so.

Let give this passage some deeper thought. Let's think about all of the thoughts that you've had in your minds until now. God knows each one. Let's also think of the thought that you have right now as I speak. God knows it. Now let's think of all the thoughts that you will have before you die. God knows each one. God knows, in other words, all the thoughts that you have ever had, have, and ever will have.

Now consider this. He knows that same thing about all 80 billion who have lived in human history, all the people who are living now, and all the people who will ever live. He knows that and He knows it now.

Now, all of these things that I've shared give us only an inkling of how vast God's knowledge is. Tozer sums it up this way in his book: *"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, motion, space, time, life, death, good, evil, heaven, and hell."* That's just a vivid way of saying that God knows everything that there is to know.

I would also point out that He knows everything perfectly. He knows no thing better than any other thing, but all things equally. I know baseball, for instance, much better than I know football. But God knows both equally well. God knows all the official rules and the best strategies of both baseball and football. That's because He knows all things perfectly. As Tozer points out, He never discovers anything and is never surprised. He never wonders about anything and never seeks information or asks questions in order to know something that He doesn't know.

Now let's think about the implications of God's omniscience to us. I will share one of those in conjunction with the quality of His that we'll discuss next – wisdom. But let's think about one of the most significant implications of His omniscience to us.

That implication is that He knows you and me through and through.

First, He knows all the external things about us. He knows every thing that we've experienced and done in the past (including the ones that are lost to our own memories), everything that we're experiencing and doing now, and everything that we'll experience and do in the future.

But He also knows all the internal things about us. He knows all of our thoughts, feelings, motives, desires, and everything else internally that there is to know about us – past, present, and future.

The point is that God knows us through and through. He knows the best about us and the worst about us.

And yet, He still loves us. What an amazing thing that really is. He knows the worst about us but still loves us.

Suppose that I decided to do something beginning next Wednesday night. Each night, one of us would be selected to be totally honest and share with everyone else all of the worst things about him or her – past and present. I'm talking about his or her worst thoughts, feelings, motives, desires, and deeds. Each of us would take our turn divulging all the worst about us no matter how many Wednesday nights it took.

If coming on Wednesday nights 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 is it that we don't want others to know the worst about us? It's because we're insecure with each other. The idea is that if you know the worst about me, you will look down on me and reject me.

That is the fear and it's often a valid one. The fact is that most people even in the church will reject others when they know they worst about them. They not only hate the sin but also in reality despise and reject the sinner. They wouldn't admit it but they loathe them and don't really want to have anything to do with them. They may or may not be polite to them but they will certainly exclude them from their inner ring to quote C.S. Lewis. Very few people will continue respecting and caring deeply for those about whom they know the worst.

That brings us to what lecturer and author Rebecca Pippert calls the law of acceptance. That law is this. 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 – to know that we have been forgiven and accepted in the full knowledge of who we are.

That is the greatest gift an intimate relationship can offer and God offers it to those of us who follow Him. He knows literally the one worst thing about us and all of the worse things about us and yet still loves us. He still offers us forgiveness and acceptance if we confess it and seek to follow Him.

I once counseled a man who had signed for his underage daughter to have two abortions and was wracked with guilt that He did. He began weeping and cried out that God would never forgive Him.

I concurred with him that what he had done was the equivalent of complicity in murder. But I also pointed out that if he decided to follow Jesus and confessed those sins, God would forgive them, as vile as they were. I then read 1 John 1:9. I called his attention to the words "all unrighteousness" and explained that God knew that he was going to sign for those two abortions when he wrote the verse. So "all unrighteousness" certainly include his complicity in the killing of those two babies.

The bottom line is this. As bad as you and I think we are, we're actually worse because even we don't know the worst things about us. But God does and still loves us. He still loves us and will forgive the worst about us and accept us if we sincerely follow Him.

That illustrates just one of the fantastic implications of an incredible quality of God. He is omniscient or all-knowing. Or as I like to say it, He is utterly, completely, and fully informed.

All-Wise

But He isn't just all-knowing. He is all-wise as well. That is the eighth quality of God. He is all-wise. This quality is related to and dependent upon omniscience. But it is different and need to be treated separately.

Divine wisdom is a major thrust of Scripture. Many verses teach it either explicitly or implicitly. Proverbs 8:22 – the context shows that the "me" here is wisdom and the verse teaches us that God possessed at the beginning of the universe. Daniel 2:19-23 – verse 20 reveals that wisdom is God's essence and verses 21 and 23 reveals that He has given it to anyone who has it. Romans 16:27 – the words "only wise" indicate that God is wise in Himself and that all other wisdom, angelic and human, is a mere reflection of His. Colossians 2:3 – this verse indicates that all the treasures of wisdom reside in Jesus and thus by implication the Father and Holy Spirit as well.

As is true of all of His other qualities, God's wisdom is infinite or unlimited. It is measureless and knows no bound. It is perfect and full.

Packer contends that in Scripture, wisdom has a moral as well as an intellectual quality and he is right about that. The book of Proverbs itself makes that perfectly clear. It is more than mere intelligence and knowledge on the one hand and cleverness and cunning on the other. It is those things harnessed to the right end.

Packer says it this way: *"Wisdom is the power to see, and the inclination to choose, the best and the highest goal, together with the surest means of attaining it."*

That is one of the best definitions of wisdom that I've ever read. Notice what it has to do with. It has to do with attaining the highest or worthiest objective or aim in a given context. It involves doing three things in that regard. First, we see or identify what the highest aim is. Second, we choose or seek that aim. And third, we identify and pursue the best means for achieving it.

Let me give you an example that illustrates these things for us.

Suppose that you're coaching a little league team for instance. There are several objectives or aims that coaches might seek to attain. Those would include the players having fun, winning, learning teamwork, learning to hustle, learning lessons about life, and so on. Wisdom has to do with attaining the highest or worthiest of those possible aims. It is doing three things.

First, we're able to see or identify the highest aim. In my view, that aim is having fun. I've concluded that from purposely developing a theology of play. Sports are essentially play and play is a gift from God that reflects a quality of His that we'll learn in a month or so. Play is also a crack in time and space the purpose of which is to give us a glimpse of what our eternal life will be like. The implication of those two truths is that play's divinely intended purpose is fun and joy. Thus, if our primary aim as the coach is to win or to teach lessons about life and so on, we're unwise. But if our primary aim is for the players to have fun, we're wise.

Second, wisdom means that we choose the highest aim. I knew a little league coach who always said that what he wanted the most was for the players to have fun. But he didn't act that way. He acted instead as if what he wanted the most was for them to win. He was unwise because he didn't choose the highest aim.

Third, wisdom means that we identify and pursue the best means for attaining the highest aim. So, we talk to our players in a way that makes playing baseball fun. We schedule and plan practices so that they're fun. We conduct the games, including who plays and how much, so that they're fun. And so on.

Whether or not you agree with what I said about little league baseball, I hope the illustration clarifies what wisdom is. Let me define it again as Packer does: ***"Wisdom is the power to see, and the inclination to choose, the best and the highest goal, together with the surest means of attaining it."***

With that definition in mind, God is all-wise. His wisdom is unlimited and perfect. He always in every situation and every circumstance and in every place sees and chooses the highest goal and achieves it the best way that is possible.

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

I read about a movie that Jim Carey starred in title *Bruce Almighty*. God gives Carey's character all of His powers 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. Soon, Carey's character finds out how dangerous power without wisdom is. He begins answering people's prayers, for instance. He doesn't really know what to do and so just gives everyone what they want. But that in turn soon causes chaos in everyone's life and in the world.

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 wisdom and power are united, thus 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 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 by saying this. God knows what He is doing. He is always chooses and pursues the best possible good in the best possible way no matter what the setting or circumstance is.

This quality of God, in conjunction with His knowledge and power, speaks profoundly to us. It instructs us that we should do two things.

First, we should trust Him. That means be confident that He is always seeking and pursuing the highest aim for us and that He will achieve it.

Let's be honest in that regard and admit that we often and for some of us usually aren't confident of that. God may know what He's doing but many times it seems to us like He doesn't.

I think of my brother-in-law Jim. Jim is a devoted follower of Jesus who worked vigorously for Him and His kingdom. He had a heart attack two years ago and went on blood thinners. One of the minimally possible side effects of the thinner he was on is blood clots. He suffered that side effect and got a blood clot in his neck. That clot in turn damaged and apparently killed the motion and feeling nerves in his spinal column, leaving him a paraplegic. Hundreds of people are praying and asking God to heal him but to this point He hasn't.

This tragedy raises several questions. First, why did God allow this freakish episode to occur in Jim's life. And second, why does God not answer the prayers of His people and heal Him?

Now, assuming that God is all-powerful and all-love, one of two things is true. He is either wise or unwise in letting this happen to Jim first of all and in not healing him second of all.

It appears outwardly of course that He is unwise. It seems to us that He really doesn't know what He is doing. What good, we ask, can this possibly accomplish. The answer seems to be "none."

Jim's tragedy is only a microcosm of our universe and life in it. Millions of events of the same proportion and kind are constantly happening around us. If I asked you to list 10 tragedies that you know first hand or know of, all of you could do that. And most of them would be inexplicable to you. You'd not see or be aware of any good purposes that they achieving or serve.

The Bible's basic response to that is this. We cannot know God's wisdom unless we know the end for which he is working. And this is precisely where many of His followers go wrong. They don't understand that end.

Let me ask you what I believe is a penetrating question. What aims does God have in view for us? What are the goods that He's seeking to achieve in our person and life?

Let me ask a related question. What is the chief aim that God has in view for us. What is the one good more than any other that He is seeking to achieve in our person and life?

Is it that we will have a comfortable and trouble free life? Sociologist Tony Campolo claims that the chief goal of most people is to get through life with as little discomfort and pain as possible and that is probably true. It's also true, I think, that they project their desires on to God. They assume that His chief goal for them is the same as theirs. They then become bitter and disillusioned when pain and discomfort come upon them. The tragedies and trials of life make them worse persons instead of better ones.

Obviously, God's chief aim for us is not that we have a comfortable and trouble free life.

So what is it then? Paul tells us in 2 Timothy 2:11-12. This passage was part of a Christian hymn written in the first century. Notice what we who follow Jesus will do in verse 12. We will reign with Him. John also tells us what God's chief aim for us is in Revelation 22:1-5. This passage is about eternal life in heaven after the Second Coming of Jesus and our bodily resurrections. Verse 5 tells what it is that we will do there. We will reign with God forever and forever.

Reigning with God in heaven means something specific that I've explained before. So, I'll just summarize it now.

Heaven is our present universe renewed and restored. God will give us in our resurrection bodies power and authority. Power refers to fantastic mental and physical abilities, which the miracles of Jesus foreshadow. Authority refers to independence of action, that freedom to use those powers as we see fit. God will assign us our own portion of the universe to reign over with whatever power and authority we have. When I say reign over, I mean do with it as we please.

Now here's what we need to grasp. Our inner condition when we die, how much like Jesus we are in our inner dimensions, determines the extent of the power and authority that God gives us. He will give us the power and authority with which He can trust us. The more like Jesus we are when we die, the greater that power and authority can be.

That explanation of eternal life helps us grasp what God's ultimate aim for us is. It's that we will be ready to reign. And the only way that we can be ready to reign is to become as much like Jesus in our inner dimensions as we can.

The implications of this are profound. One of those implications is that when we're on our deathbeds, the only thing that is relevant to us at that moment in time is whether or not we're ready to reign. And what determines that is how much like Jesus we are or are not. That means that all that counts when we're on our deathbeds is the kind of person that we've become.

What I've just said satisfies two of the three aspects of wisdom.

Remember that the first part is identifying in a given context what is actually the highest or worthiest of all aims. God has done that. He has correctly identified what objectively is the highest of all aims for us - making us ready to reign in heaven.

The second part of wisdom is the inclination to choose the highest of all aims. God has done that for us. He's so committed to that aim in fact that He was born, lived, died, resurrected, and ascended so that it could be achieved.

That leaves us then with the issue of the third aspect of wisdom. That aspect is identifying and pursuing the best means possible for attaining the goal. This is the issue inherent in the problem of suffering that we're now attempting to solve. I believe that most if not the majority of our suffering has to do with God pursuing the best means possible for making us ready to reign. It is He pursuing the best means possible for making us, our character, into the image and likeness of Jesus.

Someone, I can't remember who, said that the universe is a soul-making machine and that is in fact correct. That is just another way of saying that the primary purpose of our life in the universe as it is now is to become a specific kind of person – like Jesus.

The problem is that both the universe and those who live in it, including us, are fallen. Being that kind of people in that kind of universe, we cannot become all that we're capable of becoming without adversity and pain. We must suffer adversity and pain to one degree or another in order to grow in other words. If we weren't fallen, that wouldn't be so. But we are fallen and thus, it is so.

I have the strong sense that this is what is going on in my brother-in-law's body and life. I don't know him or his circumstances well enough to know how this suffering of his is preparing him to reign but I believe that it is.

Joni Earekson Tada herself has testified of this. As most of you know, an accident paralyzed Joni from the neck down when she was 16 years old. She has lived this way for over 30 years now. She wrote an article for a Christian publication in which she stated that she is thankful for her paralysis. She commented that she would not be the person that she is now, like Jesus, if it hadn't happened.

That doesn't mean that God caused it to happen. It does mean that He didn't prevent it from happening for good reason. Her paralysis doesn't mean that God isn't wise. As she herself testifies, it means that He is.

There are many other factors of course in adversity and pain. Some of the trials of life are the consequences of our own recklessness or sins. Still others, like Job's, are battle scars. God is using us to preach to Satan and win battles in the heavenly places. But whatever the dynamics that our adversity and pain involve, we can trust that God is wise and that there's meaning, purpose, and point in what we suffer.

So that's the first implication of God's wisdom. We should trust Him.

The second implication is that we should learn from Him how to live. Human beings of every generation and century have had a common need. It's the need to know how to live.

Our particular generation and culture, more than any other, has a proliferation of masters or teachers who are seeking to meet that need. You know who they are – Dr. Phil, Oprah, Suze Orman, Wayne Dyer, Richard Robbins, and so on.

These individuals are household names because people in mass are avidly listening to their shows, attending their conferences, and reading their books. These individuals claim that they know how to live and people believe them. As I've mentioned before, Oprah's website, for instance, claims that she is the most influential voice in the world and that is probably true. More people go to her for advice and listen to it than probably any other person in the world. They are learning from her how to live.

Now, there is nothing wrong with you and I learning how to live from selected individuals, assuming of course that they actually know how to live. But there is something wrong with you and I learning how to live primarily from selected individuals.

Daniel 2:21 reveals why I say that. Speaking of God, Daniel declares, ***"He gives wisdom to wise men and knowledge to men of understanding."*** Do you get what he's saying? Any wisdom that Dr. Phil or Suze Orman or anyone else has come from God.

But the larger point is that God's wisdom infinitely exceeds the wisdom of any man or woman. He knows how to live in this universe and world far better than any human being does.

And He has told us some of what He knows in His written word the Bible. I will reiterate again what I have many times before. In the Bible, God gives us the best information about the most important matters in human life.

So, let's go primarily to it and thus Him to learn how to live. It and thus He, not Oprah or Dr. Phil or anyone else, should be the first source to which we look for guidance. We are making a huge mistake if it isn't.

I know a long established Christian, a member of my own extended family in fact, who made to me what I think is just an astonishing confession. She actually spends more time watching the Oprah show and reading her *O Magazine* than she does studying the Bible.

Do you see what she is doing? She is looking to Oprah more than she is to God for advice about how to live. This is not an isolated incident. I believe from talking to professing Christians and from listening to the things that they say that she is the rule not the exception.

There's a reason for that. It's because people see a dichotomy in their life. There is their spiritual life, which the Bible addresses, and there is their "real" life that Dr. Phil and all the rest address. So, if they want to know how to live in their spiritual life, they go to the Bible. But if they want to know how to live in their real life, they go to Dr. Phil.

But there is in reality no such dichotomy. God is all-wise and shares that wisdom in the Bible with us. He gives us the best possible information about the most important matters in "real" life. So, if you want to know how to live, go to God and His word before you go to anyone else.

Transcendent

God has a ninth quality that I do enjoy talking about because it makes me just want to bow down and reverence Him. That quality is that He is transcendent.

Isaiah 6:1 gives us a glimpse of God's transcendence. Notice here that God is "*lofty and exalted.*" That means lofty and exalted with regard to anything else that exists in the spiritual or material world.

We see this same thing in Isaiah 57:15. Isaiah declares that God is "*the high and exalted One.*"

But my very favorite expression of God's transcendence is Revelation 4:1-7. God gave John a representative vision of Himself. Notice its details.

God is sitting on a throne in heaven, verse 2.

The imagery in verse 3 conveys the majesty and unfathomableness of God.

Verse 4 pictures 24 elders sitting on 24 thrones surrounding God's throne. These probably represent a superior order of angels.

Verse 5 describes intense flashes of lightning and booming claps of thunder coming from the throne, showing us the awesomeness of God. It also pictures seven lamps, which are the seven Spirits of God. The number "7" is the perfect number showing that the seven Spirits stands for the Holy Spirit Himself.

Verse 6 pictures a sea of glass like crystal before the throne of God and four living creatures around the throne, which verse 7 describes in terms of animals. These animals are the noblest, strongest, wisest, and swiftest in all of creation. They reveal that these four living creatures are the most important of all created beings – perhaps the four highest of all the angels.

As you can see, the whole scene that John describes here is just spectacular. But I want you to notice the detail in verse 6. A sea of glass separates God from everything in the scene including the highest of all living creatures. That detail conveys very vividly to us that the separateness of God from literally everything that exists. He is, in other words, transcendent.

That God is transcendent means that He is a different kind of reality than 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 not in the end even remotely like Him. They are less than remotely like Him.

Tozer uses an effective analogy to express the transcendence of God. I'm going to adapt what he says and explain it this way.

Let me ask you a question. Which is greater? Is it the difference between God and the highest archangel, which is the highest of all creatures, or the difference between the highest archangel and a slug?

The answer, from a Biblical point of view, is clear. The difference between God and the highest archangel is greater than the difference between the highest archangel and a slug. That's because the archangel and the slug are of the same nature, that is, they're finite creatures. But God, in contrast, is the only infinite creator.

There's another analogy that might be helpful in explaining it. My favorite number is 1. I wore number 1 on every baseball jersey that I ever had all the way from little league through college.

Let me ask you a question. Which is greater? Is it the difference between 1 and 2 or the difference between 2 and 1,000,000?

The answer is that the difference between 1 and 2 is greater than the difference between 2 and a million. That's because 1 is different in nature than any other number. Think about it. 1 totally unique. It is singular. No other number is. 2 and 1,000,000 are plural and so is every other number you can think of. When it comes to the kind of number they are, in other words, the change that occurs from 1 to 2 is far greater than the change that occurs from 1 to 1,000,000.

That helps us understand the transcendence of God. It simply means that He is a very special and different kind of reality than anything else is, including the devil.

Not giving it very much thought, I used to think that the opposite of God is Satan. But I realize now that isn't true. That's because God has no opposites. For something to be the opposite of Him would mean that it is of the same kind of reality that He is. But nothing is of the same kind of reality that He is. So Satan isn't the opposite of God. He is the opposite of Gabriel or Michael or any other of God's archangels.

We need to remember this and not overestimate Satan's power and influence. Don't get me wrong. Satan is powerful and influential but only like Gabriel and Michael are.

In the end, there are essentially two kinds of reality. There is God and there is that which is not God.

God's transcendence speaks powerfully and practically to your life and mine. It says that He needs to be hallowed. That is the first request in the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:9. We pray and ask God that His name, which means He Himself, will be hallowed.

We normally associate the word "hallow" with Halloween and ghosts. But the word with regard to God has an entirely different connotation and context. It means that we uniquely respect Him, that is, respect Him as we do no other reality. I compare this to retiring a baseball player's number. The Yankees, for instance, have retired Mickey Mantle's number "7." That signifies something specific. There are many baseball players but the Yankees and everyone else recognize that Mantle was a very special kind of baseball player. He was different than most of the rest and so is hallowed. He is set apart as a separate kind of player by retiring his number.

That helps us grasp what it means to hallow God. It means that we uniquely respect Him. We regard Him as a separate and very special kind of reality and respond to Him accordingly. That response is that we treasure and love Him literally more than anyone or anything else. That is an uncompromising statement isn't it? We treasure and love Him literally more than anyone or anything else including our spouses, our children, our parents, our friends, our professions, our possessions, our hobbies, and literally everyone and everything else.

So what do you do if you do not treasure and love God like no other right now as I speak? The answer is three things. First, make it your aim to. Second, intend to achieve that aim. And third, pursue that aim by the best means possible. Part of that best means possible, which we discussed at the beginning of the study, is doing what you're doing now – building a purposeful, objective, and thorough vision of God.

God's transcendence speaks practically and powerfully to your life and mine in a second way. We need to work so that others will hallow Him.

That first request in the Lord's Prayer suggests one particular activity which doing that involves. We pray and ask God specifically that others will hallow Him. I pray this for people I know. I ask God that the Holy Spirit will work to make their minds clear and their hearts sensitive to His transcendence. I ask Him to help them understand and believe in His uniqueness. I ask Him to help them come to treasure and love Him. I also pray it for people I don't know but meet. If I meet and begin to converse with someone, I say a breath prayer asking God to help them hallow Him.

Working to help others hallow God involves a second thing. We explain to them that He is a separate reality. Everything that you learn about Him in this study is certainly for your consideration and benefit. It will help you treasure and love Him. But it is also for the consideration and benefit of those whom you know and meet. You can tell them about Him in detail and help them have a vision for the magnificent reality that He really is.

I once talked with a physics professor at YSU for instance. We talked for about an hour and during the course of our conversation, I discussed with Him what we learned about God's power. I talked about His creation and mastery of the laws, formulas, and equations of our universe. He didn't accept Jesus but he left with a higher opinion, I hope, of God.

I close out our discussion of hallowing God with a statement that Dallas Willard makes in The Divine Conspiracy. He writes that hallowing God is *"the deepest need of the human world."* He then writes something that is just profound. Listen carefully to it as I read it, *"Human life is not about human life."* What do you think that means?

It means that human life is not about human life but about God. The ultimate and most critical issue in any life situation is always hallowing or not hallowing God. Consequently, nothing will go right in your life and mine unless we recognize the uniqueness of God and hold Him in the highest possible regard. Those who do not are like those who are lost in a jungle without a compass. They're disoriented and will always be headed in the wrong direction. Human life, individually and socially, cannot go well if people are not hallowing God.

I once counseled a person who hated her job. She was trying to get another but had thus far failed to do so and consequently was discouraged and depressed.

I once counseled a young husband and wife who were having marital difficulties and on the verge of divorce. They weren't meeting each other's expectations and were seriously considering abandoning each other once and for all.

I once counseled a man who deeply resented his brother for taking more than his fair share of their father's estate.

Here's what I want you to see. That first scenario was not primarily about hating a job. The second was not primarily about unmet expectations. And the third was not primarily about being wronged. Each of those situations and all others in human life are primarily about hallowing or not hallowing God. The root problem that all of those people had was that they weren't hallowing Him and thus were unequipped to deal beneficially with life.

If people want to have the abundance and fullness of joy that Jesus promises in life, they must hallow God. To get that right is the first step in getting everything else right.

So, let's hallow the transcendent God and help other people hallow Him as well.

Immutable

Our next quality of God, the tenth, is that He is immutable. The general definition of immutability is that God is changeless.

The Bible reveals this quality of His in many passages. Psalm 102:27 says about Him, "***But You are the same.***" Malachi 3:6 teaches the same thing, "***For I, the Lord, do not change.***" Hebrews 13:8 declares, "***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 make it clear. God is devoid of change. Specifically, His character, truth, and purposes do not change.

First, His character or nature is devoid of change. What He is like now, He has always been like and will always be like.

One of the defining qualities of human beings is that our character is capable of change. There is a term that the secular and Christian worlds apply to this. It is 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 is an observable fact of human existence. All of us have experienced spiritual formation, are experiencing it right now, and will continue to experience it until the day that we die. All of us have morphed, are morphing, and will continue to morph. Simply put, the human self that you are now is different than it was last year at this time. And it will be different next year at this time than it is now.

This change can be a good one. People can become better than they are. I knew a man who was an irresponsible and overly impulsive person when he was in his 20's. He couldn't hold down a job for more than a year or so. But now in 40's, he is a responsible hardworking businessman who has succeeded in his profession. The change in the human self that we are can be a good one. We can become a better person than we are now.

But it can also be a bad one. People can become worse than they are.

I had a friend at Malone College who was a conscientious student and Christian when he arrived there. But in his second year, he turned his back on his faith, skipped classes, and became a party animal. The change in the human self that we are can be a bad one. We can become a worse person than we are now.

But the change doesn't have to be as dramatic as that. Many if not most people have moods don't they. A woman once told me she was having a bad day. I asked her why and she told me. Her husband was in one of his moods and she couldn't do anything right.

It's plain to see that human beings are capable of great change. On the one hand, it's possible for them to take on a positive quality that they didn't have. On the other hand, it's possible for them to take on a negative quality that they didn't have.

But that is absolutely and positively not true of God. He is devoid of change in His nature or character. That only makes sense doesn't it. All of God's qualities are perfect and infinite. That they are perfect and infinite, by definition, makes them incapable of change.

That means that God never differs from Himself. He cannot change for the better. He does not grow or develop. He cannot become better in any way than He is now. He cannot become more loving and good for example. He also cannot change for the worse. He cannot become worse in any way than He is now. He cannot become less loving and just for example.

What that means to us is this. We can rely and count on God.

Because people change, we can never rely or count on them completely, 100%. This is one of the risks in marriage for instance. The person you marry will be a different person on your 25th wedding anniversary than he or she is on your wedding day. What if he or she is a worse person? Several abandoned spouses have told me that they would never have dreamed when they married that their spouse would do such a thing. That's because the person that they were then would not have. But they have changed and the person that they became would and did.

But that isn't the way it is with God. We can rely and count on Him completely. 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. He is not going to love us more or less next year than He does now. He is not going to be more or less good to us next year than He is now. His love and goodness are perfect and infinite and thus incapable of change. He isn't going to be our friend today and our foe tomorrow. There is total reliability in our relationship with Him.

But it isn't just God's character that doesn't change. Neither does His truth. Packer discusses just that in Knowing God.

Let's think about this in human terms just as we did character.

People sometimes say things that they don't really mean. Sometimes they do this intentionally and in order to manipulate or get something from people. But just as often it's because they don't really know their own mind. They think that they mean it but upon further reflection and thought realize that they don't.

People also sometimes say things and then have to take back their words. They have to take them back because they have ceased to express what they think. They've received new information and realize that what they said originally was wrong. There's an old expression that we use to describe that. They have to "eat their words," we say because the facts refute them.

I hate to admit it but I've said several things in sermons years ago that I no longer believe. I sometimes go through old sermons of mine and read things that I recognize now as being wrong.

Take tithing for instance. I preached several sermons on tithing in my first five years here at Bethel. I believed what I believed at the time because it was what I had been taught and because almost everyone else believed it. I then did an objective and thorough study of what the Bible teaches about tithing and realized I was wrong. So, I've eaten my words so to speak when it comes to tithing.

But God never eats His words. The words of human beings are unstable at best. But the words of God are unshakable, unchangeable, and certain. As Packer points out, no circumstances prompt Him to recall them and no changes in His own thinking require Him to amend them.

The psalmist understand this as well as anyone. In Psalm 119:89, he writes, *"Forever, O Lord, your word is settled (stands firm) in heaven."* In verses 151-152, he writes: *"You are near, O Lord, and all Your commandments are truth. Of old I have known Your testimonies, That You have founded them forever."*

These verses teach us that God's word in general and His written word in particular are never antiquated or outdated. What He says is true is just as true now as when He said it. His truth, including moral truth, doesn't change from one generation or circumstance to another.

That means that we can rely on both God's verbal and written word. We can base our person and life on it. We can follow it with confidence and joy knowing that it is the best thing for us.

We sometimes act as if that isn't the case. I mentioned yielding our preferences, opinions, and rights to others on Sunday. God's truth as found in Scripture is clearly this. We should yield our preferences, opinions, and rights to other until doing so is destructive.

Now, professing Christians often don't do that. They want to do or to have something a certain way and someone else wants to do or have it a different way. So, they insist on their way and if they don't get it they pout or even resent the other person who got his or her way.

When my son Moses married Ali, Jill and I immediately had two new people in our lives – Ali's parents. Her parents obviously want to do or have things a certain way that is contrary to what Jill and I want.

On special occasions, for instance, like birthday parties and holidays, they may want something one way and we may want it another. If the circumstance doesn't involve a moral principle but a preference, opinion, or right, Jesus says that we should yield to them until it becomes destructive.

Now, let's suppose that Jill and I as professing Christians don't do this. Suppose that we insist on having our own way and make a fuss if we don't get it. I have a question for you. What does that indicate about our belief when it comes to this particular truth of God – that we should yield or submit ourselves? What are the possibilities?

It indicates one of two things. First, we think that this truth of God's that is in the Bible has changed and that He doesn't require us to do this anymore. Or second, we think that God still requires it but that His word can't be trusted and that this isn't the best thing for us to do it.

My point is this. God's truth is immutable. It doesn't change. We can trust and rely on the fact that becoming and acting consistently with it is the best thing for us. It always has been, still is and always will be.

There's a third thing about God that doesn't change – His purposes. When I say "His purposes," I mean what He intends to accomplish or do. When I say "change," I mean revise one's judgment or change one's plans. So, the fact is that God does not revise His judgments or change His plans.

The Bible presents this quality of His quite forcefully and clearly in two passages.

The first is 1 Samuel 15:29. Samuel states firmly to Saul that God *"will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind."*

The second passage is Numbers 23:19. Verse 16 says that God put a message in Balaam's mind and mouth. Part of that message, in verse 16, was this, ***"God is not a man that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent; Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?"***

These passages teach us that God's purposes are immutable. He does not revise His judgments or change His plans. He always acts when He intends. Every decision that He makes, He carries out.

Now, all orthodox Christians agree with what I just said. But they vigorously disagree about the implication of it.

I'm going to quote what both Tozer and Packer write in their books that we're using as resources for our study. After I quote them, I'm going to ask you if you agree or disagree with what they wrote.

Tozer writes this: ***"Neither does He change His mind about anything . . . In all our efforts to find God, to please Him, to commune with Him, we should remember that all change must be on our part."*** I draw your attention to two statements here. The first is that God does not change His mind about anything. The second is that in our relationship with Him, all change must be on our part. Is that true?

Packer writes this: ***"Repenting means revising one's judgment and changing one's plan of action. God never does this."*** Is it true that God never changes His plan of action?

If Tozer and Packer mean that God ***always*** does what He originally intends to do and ***never*** does what He didn't originally intend to do, then I disagree. I disagree because of several passages the most important of which is Exodus 32.

This chapter records the great sin of Israel. While Moses was on Mount Sinai for 40 days and nights receiving the Ten Commandments, the people persuaded Aaron to make a golden calf, which they worshipped in the context of a drunken sexual orgy.

God subsequently told Moses what the people were doing and declared to Him in verse 10, ***"Now let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you a great nation."*** God had two options here. The first was to kill off all of the Israelites and then start over again with the offspring of Moses. He would make of them a great nation and bring them into the Promised Land. The second option was to forgive these people and let Moses lead them into the Promised Land. Both options were loving and just ones and God chose the first. He decided to make a new nation from Moses.

But Moses preferred the second option to the second. So He prayed. He reasoned with God in verses 11-13 and asked Him to spare the people. Verse 14 records God's response. It says that *"the Lord changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to the people."*

Here's what I want you to see. God had truly decided to destroy the Israelites and raise up a new nation of Moses. Moses prayed and because he did, God changed His mind and thus the decision He had made. If Moses had not prayed, God would have done the one thing that He decided to do. But because he prayed, God did a different thing.

My question is this. How do we reconcile this narrative and the statement in verse 14 *"the Lord changed His mind"* with the verses I read earlier, 1 Samuel 15:29 and Numbers 23:19? 1 Samuel 15:29 says that God does not change His mind. Exodus 32:14 says that God changed His mind. How do we reconcile those two verses? Does God change His purposes or does He not? Or to ask it another way, are God's purposes immutable or are they not?

My belief, in a nutshell, is this. God's overarching purposes are inalterable or unchanging. He does not change His mind with regard to those overarching purposes. But His intentions about many specific matters and things in the lives of human beings are not. He is flexible when it comes to those specific matters and things. He sometimes does change His mind with regard to them.

Going back to Exodus 32, for instance, God had an overarching purpose – to make a great nation of Abraham's offspring and settle them in the Promised Land. He promised Abraham that He would do that in Genesis 12:1-3 and that purpose of His was inalterable. God was utterly inflexible with regard to it. Suppose Moses had prayed and asked God not to take Abraham's offspring into the Promised Land or not to make a great nation of them there. God would not have changed His mind.

When the Israelites sinned, He had the specific intention to destroy the Israelites and then raise up a great nation from the offspring of Moses who was the offspring of Abraham. Doing that was consistent with His promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 and with His own nature. But that intention of His was not inalterable. It was also consistent with His promise to Abraham and His nature to not destroy the Israelites but to make of them a great nation. So when Moses prayed and asked Him to do that, He was flexible and did it.

That illustrates that God's overarching purposes are inalterable. He doesn't change His mind with regard to them. But His intentions about many specific matters in the lives of human beings are not inalterable. He is flexible when it comes to them. He sometimes does change His mind in regard to them.

This flexibility of God has profound implications to petitionary and intercessory prayer. Petitionary prayer is asking God to do or give something for us. Intercessory prayer is asking God to do or give something for others. The flexibility of God has profound implications to both types of prayer.

I've had many people over the years ask me this question. Why pray if God is going to do what He wants to anyway?

What is the answer to that question? The answer is that a false premise underlies it. The question assumes that God is always going to do what He wants to anyway, which as we've just discussed, isn't true.

Exodus 32 and other passages like 2 Kings 20:1-7 make it clear. When we pray, God often does or gives what He wasn't going to. God answering our prayers isn't just a charade. He doesn't pretend to answer and then go ahead and do or give what He was going to.

Anyone who believes otherwise cannot be a powerful petitionary or intercessory pray-er. The idea that our requests don't change anything makes potent prayer a psychological impossibility. It makes it a dead ritual at best.

But we know that it does change things. The infinite, triune God is actually prevailed upon by those who stand faithfully before Him. The brilliant philosopher, mathematician, and disciple of Jesus, Blaise Pascal explained God's purpose in this. Writing over 300 years ago, he said, ***"God instituted prayer in order to allow His creatures the dignity of causality."*** It's our most profound work in cooperating with God to change the people and world around us for His glory.

In one of his books, C.S. Lewis tells about a "good man" praying and asking God to heal a woman with cancer. The femur in her leg wasn't almost eaten through with cancer. So this good man asked God to remove the cancer and restore the leg, which He did. Lewis then comments that God healed her because this good man prayed. If he had not prayed, God would not have healed her.

That doesn't make God any less God. That's what makes Him great in fact – that He can change His intentions when it's appropriate. His chief purpose for us, if you remember, is to prepare us to reign. Changing His intentions when it's appropriate enables Him to do just that. It gives us the ability to cooperate with Him in building His kingdom on earth. That in turn helps prepare us to reign in heaven.

I'd sum up the immutability of God this way. His nature, truth, and overarching purposes are unchangeable and fixed. Who He is, what He says, and what He ultimately intends never change.

Love

Let's quickly review the ten qualities of God that we've discussed to this point. He is spiritual, self-existent, eternal, triune, omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, all-wise, transcendent, and immutable. These qualities reflect His competence, that is, His capability. They show us that there is not even the slightest incompetence in Him at all. On the contrary, He is totally and utterly competent or capable.

We come now to qualities of God that reveal His loveliness, that is, His character. As we will see, He is just as lovely as He is competent. He is totally and utterly lovely in other words.

We will flesh out and sum up the loveliness of God by examining the person and life of Jesus at the end of our study. Jesus is God embodied. Thus, we can see God's utter loveliness most vividly in the incarnational person and life of Jesus Himself.

God has a quality that He is best known for. Even the most Biblically illiterate person at least knows His reputation for this. Can someone tell me what that quality is? That's right. It's that He is love.

The Bible itself is saturated with God's love. The Bible articulates and demonstrates it pervasively, from beginning, Genesis 1:1, to end, Revelation 22:21.

But nowhere is it articulated and demonstrated more clearly than in the beloved disciple John's first epistle. In this epistle, John reveals three tests of our profession and faith. One of those is the test of love. We find this test in 2:7-11; 3:11-18; and 4:7-21.

John's point in these passages is a simple one. God first loved us and demonstrated that love most observably by sending His Son Jesus in the flesh to die for us. Since He first loved us, we should love Him and others in turn.

With that context in mind, let's read 1 John 4:7-10, 16. There are four statements of God's substance in the Bible: (1) "*God is spirit*" (John 4:24); "*God is a consuming fire*" (Hebrews 12:29); "*God is light*" (1 John 1:5); and "*God is love*" (1 John 3:8,16). That last statement may be the most poignant statement in the Bible. God is love.

It may also be the most misunderstood statement in the Bible. Every secular person that I've ever talked to about God and love has misinterpreted it. They have taken the word "love" to be a predicate nominative and to mean that "God = love." That means that 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 that belief of theirs is their great confidence. 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 will experience His goodwill and benefits whether they obey Him or not.

Sadly, those secular people who believe that 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 we should worship and serve love as we worship and serve God. But that is not the case. As we've learned many times during the past four months, "nothing = God." God has no equals or even opposites.

My point is a simple one. It is wrong to view love as God's essential nature to which every other quality or trait of His is secondary and subservient. It is not 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 God with love. It simply identifies love as one of His qualities or traits. Love is not God but it is something that is true of God. That means that His love does not supercede any of His other qualities.

That reveals the catastrophic mistake that secularists make. They assume that God acts only in His love. But as we've seen, He always acts in all of His qualities together. His love does find expression in everything that He does. But so do His holiness, righteousness, justice, and every other quality of His. Whenever He acts in His love, for instance, He's also acting in His holiness, righteousness, goodness, and etc. And whenever He acts in His holiness, He's also acting in His love, righteousness, goodness, and etc.

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 would also say this. That "God is love" is one of the Bible's greatest revelations. The fact is that knowing His love is the apex of human experience both now in this life and forever in the life to come. As Tozer says it, *"To know God's love is indeed heaven on earth."* What makes "heaven" heaven? The answer is experiencing God's love. If we had every other experience of heaven but not that one, then heaven would be hell.

Assuming that's true, which it is, we need to first of all understand and then second of all experience God's love. I will help you with the understanding part by now explaining it to you. Let's take a close look at the love of God.

The first thing that we need to know about the love of God is that it proceeds from His own nature. We see that quite clearly in Deuteronomy 7:1-8. God loved the people of Israel and explained in these verses what it wasn't and what it was that caused Him to love them.

First, He explains what it wasn't. Seven nations inhabited the Promised Land before the Israelites conquered it. In verse 1, God explains that He didn't love them because they were greater than those seven nations because they weren't.

Verse 1 reveals three things about the people of Israel. First, they were fewer in number than the other nations. Second, they were weaker militarily than the other nations. And third, because they had been a slave nation for over 400 years, they were less culturally developed than the other nations.

God's point is a simple one. He didn't love them because they were numerous, strong, and culturally developed. There wasn't anything about the Israelites themselves, in other words, that caused God to love them.

Why did He love them then? He tells them in verses 7 and 8. There is a long sentence that begins in verse 7 and ends in verse 8. The first part of the sentence is the opening clause of verse 7, "***The Lord set His love on you.***" The completion of that clause is in the opening words of verse 8, "***because the Lord loved you.***"

Let's put those two clauses together and see what we have, "***The Lord set His love on you because the Lord loved you.***" God is saying to them, in other words, "***I love you because I love you.***"

Taking other verses and passages into account, we know that what was true of Israel is true of us. God doesn't love us because we're so intelligent, 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 makes God love us. There is something about Him that makes Him love us.

1 John 4:8,16 reveals what that something is. He is love. His love doesn't proceed from some merit or quality in the ones that He loves – intelligence, looks, talent, wealth, influence, goodness, and so on. It proceeds from His own nature instead.

He loves us because He loves us. That is, He loves us 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. He can't resist His own impulse to love us. His love is indiscriminate.

There's a second remarkable thing that God being love means. He loves everyone equally. He does not favor one person over another in that regard. He loves everyone as much as it is possible for a person to be loved. Thus, He loves everyone equally.

That God is love means a third remarkable thing. He loves everyone unflinchingly. He never stops loving anyone. There isn't anything that 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.

To help us grasp the full reality of God's love, let me state those three implications in the most extreme of terms. First, He loved Adolph Hitler. Second, He loved him as much as He ever has or ever will love anyone including the Apostle Paul, Mother Teresa, or anyone else we can think of. Third, He loved Adolph Hitler as much when he died as He did when He was born. He could not stop loving Him even while he was in the process of killing 6,000,000 Jews.

In summary, it is not in God's nature not to love a person or to love one person more than another or to stop loving a person.

Now let's personalize this to drive home its significance to us. First, God loves you. Second, He loves you as much as He ever has or ever will love anyone. And third, He will never stop loving you as much as He does no matter what you become or do.

To describe those three things as remarkable doesn't really do justice to them. They're more than that. It's a truly phenomenal fact of human life that the infinite God loves you and me and everyone that way.

A 14th century English mystic and nun, Julian of Norwich, captured the depths of God's love for us when she wrote this: *"For our soul is so specially loved of Him that is highest that it overpasseth the knowing of all creatures: that is to say, there is no creature that is made that may know how much and how sweetly and how tenderly our Maker loveth us. And therefore we may with grace and His help stand in spiritual beholding, with everlasting marvel of this high, overpassing, inestimable Love that Almighty God hath to us of His goodness."* She was right. His love for us is inestimable.

The Apostle Paul himself understood that and expressed it better than Julian did in Ephesians 3:17-19. As verse 14 reveals, these three 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. In the same breath, in verse 19, he states that this love "surpasses knowledge."

Paul isn't contradicting himself. He is saying that we can never grasp the true depth of God's love for us and we need to know that. But we can grasp enough of its depth to find the meaning and joy in life for which we're looking.

That is in fact the intended purpose of our discussing God's love now. It's that we might gain a basic understanding of it that will be a launching pad for further study and comprehension.

To this point, we have learned a significant truth - that God's love proceeds from His own nature. We have also learned the three implications of that truth.

We must now address what God's love is. What does it mean as a practical matter that He loves us? Let's define quite carefully what the precise nature of His love is. That God loves us means two things.

First, He always and only wills and seeks what is good for us, no matter what the cost is to Him.

We see this in 1 John 4:18. John states here that perfect love casts out fear because fear involves punishment.

Imagine being in a relationship with someone who sometimes willed and sought what was bad for us. What would our emotional tone be in that relationship? John tells us here. It would be fear. We'd always have the anxiety that the person was going to act against our well-being and joy.

Now imagine being in a relationship with someone who never willed or sought what was harmful or bad for you. On the contrary, he or she always knew always willed and sought what was best for you. What would you be fearful at all? No, you would not because there would be nothing to fear. What would our emotional tone be in that relationship? It would be confidence and peace.

That's what John has in mind in verse 18 and that is what God gives us. Think of that and let it penetrate deeply into your mind and heart. He never and I mean absolutely positively "never" wills or seeks what is harmful or bad for us. On the contrary, He always knows what is best for us and He always wills and seeks that. That is love and we can rest confidently and peacefully in it.

About five years ago, I visited a long established Christian, not from our church, who had cancer. That she did deeply troubled her and compelled her to ask me, "*Pastor why is God doing this to me? Why does He hate me?*" She asked me that question at least seven times during my visit with her.

I shared that story in my Sunday school class several years ago. After I did, two people came up to me and told me that they could empathize with that woman. They told me that they often feel the same way when things are going badly for them – that God doesn't love them.

Those who feel that way do so because they assume something. They assume that God has allowed or caused their trial or tribulation in order to harm them.

But is that assumption a correct one? Let's analyze it in order to determine that.

If something bad happens to us, is it true that God either allowed or caused it? Yes, that is true. God is sovereign over all and nothing can happen to us unless He at least allows it.

If God allows or causes something bad to happen to us, is it true that He does so in order to harm us. No, that is not true. Because we live in a fallen world, bad things are going to happen to us. One of two things is always true when they do. First, God caused it to happen in order to benefit us. Or second, God allowed it to happen and will act in it to benefit us.

My mother had Parkinson's disease and my brother currently has it. Suppose that I am diagnosed with it next year. I will know that one of two things is true. Either God caused it in order to benefit me or He allowed it and will work in it to benefit me. Either way, knowing that love of His casts our fear.

So that's the first thing that it means that God loves us. Always knowing what is good and beneficial for us, He always wills and seeks that. A theologian named Tillotson said it well, "*This is true love to anyone, to do the best for him we can.*" That is exactly what God always does for us – the best that He can, no matter what the cost is to Him.

That God loves us means a second thing. It means that He emotionally identifies Himself 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 used to describe it. Anyway, keeping that in mind, that God loves us means that He emotionally identifies Himself with us.

Parental love demonstrates what I mean by that. I'm going to make two statements. After each, I'm going to ask you to explain the psychological and relational dynamics behind each one.

The first statement is this. As one author says it, a child is a parent's heart walking around outside of him or her. What are the psychological and relational dynamics that explain what that statement means?

The second statement is this. A parent is only as happy as his or her happiest child? What are the psychological and relational dynamics that explain what that statement means?

Inherent in both of those statements is emotional identification. Good parent 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 their children weep.

Imagine that my son's wife leaves him or that he is diagnosed with cancer but I am unmoved by that. I remain happy and carefree and go about my business as if neither has happened. What kind of father would I be?

Or suppose that my son decides to be a disciple of Jesus or that he gets a job that he desperately wanted but I am unmoved by that. I'm not overjoyed or even happy about it. What kind of father would I be?

One of my biggest concerns when my son Moses left the Marines was he getting a job that he enjoyed and that could support him. His current job is a dream job that accomplished both of those for him and more so. I'll tell you what I told him when he got it and it's true. I was happier about it than he was. That's because I love him dearly and emotionally identify with Him.

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

Tozer describes this aspect of God's love for us this way: *"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 is powerful and true. God has voluntarily bound up his own final happiness with ours. He emotionally identifies with us.

I've heard several preachers and teachers 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 thing isn't it? Several months ago, I met a woman at a funeral dinner and before the conversation was done she whipped out her purse and showed me pictures of all her grandchildren. She then went on about what they were like and what they did.

Preachers and teachers often say that God is like that with us and in fact he actually is. In a way that is known only to Him, his heart is bound up with us and our well-being and joy. His heart breaks and rejoices with us as we go through the ups and downs, the good times and bad times, of our lives.

One of the words that we use to describe this aspect of love is affection. I have great affection for my wife and children but it is miniscule compared to the affection that God has for us. What we are and do and what happens to us warm or hurt the heart of God.

God's love has many practical implications to our person and life, two of which I would like to explain.

First, God's love provides us with 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 Republicans or Democrats, 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 thing about us comprises our identity.

When I say "objectively," I'm referring to what is actually true about us. Everyone has a sense of identity. Our sense of identity is what we perceive to be the single most significant fact about us. What we perceive that fact to be may or not be what it actually is. If what we perceive to be is actually what it is, then we have a true sense of identity. If it is not, then we have a false sense of identity.

Many people including followers of Jesus have a false identity. That's because they take their identity from the wrong source. That wrong source might be something that they do or have or that happens to them or that others think of them and so on.

I know a woman for instance who has taken her identity from the death of her child. Her child's death occupies her thoughts, conversations, and deeds. She has defined herself, in other words, in terms of that.

And because she has, so have others. They think of her primarily as the woman who lost her child. That's how she thinks of herself and consequently, so do others.

Wrong identities diminish our persons and lives. They negatively affect not only our emotional life but our decisional life as well. Having the right identity is crucial to a life of well being and joy.

So what is our identity? What is the single most significant fact about us? It's that we are the beloved of God. 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. The infinite and perfect maker of the universe always wills and seeks our well-being and has a deep affection for me.

Let me ask you a series of questions. Answer them honestly. If your spouse suddenly leaves you, is the single most significant fact of your life that he or she did? If you've broken all of your company's sales records, is it that you did? If you've been fired, is it that you were? If you've been drafted by the New York Yankees, is it that you were? If your child died, is it that he or she did?

The answer to all of those questions of course is "no." The single most significant fact of our lives is that God loves us and we should make that, not any of those others things, our identity.

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

To have the right sense of identity, we need to do three things.

First, learn in detail how deeply God loves us. The best way to do that is to read and study what the Bible says about that. You can do that by using *Nave's Topical Bible*, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*, or a good Bible dictionary.

Second, practice solitude. Withdraw from the sights, sounds, and activities of daily life and do nothing but be alone with God. Something tremendous happens when we're alone with the One who loves us the most. He speaks His tender feelings for us into the very depths of our soul. We then actually experience what we know – how deeply He loves us.

Third, purposely and periodically place our minds on what we've learned from the Bible about God's love.

When I sin, fail, or make a mistake, for instance, I think of what we've learned tonight – that nothing I do can make God stop loving me. Or as I'm moving through my day in general, I periodically recall various verses I've learned.

Isaiah 49:15 is an example of what I mean. This will be one of the memory verses we learn as a congregation this year. I wrote a note in my Bible beside this verse. It says, "***One of the strongest, if not the strongest, expressions of God's love in the Bible.***" It was written of the Israelites but as the rest of the Bible makes clear, is true of us as well. What is the strongest and most impassioned of all human loves. It's that of a mother for her nursing child. God, this verse says, loves us more than that.

I take verses like this one and periodically call them to mind as I move through my day. Doing that helps cement my identity as the beloved of God.

God's love for us has a second implication that we need to grasp and live consistently with. That implication is that those with whom we work, play, and live are the beloved of God.

I've heard preachers say that Jesus would have died for any one person alone. I've heard others say that Jesus loves each person on earth as if he or she were the only one. I think those preachers were right in saying that. The people with whom we work, play, and live are the beloved of God.

And we need to perceive them that way. Doing so helps us love them like Jesus does.

I taught something in another study that you may remember. Love is not blind. On the contrary, love always has a vision of the beloved.

After I became involved with my wife Jill in college, I wrote my mother a letter and described Jill to her. If you could read that letter, you would know the specific vision that I had of her. I had a perception of her that made me love and want to marry her.

The truth is that love is not blind. It always has a vision of the beloved.

That's one of the reasons that we're building a vision of God. I've talked about that in sermons in fact - that we need to build a vision of God because doing so will help us to love Him.

Well, we need to do the very same way with human beings. We need to build a Biblical vision of the people that we know and that we meet in our daily routines.

Doing so will help us to understand their value and worth, which in turn will assist us in loving them.

I've done that. I've built a vision of human beings and found it quite helpful in dealing with people who aren't quite so easily loved as others. What I do is bring that vision of people to mind as I'm dealing with or relating to them.

There is a person who thinks that I should do something. I think that I should not and won't. So, she's upset with me about it and has let me know it. I think she's being unreasonable but that doesn't matter. I should love her still and one of the things that assists me in doing so is my vision of her. She is the beloved of God, one that He loves dearly, and I keep that constantly in mind as I deal with her. I've found doing so quite helpful in loving her.

So learn and keep constantly in mind that the people that you're living and dealing with each day are the beloved of God. Doing so will assist you in loving them.

I close out our study of God's love with the chorus of one of Charles Wesley's most dynamic and meaningful hymns. It's titled *And Can It Be* and the chorus goes like this: ***"Amazing love! How can it be that Thou, my God, shouldst die for me."*** That is what God's love is. It is absolutely amazing.

Good

The next quality of God's that we need to address is closely related to love. It's so closely related in fact that I personally have a difficult time articulating the difference. That quality is goodness. God is good.

We sing a chorus that declares the goodness of God. You know how the words go: ***"God is so good. God is so good. God is so good. He's so good to me."*** The Bible too celebrates God's goodness. Several of the verses that do are Psalm 107:1; Hosea 3:5; Nahum 1:7; Mark 10:18; and Ephesians 5:8-9.

I have read many books, Bible dictionaries, and articles that define the goodness of God including Tozer's and Packer's. Not one has, in my opinion, defined it well. All the discussions I've read have left my fuzzy regarding what it actually is.

To understand God's goodness, we probably need to begin with the word "good" as we ourselves normally use it.

We regard inanimate objects as good. My wife makes chicken fettuccini for instance that I just love. I tell her over and over again every time that she makes it how good it is. Or someone will comment about the kind of weather we've had today how good it is. Or someone will say what a good picture his or her television has.

What do we mean when we use the word "good" with regard to those things? We mean that the fettuccini is pleasant to our taste and that the day is conducive to our comfort and that the television is enhancing to our viewing experience.

Good thus has reference to the nature of the things and the beneficial consequences of their nature on the persons and things around them.

Notice here that we concur on what is good. Food is good when it pleases our taste buds. Weather is good when it makes us comfortable. A television's picture is good when it enhances our viewing experience.

But it isn't just inanimate objects. We also regard animate objects as good meaning living things including people.

What do you think of for example when I say that I have a good dog? You think that he is potty trained, doesn't chew on furniture, has a nice temperament, is friendly with people, doesn't bark too much, and so on.

You can see therefore what we mean by good in regard to dogs. We mean that the nature and behavior of the dog is beneficial to the persons and things around it.

That brings us of course to people. I think of Robert Gallner senior for example. I believe that he is a good man. I've told many people that in fact. We do that quite frequently don't we. We describe some person or persons as being good.

What do you think of when I say that someone is good? It is many things isn't it. They are moral, generous, kind, patient, fair, faithful and so on.

I met Robert's niece at the hospital and she went on to me about how he is the glue that keeps the family together. He stays in contact with his sisters, treats every family member with respect, and makes sure that if they have needs, they're met.

Goodness seems to encompass a number of positive qualities of character and behavior that we again agree impact people and things beneficially.

That helps us understand what the goodness of God is. It's His disposition to always do what is most the most beneficial and helpful to everyone and everything including Himself.

That is how I define God's goodness but listen now to Tozer and Packer.

Tozer writes: *"The goodness of God is that which disposes Him to be kind, cordial, benevolent, and full of good will toward men. He is tenderhearted and of quick sympathy, and His unfailing toward all moral beings is open, frank, and friendly. By His nature He is inclined to bestow blessedness and He takes holy pleasure in the happiness of His people."*

Packer's definition isn't all that different than Tozer's. He writes: *"Within the cluster of God's moral perfections there is one in particular to which the term goodness points. This is the quality of generosity. Generosity means the disposition to give to others in a way that has no mercenary motives and is not limited by what the recipients deserve but consistently goes beyond it. Generosity expresses the simple wish that others should have what they need to make them happy. Generosity is, so to speak, the focal point of God's moral perfection; it is the quality which determines how all God's other excellences are to be displayed."*

I would note two words that Tozer and Packer use that I think are aspects of God's goodness. He is friendly and generous. Considering that God's knowledge and power are unlimited, that is good to know.

I sometimes think about something to which most people don't give any thought. Suppose that the all-powerful and all-knowing God who made the universe was bad. Suppose that He was disposed to always do what was harmful and detrimental to us. Ours would be an agonizing and painful life indeed.

That reminds me of Ecclesiastes 9:1. Consider what the created world teaches us. It teaches us that we are in the hands of an all-powerful and all-knowing God. In 9:1 Solomon identifies what it doesn't teach us. Is He good or bad? Is He friendly or hostile toward us?

The Bible teaches us the answer to that. He is good not bad. He is friendly not hostile.

I'd like to discuss two issues now that the goodness of God raises.

The first is this. It is vital that we see all dimensions of our human situation in order to have an adequate vision of God.

Some years back a popular book was written titled *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Has anyone read it? I have not but the title does tell us what it is about. If God is good, how do we explain the fact that bad things happen to good people?

Is that in fact the case? Let's look at this objectively. Do bad things actually happen to good people?

Yes, they do. Most of us, for example, agree that the Apostle Paul was a good person. But we know from his letters that a lot of bad things happened to him, far more than to most. So, we acknowledge that the premise of the book is true. Bad things do happen to good people. That is reality.

The problem with the book is that it views reality only in those terms. If it is only true that bad things happen to good people, then what do we necessarily have to conclude about God? We would have to conclude that He is not good, which is exactly what many do – conclude that He is not good. I know because I've counseled them.

But what is the right response to those who believe this? The right response is that this is only a partial view of reality. It is not **only** true that bad things happen to good people.

Consider these things for example and I take them one by one.

Why do bad things not happen to good people? Let's suppose for a moment that I am a good person. I try to be at least. I've been driving for 41 years and have driven over 500,000 miles during that time – and I've never had an accident. When you think of all the cars on the road and the dynamics involved in driving, that's miraculous. How do you explain that?

Or why do good things happen to good people? I know a good man who got a dream job through a whole set of odd circumstances coming together at just the right time. How do you explain that?

Or why do bad things not happen to bad people? A tornado ripped through my hometown several years ago. A farm of a man who attends my home church was destroyed. The farm of the man next to him was untouched. Someone commented about the injustice of that because the man whose farm was untouched is a scoundrel. How do you explain that?

Or why do good things happen to bad people? I know a farmer who is a horrible husband and father. He constantly neglects and on occasion emotionally abuses his wife and children. But he gets a great harvest of crops every year and is one of the most successful farmers in his county. How do you explain that?

The answer to the four questions I just asked, *"How do you explain that?"* is the same. The answer is *"God is good."*

My point is this. If you look at reality in part - that bad things happen to good people - you will conclude that God is not good. But if you look at reality in totality - that bad things don't happen to good people, that good things happen to good people, that bad things don't happen to bad people, and that good things happen to bad people - you will conclude that God is good.

Be realistic, in other words. See the world and life in it as they are. You will grasp God's goodness if you do.

I want to discuss now a second issue that relates to God's goodness and it's this. Willard opens up this issue to us in The Divine Conspiracy. We must see our own personal life within the framework of that goodness. We must find the goodness of God in our own life in other words.

We must do that because of something that is true about us. We are not separate from our life. There is no "you" apart from your actual life. There is no "me" apart from my actual life.

Consequently, it is in this life that we must find the goodness of God. We must believe that God has done well by us in our own life. When I say our own life, I mean the things that concern us the most: our body, our parents and family, our marriage, our children or lack thereof, our opportunities, our work, our calling, our sexuality, and more. It is those things that define our existence and it is in those things that we must find the goodness of God.

St. Clare is our model for this. Francis of Assisi won Clare to a life of complete devotion to God. After living her life for Jesus, she spoke these dying words: *"Lord, God, blessed be thou for having created me."*

Those are inspiring words, especially in the context of her life. She lived a life of hardship and experienced much terror and pain along the way. But she found the goodness of God in it all.

As she lay near death, Brother Renaldo had exhorted her to bear all her infirmities with patience. To which she replied: *"Dearest brother, ever since I have known the grace of my Lord Jesus Christ through His servant Francis, no suffering has troubled me, no penance has been too hard, no sickness too arduous."*

Those words of Clare reveal what she believed. She believed that God had done well by her in her life. She had found God's goodness in the things that mattered most to her. An instructive summary is that she believed that it was good that she existed and that she existed the way that she did.

We must be sure of the same thing. We must seek and find the same certainty about our person and life that Clare found. We must believe that God has done well by us. We must believe that it is good that we exist and that exist the way that we do. We can never believe in His goodness and thus be able to love Him if we don't.

There are two passages in the Bible that express a sentiment that is the antithesis of Claire's. They are Job 3:1-10 (especially 1-3, 10) and Jeremiah 20:14-18. Job and Jeremiah expressed the very same sentiment. It is bad that I exist the way that I do.

How many of you have ever thought or felt that way. It could be some circumstance or several circumstances in your life that is the source of that thought and feeling: illness, injury, physical deformity, abusive or neglectful parents, barrenness, poverty, a detestably job, no job at all, divorce, abandonment, bankruptcy, failures, criticism, unhappy children, death of a loved one, aloneness, and more. Or it could be just life in general. You are just tired of all of the cruelty and pain in the world.

I know that feeling by experience. As I've told you before, I was freakishly young looking and small growing up. And I sometimes cursed the day of my birth as a result of that. I allowed my condition to make me so miserable that I sometimes wished I hadn't been born.

Let's consider the effect of believing that on our ability to achieve what this study is all about. The title of our study is *The First Aim*. That first aim is to love God with our whole being. But if I believe that my life isn't good then I will believe that God isn't good. And if I believe that God isn't good, then I can't love Him. It is psychologically impossible to believe that it is bad that I exist the way I do and at the same time love God with my whole being. No one can do that.

The reasoning, conscious or subconscious, behind this effect goes like this. It isn't good that I exist the way that I am. I exist the way that I am because God created me that way. God therefore isn't good or He wouldn't have created me this way. And since God isn't good, I can't delight in and love Him. I resent and maybe even hate Him instead.

It is one of the inexorable laws of life. We cannot reject ourselves and love God or even others. If we resent our lives and thus ourselves, then we will most certainly resent God. Self-rejection minimizes if not destroys any ability we have to delight in and love God.

I hope you grasp the implication of this. This may be the very first issue that we have to successfully address in our own life if we are going to love God. If we resent our condition of person or circumstances of life then we will resent God. Thus, we must deal with that resentment and get rid of it in order to advance in our spiritual life.

Or this may be the very first issue that we have to help others address in their lives. They may so resent their existence that it's impossible for them to love God. So we must help them deal with that resentment and remove it from their lives.

There is only one way that I know of to do that. We must learn and understand those truths of the universe and life in it that make it possible for us to believe something specific. That something specific is this and I quote Willard: *"The path appointed for us by when and where and to whom we were born is good, and nothing irredeemable has happened to us or can happen to us on our way to our destiny in God's full world."* We must believe that in order to believe that God is good and thus to love Him. But the only way that we can believe that is to learn and understand those truths of the universe and life in it that support such a belief. We must learn those and then focus on them, that is, place our minds on them. We must also pray and ask the Holy Spirit for the gift of belief as we do.

The fact and depth of God's love for us has nothing to do with your looks. Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit that He inhabits. Inner beauty is objectively far more significant than outer beauty because God values the first far more than the second. You are what you are before God, nothing more or less. Physical beauty is temporary and passes away even in this life if a person lives long enough. Every follower of Jesus will one day have a resurrection body that is dazzling in appearance and function.

Those are some of the things that I told a maimed Christian Viet Nam veteran in Barberton. His face was horribly deformed when the personnel carrier he was in ran over a mine. This man rued the day of his birth because of the way he looked. And he was angry and disgusted with God because he did.

How can we help this man overcome his self-rejection? There is only one way that I know of. It's to help him see reality as it is. The reality is that he's horribly deformed. If that is the only reality, then God is not good and cannot love Him. But it is not the only reality. All the other things that I just said are just as real and true as the appearance of his face. God's love for him has nothing to do with how he looks. His body is still the temple of the Holy Spirit as much now as it was before he was maimed. And so on. We can help him only by assisting him to understand the realities that he needs to understand, to pray for the gift of belief, and to focus on those realities that he now believes.

The bottom line is this. If we have or are suffering terribly, we need to focus on God, His world, and ourselves in it with a glorious eternal destiny. If we cannot do that, then we cannot find the goodness of God.

Holy

Most people think of God's loveliness in terms of the last two qualities that we've discussed – His love and goodness. But the next five comprise His loveliness just as much as the first two.

God has a thirteenth quality. He is holy.

The Bible is permeated through and through with the holiness of God, from the first book to the last. Here are a few sample texts: 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.

Several passages define quite clearly what God's holiness means.

One of those is Psalm 5:4. Notice that God does not take pleasure in any wickedness and no evil dwells within Him.

Habakkuk 1:13 defines God's holiness the same way. We read verse 12, which states that He is holy. Verse 13 then elaborates on that holiness and declares that He is too pure to approve evil.

Those verses reveal the gist of God's holiness. On the negative side, it refers to His total separation from evil of any kind. On the positive side, it refers to His absolute purity. He is ethically spotless and fully pure. Or as Tozer says it, "***He is the absolute quintessence of moral excellence.***"

I'd say it more practically this way. Evil is totally foreign to Him and moral purity is His essence. There is no evil of any kind in Him, only total moral goodness. He has never thought an evil thought, felt an evil feeling, or done an evil deed and never will. He has always thought pure thoughts, felt pure feelings, and done pure deeds and always will. It is impossible for Him to do otherwise.

An imperfect analogy helps us understand what God's holiness is. That analogy is human holiness. I'll explain why it's imperfect shortly.

People have the general perception that all pastors are holy. Let me quickly say that is a misperception. The truth is that pastors by and large aren't any holier than the people they're pastoring. But people do have the perception that they are. Most can't imagine their yelling at his wife, for instance, or looking at a pornographic magazine.

Tony Campolo tells about going to the barbershop when he was a young pastor. The moment that he walked into the shop the guys in it grew quiet and stuffed their dirty magazines under other magazines.

That's why the barber always let him go first ahead of the other guys – so that he could get him out of there. They'd then pick up their conversations or their places in the dirty magazines where they had left off. They didn't want to do those things in his presence because they perceived him as being holy. They couldn't imagine him using their filthy language or looking at their dirty magazines.

Or take Mother Teresa. I believe that Mother Teresa was truly a holy person. Can you imagine her looking at pictures in a *Playgirl* magazine, or swearing at one of the Sisters of Charity, or shoplifting an item from a store? Most of us cannot even imagine that because she was holy.

That helps us understand what God's holiness means. There is no evil in Him of any kind. He is absolutely, totally, completely, and utterly morally excellent and pure.

I said that my analogy for explaining this is imperfect and it is. That's because God's holiness isn't just human holiness infinitely bettered or perfected. It's so much different in its nature than ours is that we can't even come close to understanding it. But the analogy at least gives us an inkling of what it is.

I do want to point out that God's holiness has nothing to do with Him conforming to some outside standard of moral purity. There is not some moral code outside of God to which He conforms thus making Him holy. That He is holy doesn't mean that He conforms to a standard. It means that He is the standard. His holiness isn't judged by moral codes. Moral codes are judged by His holiness.

I now want to identify and discuss two implications of God's holiness to us.

The first is that what is holy is healthy. Because God is holy, He has made holiness the moral condition necessary to the health of the universe. Thus, whatever is holy is healthy. Whatever is unholy is unhealthy. Purity is mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual health. Evil is mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual sickness. It really is as simple as that.

Unforgiveness is an example of what I mean. Unforgiveness is unholy. Therefore, it is unhealthy. Author Ann Lamott said it so well, "***Not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and waiting for the rat to die.***" That is so true isn't it? I want to hurt the rat that hurt me. But when I don't forgive, the rat is me. I'm causing me far more pain by not forgiving than the person who hurt me caused.

In contrast, forgiveness is holy and therefore healthy. Listen to what a mother said about the man who raped, beat, and killed her daughter: *"The decision is mine. I either carry anger, unforgiveness, and resentment around with me, and break under the load, or I hand it over to my heavenly Father who can bear the weight so easily. I can let go, begin to breathe again, and live and grow."* Note those last words, *"live and grow."*

Forgiveness and unforgiveness illustrate this fundamental principle of our universe. Holiness is the moral condition that is necessary to its health. That is true at three levels, the individual, societal, and global. That's why I have great concern for our own culture and society. It is unholy and thus unhealthy and if something isn't done, it will eventually die.

There is a second implication that is inherent in the first that I just shared. We can be holy. The Bible's classic statement of this is a passage we've already read, 1 Peter 1:15-16, quoting Leviticus 19:2 and 20:7,26. This passage declares that God is holy and that we should be holy too. God's holiness calls us to holiness. He is morally excellent and pure and we should be too. That implies of course that we can be and that is in fact the case.

Don't misunderstand me. God cannot impart His holiness, which knows no degrees, to His creatures. But He can impart a relative and contingent holiness and does – to angels and human beings. He not only imputes it to them but imparts it as well.

Thus, our person and life can be characterized by holiness and will be if we decide to be a disciple of Jesus and commit ourselves to Christian spiritual formation, both of which we teach in detail here at Bethel. When we do that, the Holy Spirit makes us holy as God is holy.

The problem is that most professing American Christians do not believe that. What they believe instead is the old slogan that I so often point to, *"Christians aren't perfect; just forgiven."* But if we're just forgiven, then we aren't holy, which, according to the Bible, is wrong.

That belief is behind the current condition of the church. As Tozer describes it in his book, *"We have learned to live with unholiness and have come to look upon it as the natural and expected thing."* That is more characteristic of the Christian world today than it was 50 years ago when Tozer wrote his book.

One of the most observable expressions of that is the church's attitude toward the sins of the spirit.

Historically, Christian thinkers have divided sin into two categories: sins of the flesh and sins of the spirit.

Sins of the flesh referred to bodily desires that get out of control: lust, greed, gluttony, drunkenness, laziness, and more. Most American Christians today identify them primarily with sexual sins, emphasizing fornication, adultery, and pornography.

Sins of the spirit refer not to desires of the body but to those of the soul. They include pride, anger, malice, contempt, jealousy, slander, gossip, resentment, manipulation, and more.

Those are the two categories of sins and here's what so revealing today. Christians are scandalized by the sins of the flesh, primarily the sexual sins, but not the sins of the spirit. There's a dichotomy in their minds that have led them to denounce and punish sins of the flesh, primarily sexual, but to ignore or even tolerate the sins of the spirit.

Here is a classic case in point. There was a competent and successful Friends pastor whose defining quality was an angry, aggressive, prideful, and dominating spirit. He wasn't able to get along with his staff members, half of his elders, and much of the congregation. He was constantly in conflict with people, often resorting to anger and yelling to get his way. His behavior finally became so intolerable that he was forced to resign from his church.

But here's what's revealing. In the official letter to the congregation, leadership made sure to state that he wasn't resigning for "moral failure" and I quote the letter, "moral failure."

They were referring to something quite specific in saying that? What was that something? It was sexual sin. They were saying that he wasn't resigning because of sexual sin.

But what underlying belief does the statement that he wasn't resigning for "moral failure" express. It's the belief that pride, anger, and malice aren't really moral failures. As Tozer said it, Christians regard those as natural and expected things.

That partially explains why our denomination strips pastors who commit sexual sins of their credentials and does not allow them to pastor again but doesn't do that with those, like this pastor, who are filled with anger, malice, and pride. We don't tolerate the first but we do the second.

Our call is to get a vision of God's holiness and the kind of holiness that He can impart to us. The greater our vision of that, the more attracted we'll be to what is pure and the more repelled we'll be by what is evil. We will regard even the sins of the spirit as unnatural and unexpected things. We will hold ourselves to and achieve higher standards of behavior. We will be more in line with the holiness of God Himself.

Someone not from our church showed me a cartoon from the Internet that was totally degrading to Hillary Clinton. This person thought I would get a kick out of it but I didn't. 10 years ago, it would have been appealing to me. Last week, it was repulsive to me. Why. It's because the more I grow in holiness the more sensitive I become to what is pure and what is evil.

The Bible calls us to be imitators of God in all things – including His holiness.

Righteous

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

Many verses in the Bible teach this quality of His. They 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.

As I said, righteousness is closely related to holiness. It is God acting so that His holiness is upheld. Theologian T.C. Hammond defines it this way. It is *"the principle in God which gives rise to and upholds the moral order in the world."* God is morally perfect and acts so that the world itself will also be.

One of the mighty acts of His righteousness was the giving of the law. By law, I mean the commandments, the do's and don'ts, which He gives us in Scripture. Giving the law to mankind was of 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 holiness.

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 are not 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 our opinion or approval.

Suppose that I find a lost wallet with \$200 that contains the address of the owner and that I am able to return. Is keeping the money right if I think it is? No, it is not. Based on what Deuteronomy 22:1-3 teaches, it is objectively right to return it and objectively wrong to keep it.

Suppose that I'm fed up with someone and grumble and complain about him to others. Is doing that not wrong if I think it isn't? No, it is not. Based on Philippians 2:14, it is objectively wrong to grumble and complain.

The implication is clear. We need to learn and do all that the Bible commands. We do emphasize here at Bethel that doing that requires transformation into Christlikeness but that's a different subject. For our purposes now, the implication is that if we're serious about morality, then we'll be serious about His law. We'll study and learn it and then do whatever is necessary to obey it.

That exposes the fallacy of the "good moral person." It's often said of non-Christians that they are good moral people. But the only good moral people are those committed to learning and doing all that the Bible says. Those not committed to that are not good moral people.

That includes many professing Christians. I once counseled a professing Christian who had decided to divorce her husband. I commented that I assumed that she had studied what the Bible says about divorce before making her decision. She replied that she had not. Was she acting morally in her divorce? No, she was not.

I once advised a professing Christian who was planning on filing a lawsuit against a partner of his. I told him that he should study what the Bible says about lawsuits before filing his but he refused to do so. Was he acting morally in filing the lawsuit? No, he was not.

To be good moral people, we must learn God's law and do whatever is necessary to obey it.

Recognize in that regard that it isn't the law that determines morality. It's the holiness of God. Grumbling and complaining about others isn't immoral because it violates Philippians 2:14. It's immoral because it offends God's holiness. The standard isn't the law. The standard is God's nature generally and His holiness specifically, which are expressed in the law. Morality isn't primarily about the law but God who gave it.

That the law is an act of God's righteousness and an expression of His holiness reveals a second thing. Obeying it is good for the world and us and breaking it is bad for the world and us.

In Mere Christianity, C.S. Lewis tells the story of a schoolboy who was asked what he thought God was like. He replied that God was "***The sort of person who is always snooping around to see if anyone is enjoying Himself and then trying to stop it.***" Lewis then states that many people think that very same way about morality.

But nothing could be further from the truth. The truth is that morality is good and immorality bad for the world and us. Lewis explains it this way: "***Moral rules are directions for running the human machine. Every moral rule is there to prevent a breakdown, or a strain, or a friction, in the running of that machine.***"

He's absolutely right. Every moral failure is going to make things worse certainly for our selves and probably for others. Every moral success is going to make things better. Morality is good for the world and us in other words and immorality is bad.

Let's go back to lawsuits again. On the one hand, people think that being hostile, aggressive, and hateful in lawsuits will be beneficial to them. But it will ultimately be detrimental instead. On the other hand, they think that caring about the welfare of their opponent like Jesus said will be detrimental to them. But it will ultimately be beneficial instead.

People can be as skeptical about that as they want to but it's true. I've never had a client yet who believed it but it's true. The best strategy a plaintiff or defendant can pursue is to act according to God's holiness in lawsuits.

What I've said tonight about the law helps us understand what righteousness is. It's an expression of God's holiness. It's God acting to uphold His moral excellence in the world.

Just

Our next quality of God is also closely related to His holiness and righteousness. That quality is that He is just.

Here are a sampling of verses that teach us that God is just: Deuteronomy 32:4; Nehemiah 9:33; Zephaniah 3:5; Zechariah 9:9; and Romans 3:26.

The justness of God has to do with His competence in dealing with people's morality and immorality. He deals with that by judging or assessing their morality or immorality and then rewarding or punishing it accordingly. God is just in doing that. That means that His judgment and punishment are always fully informed and fair. Or to say it quite simply, God always does right by us when He assesses and deals with us.

The justness of God will be fully and finally seen on the Day of Judgment.

Down through the centuries, people, including some of the Bible's authors, have questioned the injustices that drive our world. I'm talking about unfairness like the prosperity of the wicked and the suffering and oppression of the innocent.

We think, for example, of the over 1,000,000 babies whom self-serving parents and physicians abort in the United States each year. I'm talking about people who value their own convenience or profit over the life of a human being. They're doing it and profiting from it now.

But that poses a moral problem doesn't it? For people to get the bad that they don't deserve or to get the good that they don't deserve is wrong. If God allows that wrong, then He is not holy.

But God is holy, which means that He will not allow that wrong. He will have His day, His turn at bat so to speak, when He will right the wrong. It will be a day when He gives people exactly what they deserve. He will give them no more or no less than they deserve.

According to the Bible, He will do that right after human history ends with the Second Coming of Jesus. There will be an event and that event will be judgment.

Every person who has ever lived will stand alone before God to be judged. The basis of that judgment will be our behavior and the character that it reveals. Jesus taught that what we are on the inside determines what we do on the outside. That will be an underlying principle of judgment. God will examine what we did on the outside to determine what we were and are on the inside.

He will then reward or punish us accordingly for what we were and are. He will give us the good or bad that we deserve.

Thus, the inner evil condition of the abortion doctors will be brought to light. Every living being that exists (human, angelic, and demonic) will learn of that inner condition and will then witness God pronounce the punishment for it. God will say, "***Depart from me for I never knew you.***" At that point, half of the wrong will be righted.

The other half will be righted as the baby that was aborted stands before God, probably in a 30 year-old resurrection body. Once again every living being that exists will witness God pronounce that person's eternal destiny, "***Come to Me and be with Me forever.***" At that point, the other half of the wrong will be righted.

Now, there's something that we need to know about judgment. It has two main purposes.

The second is that it imparts moral significance to human life. Absent this judgment and eternal consequences, our present life has no moral significance.

But the first or primary purpose of judgment is to reveal the moral character of God. I've insinuated that the judgment of each individual is public and that is in fact the case. Every living being will know as a result of everyone's judgment and sentence that God is holy, that is, He is morally perfect. He will give every living being, including Satan, what he or she ultimately deserves and thus vindicate His holiness.

That helps us understand what it means that God is just. It means that He always does right by us when He assesses and deals with us. His judgment of us, now in this life and forever in the next, is always fully informed and fair.

That raises what I believe is just a burning practical question. Just what is the basis of God's judgment? Just what is it that He is going to hold us accountable for? Countless people who have lived through the centuries have not even heard of Jesus, for instance. So, will God punish them for not loving Him? Countless people have lived without knowing that the Bible even exists? So, will God punish them for not obeying it? What is it that God is going to hold us accountable for?

Paul answers that us in Romans 2:12-16. 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 by 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 that 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 that they didn't know or couldn't know were wrong, then He'd be unfair and thus not just.

Yet, those who do not know God or His law will be judged and there will be a legitimate basis of that judgment. Paul tells us what that basis in verses 14-16. It is 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 is there nonetheless telling us what is right and wrong.

In Mere Christianity, for instance, C.S. Lewis asks us to think about a society that admired people for running away in battle or where people felt proud about double-crossing those who have been most kind to them. You might as well imagine a country where two plus two equals five, he says. His point is that people know instinctively, within themselves, that those things and many others are wrong. They also know in that 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 and reward them for having lived consistently with - the moral code of their conscience.

People often ask me if pagans who have never heard of the true God will be saved. The answer is that they may or may not, depending on whether they obeyed or disobeyed their conscience.

Based on this Scripture and what I know about God's nature, I believe that the basis of our judgment will be falling short of or attaining the best that we knew or should have known and were capable of becoming. Notice the two things involved. #1 – the best that we knew or should have known. #2 – the best that we are capable of becoming.

What is it that I am capable of becoming? How much like Jesus is it possible for me to become? I will be judged based on how close to or far from that I was when I died.

You can see that his basis of judgment is a just and fair one. God will deal rightly with us and that is what His justness is all about.

What I've just said does speak to the issue of election to salvation and damnation. Pure Calvinists believe that God arbitrarily elects some people to salvation and some to damnation.

As a practical matter, His election expresses itself in this manner. All unsaved people are incapable of responding on their own to Jesus. They can respond to Him only as the Holy Spirit enlightens their mind and frees their will to do so. The Holy Spirit does just that with those who are elected to salvation. He does not do that with those who are elected to damnation.

Thus, those who are elected to damnation, are incapable of responding to Jesus. They are not able to decide to follow Him. They can hear the gospel a million times and will never respond because they can't. It is not in them to do so. They are irresistibly predisposed by their own nature to either ignore or reject Jesus. They cannot do otherwise.

That means, in the Calvinist system of thought, God punishes people for doing what it is impossible for them not to do and for not doing what it is not possible for them to do.

The problem is that is not just. The first reason that I reject Calvinism is because I think Scripture teaches otherwise. The second reason is that it is inconsistent with what we know to be just.

Calvinists like my seminary Old Testament professor respond to my second reason by saying that we cannot judge God by our own fallible sense of justice. My reply is that my sense of justice is fallible but at the same time it's also generally reliable. God Himself has endowed us with a moral sense that when trained is a reliable guide to assessing what is right and wrong.

Children are supposed to obey their parents. Suppose that my child is a quadriplegic and I tell him to go upstairs and get my wallet. He does not obey me because he can't. So, I punish him for that.

Out of 100 people, how many do you suppose would think that punishment unfair and thus unjust? It would probably be all 100. Even the most primitively developed moral sense would conclude that.

In the same way, it would be unjust, defined by God's own nature, for Him to punish people who are incapable of doing or not doing what He demands.

The bottom line is that election as pure Calvinists define it is contrary to everything that I personally know about the nature of God, including His love, goodness, holiness, righteousness, and justness. It's also contrary to almost everyone's natural moral sense.

Wrath

To this point, we've discussed several qualities of God that are related to His holiness. Those qualities are righteousness and justness. There is a third that we need to address now – His wrath.

I've heard people say that the God of the Old Testament is a God of wrath and that the God of the New Testament is a God of love. They mean in saying so that the God of the Old Testament isn't loving and that the God of the New Testament isn't wrathful.

They're wrong on both counts. There is only one God. And that one God is both loving and wrathful. The Old Testament reveals that He is loving as well as wrathful. The New Testament reveals that He is wrathful as well as loving.

The Bible, in other words, teaches the wrath of God. His wrath, in fact, is mentioned over 600 times in it. The following verses are examples of this: 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.

Because the Bible majors on God's wrath, we need to define accurately what it is. It is the settled opposition of His holiness to sin. As we've seen, God is perfectly and wholly moral. 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. The analogy I use is someone kicking a sleeping baby. If you saw someone kick a sleeping baby, you would you react inwardly? You'd be appalled. You would also respond outwardly. You'd call the police to have him arrested because he deserves it.

We'd react and respond that way because we're moral creatures. We would be "morally outraged" as we sometimes say it. The reaction and response come from the moral sense within us.

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

God's wrath is always just. His reaction isn't too much or too little. He never over or under reacts. His response isn't too harsh or too lenient. He never over or under responds. His reaction and response are always commensurate with the nature of the sins that are committed. His wrath is just as we previously discussed it.

But it's terrifying as well. The unknown author of Hebrews says it this way in 10:31, *"It's a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God."* I know that those aren't pleasant 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 His goodness and thus separates us from true, love, peace, and joy. That separation is partial in this life but total in the life to come.

I used an imperfect analogy to explain this in a sermon I preached about God's wrath. The analogy is the loss of a beloved spouse. My mother was a widow for almost 40 years. Two years before she died, she shared a poignant insight with me that I'll never forget. She said that she still missed my father. She described it as a strong sense of loss inside. She felt it, she explained, even when her children and grandchildren surrounded her. She was cut off from her beloved husband and still felt the loss 38 years later.

That helps us understand what the wrath of God does. It cuts us off from the One whom we were made, psychologically and spiritually, to love and be loved by. The consequence is a deep sense of loss that hurts. This loss is partial now in our earthly life. It is like my mother's in extent and degree. This loss is total in our eternal life to come. It is like my mother's in extent and degree times one million.

You can see why the Bible says what it does. God's wrath is a terrifying thing and we need to respond accordingly. There are three things that we must do in that regard.

First, we must decide to be a disciple of Jesus. We must make and carry out the decision to be with Jesus in order to learn and do all that He says. If we do, God's wrath will not come against us. If we don't, it will. It's as simple as that.

Second we must detest sin just like God does. Our culture has trivialized sin. For centuries, the church has condemned the seven deadly sins. But as rap star, Ice-T commented about them, "*These are all dumb.*" He expressed what the large part of our culture thinks about sin. There's no such thing. Lust, pride, gossip, and all the rest are in the end okay. Our culture takes sin very lightly and if we let it influence us, we will too.

Many Christians have. If you watch the promos for sitcom's and reality shows, for instance, they are almost all detestable. They promote lust, pride, greed, gossip, and more. Yet, so many professing Christians watch and relish them. If they had God's view of sin, however, they wouldn't relish them. They would detest them instead.

So, don't let the culture suck us into its trivialization of sin. We need to develop a healthy moral sense, patterned after God's. We should detest sin like does.

Third, we must fear God. I've discussed this at length before. Knowing what we know about God's wrath, we should anticipate harm if we disobey Him. That anticipation of harm in turn should be one of our motivations, along with the primary motivation of love, for moral purity.

I close out our discussion of God's wrath with this thought. His wrath is just as real as His love is. He will react and respond adversely to our sin. There is no way of escaping this.

Gracious

The counterpart of God's wrath is His grace. God is gracious.

The Bible is replete with God's graciousness from the very beginning to the very end. Both the Old and New Testaments celebrate the fact that grace verily flows from the being and essence of God to us.

The passages are legion. They include 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.

The Bible's unmistakable message is this. God is gracious and lavishes His grace upon each of us.

God's grace is defined in different ways. Packer, for instance, defines it as God's spontaneous and self-determined kindness. But my favorite definition is found in Baker's Dictionary of Theology that we used in seminary. It says this: *"The essence of the doctrine of grace is that God is for us. What is more, he is for us who in ourselves are against him. More still, he is not for us merely in general attitude, but has effectively acted towards us. Grace is summed up in the name of Jesus Christ."*

That is my favorite definition of grace and it's thoroughly Biblical. Romans 8:31-34 teaches us exactly that. Note that powerful statement in verse 31, *"God is for us."* I wrote a little note beside this verse that says, *"God is in our corner."* That's what it means that He's gracious. He's for us or in our corner. That is simply an overwhelming fact of our existence. As I go through my everyday life, God is for me and in my corner.

Because God is for us, He gives us the good things that we don't deserve and doesn't give us bad things that we do deserve. That really is the essence of grace. It is God acting to give us the good that we don't deserve and not to give us the bad that we do deserve.

Let me ask you a question in that regard. Is that true of Christians only or is it true of non-Christians as well? Is God just for those who follow Him or is He for those who don't follow Him as well?

The Bible teaches that He's for the non-Christian as well as the Christian. His "for-ness" in that regard is called "common grace."

The wise man understood this well and expressed it quite succinctly in Proverbs 29:13. God gives light, by way of the sun, to both the righteous and the wicked. Jesus picks up on this in Matthew 5:45 and reiterates what the wise man says. God is for the pagan farmer and just as surely sends sun and rain on his crops as He does on the crops of the Christian farmer. The pagan farmer doesn't deserve the sun and the rain but God gives it to him anyway.

We see God's graciousness to non-Christians everywhere around us don't we? That's one of the reasons that I don't rail against the prosperity of the wicked. I think of Hugh Hefner, for instance, and how much he has prospered financially, socially, and even physically for so many years. I used to be upset with God that he did and wondered why He didn't destroy him with lightning from above. But I look at it differently now. God has given him good things that he doesn't deserve, like good health and a bright mind, that have allowed him to prosper – despite the moral depravity that characterizes his person and life. Thus, whether he likes it or not, he is a living breathing testimony of the graciousness of God. Even though Hefner doesn't grasp it, God is for Him.

But God isn't just gracious. As we've seen, He is holy, righteous and just as well. Thus, even though He is for non-Christian, He will ultimately react and respond adversely to their sins, now or forever. As we've discussed, He will one day, maybe in this life but certainly in the life to come, permanently and totally cut Hefner and every other non-Christian off from love, peace, and joy.

That shows us that the ambience of common grace is the benefits and harms of bodily life in a fallen world. God is for non-Christians in that ambience and gives blessings and prevents harms for them just as He does for Christians.

But there is a second kind of grace – special or saving grace. This is in contrast to common grace. The ambience of special grace is the benefits and harms of our spiritual lives. I define "spiritual lives" quite specifically here. It means our power to interact with and respond to God and the realities of His kingdom.

Special grace is God's action that is directed toward giving human beings the spiritual good that they don't deserve and not giving them the spiritual bad that they do deserve.

Because God is for us, the Holy Spirit convicts and enlightens us so that we're capable of deciding to follow Jesus. Then, if we decide to follow Jesus, God gives us the good that we don't deserve, spiritual life now and eternal life forever, and doesn't give us the bad that we do deserve, spiritual death now and eternal death forever.

You can see from this definition that everything that you and I experience in our persons and lives right now as Christians is a matter of grace. We're saved by grace. We're sanctified by grace. We pray by grace. We worship by grace and so on.

But if God is holy, righteous, and just, how is He able to give us the good that we don't deserve and not the bad that we do deserve.

I would draw your attention to a sentence I read from Baker's Dictionary of Theology in that regard. T.H.L. Parker, who wrote the article on grace in it, declares, ***"More still, he is not for us merely in general attitude, but has effectively acted towards us."***

That is so isn't it. He has effectively acted toward us through the person and work of Jesus. Specifically, God the Father Himself offered His Son, Jesus, as the propitiation for our sins.

There are four verses that contain the Greek word that the NASB translates "propitiation." They are Romans 3:25, Hebrews 2:17, 1 John 2:2, and 1 John 4:10.

Propitiation is one of the Bible's cardinal tenets. What it connotes is 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, as we've seen. Consequently, His wrath must come against our sins. If it didn't, He wouldn't be just. His wrath, therefore, must be pacified. There's only one way that it can be. There must be an offering to Him that satisfies all the demands of His justice. And there is. That offering is God Himself.

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 this - the bigger the offering the better. The biggest 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 there is a radical difference and it's 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 own wrath.

Romans 5 explains what that action is. Notice these phrases in the verses: (1) verse 6 - "***Christ died for the ungodly***"; (2) verse 8 - "***Christ died for us***"; and (3) verse 10 - "***through the death of His Son.***"

Most of you know what that's all about. 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. The penalty was that Father God's wrath came against Him. Father God cut Him off completely from goodness. He totally deprived Him of His very essence - love, peace, and joy.

Take my mother's sense of loss and multiply it by a billion. That's part of what Jesus experienced on the cross and why He cried out, "***My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me.***" The cross experience of Jesus was literally hell on earth for Him. Father God's wrath that should have come against us came against Him instead."

That's what Jesus did and Romans 5:9 reveals the result, "***We are saved from the wrath of God.***" 1 John 4:10 teaches the same thing. It says that "***God sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.***" Note the word "propitiation." Do you realize what those two verses together mean? They mean that our sins have already been punished. God's wheel of justice and retribution has already been turned. His wrath has already come against us. All of this was in and through Jesus.

So that's what the word "propitiation" in the Bible means. God has pacified His own wrath by offering Himself. That is a solemn reality, the implication of which is clear. We must love God.

That God chose Himself to be the propitiation for our sins is the greatest of all expressions of selflessness and love. As John says it in 1 John 4:10, *"In this is love, that God loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins."* Such extravagant love calls for ours in return. We should love Him because He loved us.

I used an analogy in a sermon several months ago to explain this. Let me share that analogy with you again.

Suppose that one of my sons has to experience God's wrath exactly like Jesus did, cross and all, to save your life. Also suppose that both he and I have to willingly agree that he will and we do. We do agree and he goes through what Jesus did for you. If you're a functional person, you'd understand the love that it took for us to do that and you'd love us in return. What an ingrate you'd be if you didn't.

It's the same way with God and us. We should love Him because of what He did for us. So, let's love Him or at least try to. Remember that's why we're here in this class. Referring to its title, our first aim is to love God with our whole being. So, we do the best that we can to achieve that aim.

We do three things. #1 – build a vision of God. #2 – use that vision to practice His presence. And #3 – try and train to obey Him.

That, in my view, is the only appropriate response to the common and special grace of God. God is for us and thus, in more ways than one, we should make and carry out the decision to love Him with our whole being. Considering everything that we've just discussed, we're ingrates if we don't.

Joyful

We come now to the eighteenth and very last quality of God that we are going to address and discuss. God is joyful.

I begin with an observation. I have never read even one theology book that identified this quality of God. I have also never heard a sermon or Sunday school lesson about it. For some reason, people have a problem equating happiness, laughter, and joy with God. It seems almost sacrilegious to them.

But it doesn't to me. I say categorically and without any reservations at all that God is joyful. It is in fact one of the most delightful qualities that He possesses.

That is one of the reasons that the Bible talks about joy so much. In the movie *Polyanna*, Polyanna tells a preacher about what she called "the happy texts," the ones that call us to rejoice, laugh, and be glad. There are over 360 such texts in the Bible. God of course wrote those texts and they reflect this quality of His. 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 happy and joyful as He was.

Jesus was not the slow moving, slow talking stuffed shirt that so many movies make Him out to have been. Certainly, He was a man of sorrows who grieved over the sinful and painful world in which He lived. But at the same time, He was also an enthusiastic and delightful person with a highly developed sense of humor who was fun to be around.

Jesus shows us God. That 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.

Our own sense of humor and capacity to laugh are reflective of that. Let's take a few moments and let you share your favorite joke.

I have a revealing observation. You cannot tickle your dog but you can tickle your child. As the Greek philosopher Aristotle pointed out, human beings are the only creatures who laugh.

That capacity of ours is purposeful not accidental. God has made us in His image and two of the things about us that are like Him are our sense of humor and capacity to laugh. Remembering what I said about anthropomorphisms, He has a sense of humor and laughs. He experiences something like we experience when we laugh but His experience is perfect and complete.

The ostrich illustrates God's joyfulness as well as anything does. Job 39:13-18 gives us an hilarious description of the ostrich – dumb, ugly, and eccentric. It teaches us that God 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 of God.

You can see from what I've said that God gets joy from the same things that we do but to a much greater degree. That's because He's able to experience the universe and everything in it in ways that we can only dream of.

Think of it this way. Human beings are constantly "losing" themselves in all kinds of different things. That's how we say it. They are "losing" themselves in things. Those things include baseball, electric trains, the Internet, Hummel figurines, dog shows, antique cars, traveling, and much more. People lose themselves in those things and consider themselves fortunate and enriched because they do.

But God can lose Himself in things infinitely greater and more exciting than these.

Consider the pictures of the Eagle Nebula that the Hubble Space Telescope sent back in the 1990's. They showed clouds of gas and microscopic dust reaching sex trillion miles from top to bottom. Hundreds of stars, bigger and hotter than our sun, were emerging here and there in it. 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 creatures that fill and inhabit it. Aquariums excite us but imagine being submerged in the ocean and able to take in all the sights, sounds, and smells of what was happening there.

Or consider the happiest moments of your life: your graduation from college, your wedding ceremony, the birth of your first child, your game winning homerun with the bases loaded, your first big promotion at work, your surprise birthday party, and much more. Try to recapture the excitement, fulfillment, and joy of all of those events/

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 says 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." 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.

I came into church one morning whistling and Ron Aeppli said, ***"Someone must be happy today."***

That is how I picture God. He isn't a morose monarch, a frustrated petty parent, a detached disinterested creator, or an angry vindictive policeman on the prowl. He is instead the most joyous, happiest being in the universe who whistles His way, so to speak, through His day. He lives a remarkable life filled with passion and joy.

And so should we. That is what this quality of God speaks to us. Followers of Jesus should be the most passionate and joyful people on earth. There are four things that we should do in that regard.

First, we should laugh. In 1418, the Second Council of Constance passed an ordinance that said, ***"If any cleric or monk speaks jocular words, such as provoke laughter, let him be anathema."*** That is probably the stupidest ordinance that a church council has ever passed. Because God breaks through and blesses His people on a regular basis, we should have mouths filled with laughter.

We see this 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 can't help but laugh. Laughing is just as much a product of God's presence and power as love, peace, and joy are.

One of the greatest American preachers who ever lived, Charles Spurgeon, understood that as well as anyone ever has. Most of us who know about him picture him as a tight-lipped, stoop shouldered man but he wasn't. Many of his peers in fact criticized him for being so frivolous, especially in his preaching. But he answered them well. He said, ***"This preacher thinks it less a crime to cause a momentary laughter than a half-hour of profound slumber."*** He said that his favorite sound was laughter and he often roared from the pulpit.

Laughter really is the best medicine. It makes our load lighter and our Christianity brighter and we need to do it.

The second thing that we should do is play. John Wesley once said, ***"He that plays when he is a child will play when he is a man."*** Wesley understood the importance of play even to adults and we should too.

The truth is that adults and even leaders need to play. Play and the laughter that go along with it are not 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 easier to live with.

Play is nothing more than having fun. There are many different ways of playing of course because there are different ways of having fun.

We can have fun with these things: 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 bought at Gettysburg. I keep a supply of caps and every so often shoot it off just as I did when I was a boy. I play hide and seek with my dogs. I bounce a rubber ball off my garage door and pretend that I'm a Yankee short stop fielding ground balls. I fly those little toy airplanes. I shoot spit wads through straws at my grandsons and they do the same with me.

I purposely find ways to play and so should you. As Chesterton said, it will humanize you to do so and make life brighter in the process.

A third thing that we should do is joke around. When I say joke around, I mean kid each other about the incongruities, oddities, and superficial sufferings in our character and lives.

For instance, most of you know I don't use the word "Reverend" and never have. But Don Renzenbrink got a number of letters at the church mistakenly addressed to "Reverend Don Renzenbrink." I couldn't just let that go and for some time after that called him "the Rev."

For two months, in our Sunday school class in the fellowship hall, a timer in the kitchen went off about 15 minutes into the class. We always laughed when it did and expressed amazement as well - that it did that Sunday after Sunday at precisely the same time. We just couldn't figure it out - until Barb Queen let it out one Sunday that her husband, Bob, had been fixing it every Sunday morning to do so.

Sandy Mink had a stuffed gorilla in her office and it suddenly disappeared. For the next year, she got post cards on a regular basis from that gorilla who was apparently traveling the world. The neat thing was that the post cards were actually postmarked from the exotic places the gorilla claimed to be experiencing. The gorilla then suddenly appeared one day in her office just as suddenly as it had disappeared. We still to this day don't know for sure who pulled that prank. We have our suspicions but don't know for sure.

Those are samplings of joking around and believe it or not, such things are a necessary and natural part of the community of prayerful love that the Holy Spirit creates.

Listen to this observation in that regard. We've talked before about Christians fighting with each other. When Christians fight, several things almost totally disappear. One of those things is laughter. Genuinely shared laughter is one of the surest ways for human beings to come together and break the stalemates of life. It is absolutely essential to genuine community.

And one of the greatest sources of it is joking around, within reason of course. Joking around is truly part of the koinonia that the Holy Spirit Himself creates. Along with laughter, it is one of the first things that go when people are at odds with each other.

Finally, there's a fourth thing that 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. 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. Almost all of His closest friends have understood that. The universe is a divine comedy. Our call is to see and enjoy the excitement and comedy that is in it.

We do that by giving deeper thought to and drinking in the world around us.

A rooster crows. It's the sound of a trumpet – the glad announcement not only of a new morning but a new life as well, a roar of reveille and resurrection all at once.

It rains. Think of how exciting it would be if someone threw a pail of water on you. Rain is nothing more than God throwing many pails of water on you.

The wind blows your hat off and across the parking lot. It's God's game and He's challenging you to catch it. He's probably even provided an audience who are watching to see if you can.

You get the idea. The universe is a divine comedy. Develop a palate for all the joys of sense, intellect, and spirit that are in it. Let nothing in this wonderful world be wasted on you. Like more things and like them more than anyone. That is something that we must all purposely commit our minds and wills to. We'll laugh a lot if we do.

Those then are the four ways that we can be passionate and joyful just like our God is – laugh, play, joke around, and enjoy the divine comedy. Believe it or not, this please Him as much as anything that we do. Martin Luther said it well, "*It is pleasing to the dear God whenever thou rejoicest or laughest from the bottom of thy heart.*"

God is passionate and joyful. We should be too!

SUMMATION OF THE QUALITIES OF GOD

We have now finished building a purposeful, thorough, and objective vision of God. We have discussed in some detail 18 qualities of His. Let me quickly review them for you.

#1 – Spiritual: He is not made up of matter. He has the highest possible levels of consciousness and activity without a body or brain.

#2 – Self-existent: He has the power of being within Himself and thus has no origin or cause.

#3 – Eternal: He has always existed, exists now, and always will exist. There has never been a time when He did not exist or when He will not exist.

#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 all things are possible for Him because He does.

#6 – Omnipresent: He is everywhere present with His entire being all at once. His presence occupies all the space in the universe.

#7 – Omniscient: He is all-knowing. He knows literally everything that there is to know now or in the future.

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

#9 – Transcendent: He is the only one of His kind. He is a different kind of reality than literally everything else that exists.

#10 – Immutable: He is devoid of change in His character, truth, and overarching purposes. What His character, truth, and overarching purposes are now, they have always been and always will be.

#11 – Love: He always and only wills and seeks what is good for us, no matter what the cost to Him, and He emotionally identifies Himself with us.

#12 – Good: He is always disposed to do what is the 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 evil is totally foreign to Him.

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

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

#16 – Wrath: He, because He is holy, always opposes sin. He always adversely reacts and responds 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 and fun-loving being in the universe.

These qualities of God are often categorized in different ways to aid our understanding. The category that I've used in our study is competence and character. Qualities 1 through 10 are about His competence or capability. Qualities 11-18 are about His character or loveliness. All 18 together teach us that He is the only utterly competent and lovely being in the universe.

I close out our study of God's qualities with this critical point. All of God's qualities are both infinite and perfect. Infinite means that they are limitless. Perfect means that they are fully developed and without defect or flaw. Thus, God is always capable and without mistake.

Knowing God

At this point, we need to get our bearings and place what we've done in its context.

The title of our study 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, achieving that aim is a process that involves three steps. The first step is that we understand God. The second step is that we know Him. And the third step is that we love Him.

Remember that this three-step process is sequential. Each step leads to the one after it. Understanding God enables us to know Him. Knowing Him then enables us to love Him.

What we've done these past months, built a vision of God, achieves the first step. If we've heard, grasped, and remember what was taught, we now understand the God of the universe. We know what He is like.

That means that we are now ready to move to the next step in the process – knowing God. When I say knowing God, I mean having a relationship with Him, experiencing Him.

As all of us know, relationship is a two-way street. We must act to engage the person we seek to know and he or she must act to engage us. This mutual engaging leads to knowing.

WHAT PRACTICING THE PRESENCE OF GOD MEANS

God promises us in that regard that He will do His part to engage us if we do our part to engage Him. We are going to talk now about what our part is - what we must do to engage God and thus know Him.

What we must do is practice His presence. As I'll explain later, that's the central activity in knowing God. So, let's take a close look at what it means.

As most of you know by now, a 17th century French Carmelite monk named Brother Lawrence coined the expression "The Practice of the Presence of God." Brother Lawrence spent the last 25 years of his life washing dishes and scrubbing floors practicing God's presence as he did. During those years, he had conversations with and wrote letters to various people about that experience. After he died, many of those conversations and letters were brought together to form a little book titled *The Practice of the Presence of God*. This little book has profoundly impacted the lives of many including me. It will do the same for you if you read it and take it to heart.

There are two other resources that you can read along with *The Practice of the Presence of God*. Those are the booklet *The Game with Minutes* by Frank Laubach and the book *The Sacrament of the Present Moment* by a 17th century French monk named Jean Pierre de Caussade. These are life transforming resources for those who have ears that hear.

Practicing God's presence has to do with our mind. Our mind is the primary instrument by which we do it.

There's something that we need to understand about the mind in that regard. It's the place of our widest and most basic freedom. Of all the things that 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 that we have in the mind is a direct freedom. It isn't dependent on anything else. We don't have to do anything else to exercise it. We simply think of whatever it is that we choose to think of.

That implies something that all of us desperately need to know. One of the deepest revelations of our character is what we choose to dwell on in thought. It's what we choose to occupy our mind with.

Suppose that someone was able to know our thoughts and kept a detailed log of what we placed our mind on during a typical day. What would they conclude about our character from that? A related question is this. Would enough of our thoughts be about God that they would conclude that we're seeking Him with our whole being? Or would we think so little about Him that they would conclude He isn't important to us?

That helps us understand what it means to practice the presence of God. Since we are free to place our mind on whatever we choose, we choose to place it clearly and constantly on God.

Let's examine two passages of Scripture that call us to do just that.

The first is Proverbs 3:6.

Let's start with the phrase, "*in all your ways.*" That means in the totality of our lives. Let's stop for a moment and identify some of the ordinary activities, experiences, and events of our lives: taking a shower, driving to work, eating dinner, packing the children's lunches, cleaning the house, waiting on customers, standing in line at the grocery store, taking the dog a walk, and mowing the yard. Now let's identify some of the out of the ordinary activities, experiences, and events of our lives: getting a speeding ticket, being laid off from work, getting an inheritance, taking a vacation, becoming ill, being injured, moving, and changing jobs. The phrase "*in all your ways*" encompasses all of those ordinary and out of the ordinary activities, experiences, and events.

Notice what we're to do in all of our ways. We are to "*acknowledge*" God. According to Derek Kidner in his commentary on Proverbs, the Hebrew word translated "*acknowledge*" means "*to be aware of*" and "*to have fellowship with.*"

Putting the phrase together with the word, we find what God is calling us to do in this verse. Be aware of and have fellowship with Him in all of the activities, experiences, and events of our lives.

"*Being aware of*" makes clear that we do this through the mind. The mind is the primary instrument for obeying this command. Exercising the direct freedom we have with regard to it, we choose to place our minds on God in all of those activities, experiences, and events.

The second passage that calls us to place our minds on God is Psalm 16:7-8. Look closely at two phrases in particular. One is ***"My mind instructs me in the night."*** The other is ***"I have set the Lord continually before me."*** Notice what David did and that we should do – thinks about God all the time.

Those two passages define what it means to practice the presence of God. We consciously and purposely choose to place God on our minds as much as we possibly can. We choose to bring Him before our minds and keep Him there as often as we can in all the activities, experiences, and events of life. We think about Him all the time in other words.

That is what Brother Lawrence did. In one of his letters, he writes about ***"practicing the presence of God in one single act that does not end"*** and that's exactly what he did. Whether he was scrubbing floors, washing pots and pans, eating, relaxing, repairing sandals, taking communion, and so on, he thought of God. Some of his most celebrated words are these: ***"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."*** He set God before him in other words all of the time and in everything that he did.

That is our call today. Continually open our consciousness to God. Think about Him all the time in all the activities and experiences of our lives. Doing that is a matter of decision and intent. We make and then carry out the decision to think continually about Him.

But what does "continually" mean. How often can we think about Him and still function well? World acclaimed literacy expert Frank Laubach asked and answer that question 70 years ago. He experimented for years practicing the presence of God. He then concluded that we can think about Him at least one second out of every minute during the day no matter what we're doing.

But were David, Brother Lawrence, and Frank Laubach right? Isn't it unrealistic in our complex world to think continually about God? Must there not be long periods of time when other things push Him out of our minds? The answer to that question is "no." Don't get me wrong. On occasion, something may need to so intensely occupy our mind that we can't think about God. But in most of the activities and experiences of our lives, we can bring Him into our minds if we choose to.

In his remarkable little booklet *The Game with Minutes*, Frank Laubach teaches us how to do just that. It's easy reading that offers a practical methodology for thinking continually about God. Read and apply it. Your person and life will never be the same if you do.

Now, if you're like most people, practicing the presence of God is going to take a great deal of conscious effort at first. It's going to be a difficult thing for you to do. Consequently, there will be times when you're frustrated and tempted to quit.

But don't because it will get easier and even easy. What's happening is that you're compelling and training your mind to think about God. But the longer and more consistently you do it, the more natural it becomes. You will eventually get to the point that you think continually about God as effortlessly as you continually breathe.

You might compare it to a compass. When a compass is removed from nearer magnetic forces, it always turns to the North. Well, our minds become just like that once we've practiced God's presence enough. Just as the needle always points North when not within the magnetic pull of any pole, so our mind always turns to God when it isn't intensely occupied. We find ourselves naturally, almost automatically, thinking about Him.

HOW WE PRACTICE THE PRESENCE OF GOD

Now that we know what practicing the presence of God means, let's examine specifically how we do it.

Let me quickly say that we are well prepared to do it – or at least should be. We have built a detailed vision of God and now understand a great deal about Him. That understanding in turn enables us to think continually about Him.

What we do is simply take what we've learned about Him and purposely apply it and look for it in the everyday activities, experiences, and events of our lives.

The best way to explain it is to illustrate it. Here are samplings of what I mean.

#1 – My son Moses bought me a collector's set of Three Stooges DVD's for Father's Day. I can't watch those without thinking about God's sense of humor and the joy that He himself experiences with me as I'm watching them.

#2 – I hear someone set a date and think of God's eternal nature. I had a board meeting last night at the close of which we set a date for our next meeting – October 16. I thought as the date was set that October 16 isn't future for Him but present.

#3 – I eat dinner and don't thank God as much before it and as I do through it. I savor each bite and the flavor reminds me of God's 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 also enjoy and experience pleasure as well.

#4 – As I interact with my dogs I think of the great hymn that Francis wrote, *All Creatures of Our God and King*. I think that these aren't my dogs as much as they are His dogs. He created them to glorify Him and I often actually sing the first line of that hymn to them.

#5 – 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.

#6 – I enter a hospital room to visit someone and think of God's omnipresence. He inhabits that room with His entire being, making it a holy and sacred place. He is with that patient and I'm reminded of what Jesus said in Matthew 28:20, *"I am with you always, even to the end of the age."*

#7 – I drive past a courthouse and think of God the just judge who will one day right all wrongs. Or I drive past an attorney's office and think of Jesus my advocate who will one day stand with me at final judgment.

#8 – I see a stream or lake and think of God's omniscience. He knows each and every one of the trillions of hydrogen and oxygen atoms that make up that stream or lake.

Those samplings illustrate how we practice the presence of God. We simply take what we've learned about Him and purposely apply it and look for it in the everyday activities, experiences, and events of our lives. We do that purposely and continually.

Note something here. It's plain to see that the more details that we know about God, the easier and more natural it is to practice His presence. That's why we need to review and remember what we've learned in this study and build on that with our own further study.

PRACTICING THE PRESENCE AND KNOWING GOD

You may be wondering at this point why we're even discussing practicing the presence of God. What does that have to do with loving God? Let's go back to our sequence again. Understanding God leads to knowing Him, which leads to loving Him.

Practicing the presence of God is the core activity of knowing Him, of having a relationship with Him. Notice that I didn't say "only" activity.

Our relationship with God involves seven central activities. Those are solitude, silence, Bible reading, prayer, fasting, celebration, and worship. We must fervently and persistently practice those activities. They're essential to relationship with God.

But those seven activities are only effective when they come out of what I call a spiritual ambience or context. And that spiritual ambience or context is practicing the presence of God. It is the core activity.

It is that because it energizes and deepens those other activities. It provides an overall spiritual ambience in which they can meaningfully occur. It even extends the influence of those activities by bring them into the entirety of our lives.

When I was in college, I had a strict regimen for my quiet time with God. I read the Bible and prayed for 40 minutes in the morning and for 20 minutes at night. But in between those times, I rarely directed my mind to God. Those quiet times were, as a result, sterile and stale. They were obligatory responsibilities that I neither anticipated nor enjoyed.

But practicing the presence of God has changed all of that. It has infused my daily quiet time with meaning and joy and enhanced its spiritual benefits to me. Oddly enough, it has also brought quiet time itself into the entirety of my everyday life. Thinking of Scripture and prayer are a vibrant part of my everyday activities and routines. I've had the same experience with solitude, silence, worship, and the other essential spiritual activities. Practicing the presence of God enlivens those them and enhances their effects.

All of this together is what it means to know God – on our side at least. Relationship involves two or more persons directing themselves to each other. Well, we direct ourselves to God by doing the spiritual activities I mentioned in an overall context of practicing God's presence. He responds to us as we do, speaking, guiding, encouraging, informing, assisting and so on. The result is what the Christian community calls a personal relationship with God. We know Him.

Loving God

We are now ready to address the issue to which our study has been moving all along. That issue is loving God. As our sequence shows, love is the consequence of the choice we make to understand and know God. As disciples of Jesus we make and carry out that decision to understand and know. Loving God then naturally and inevitably flows from that.

That teaches us something about loving God that we, for our own sake and the sake of others, must grasp. Loving God is not a direct freedom we have but an indirect one.

I've already explained what a direct freedom is. It's the ability to do something without doing something else first. I said, for instance, that we have the direct freedom to place our minds on whatever we choose to. We don't have to do something else first. We simply choose to think about whatever we choose to think about. That is just one of the many direct freedoms that we have. Suppose that I tell you to read five verses of any chapter in the Bible. You can do that right now without doing anything else first. That illustrates that all of us have countless direct freedoms.

Indirect freedoms are in contrast to direct freedoms. An indirect freedom is the ability to do one thing if we do some other thing or things first. We can't do the one thing if we don't do the other thing or things first. But we can do the one thing if we do the other thing or things first.

The highly successful Alcoholics Anonymous 12-step program is an excellent example of this. This program has a specific objective – that people will be free from drinking alcohol. It teaches and correctly so that people cannot be free from alcohol just by trying to be free from alcohol. They don't have the ability to break its hold over them. But they will have the ability to break its hold over them if they do other things first. The ability to do that is an indirect freedom. We see that in the 12 steps themselves.

Steps 1 through 4 are about the direct freedom that all alcoholics have. That is the freedom to place their minds where they need to – on themselves as they really are and on God who can help them. Even the most addicted alcoholics can do that if they choose to. They are free to do it.

Once alcoholics learn to place their minds where they need to, they're then able to do things, steps 5 through 12, which free them from alcohol. The sequence here is critical. Steps 1 through 4 make steps 5 through 12 possible. If alcoholics skip steps 1 through 4 and do not place their minds where they should be, they're unable to do steps 5 through 12.

Breaking addiction to alcohol, therefore, is an indirect freedom. All alcoholics have the freedom to do that but only if they do something else first – direct their minds in a certain way.

That illustrates one of the helpful insights that you will ever learn. The mind is the root of most of our indirect freedoms.

That raises an issue that all of us, pastors and their congregations alike, need to understand and address. That issue is challenging people to do things directly that they can only do indirectly. I was guilty of this for years in my own pastoral ministry and most pastors still are.

What we as pastors do is this. We think and act as if people can choose to do things directly that they can't do directly. I think of all the times, for instance, that I told people to trust God, as if they could choose just to do that. Or I think of all the times that I told people to turn the other cheek, as if they could choose just to do that. Or I think of all the times that I told people to not get angry, as if they could choose just to do that.

But they couldn't choose just to do that. They had to choose to do other things first that would then eventually enable them to do that.

But I didn't know and thus tell them that. The result was that if they listened to what I said, they went out and tried to do things that they weren't capable of doing, which in turn frustrated them I'm sure.

I know it did me. Take trusting God, for instance. I heard many pastors, evangelists, and even Christians tell me to do that over the years. So I tried but couldn't do it. Something would happen in my life and I tried to trust God but couldn't. I would worry instead. And it frustrated and defeated me because I did. I always felt that I must not be committed enough because I'd trust God if I was.

I realize now what the problem is. I do have the freedom to trust God but it's an indirect freedom. I can't choose just to do that. I must choose to do other things first that eventually enable me to trust Him.

So, I'm very careful now to do two things if something is an indirect freedom. First, I make it clear to people that it is. I inform them that they must do other things first before they're able to do that something. Second, I tell them what those other things are.

Which brings us back to our first aim – loving God with our whole being. Each and every person who has decided to follow Jesus has the freedom to do that. But, it's an indirect freedom. We have to do other things first and those other things are understand and know God.

A young mother came to me one time deeply upset about just that. She wanted to love God, she said, just like the Bible said, more than anyone or anything. But she just couldn't do it. No matter how hard she tried, she still loved her children, for instance, more than Him. She felt guilty that she did and didn't want to but concluded that there was absolutely nothing that she could do about it. So, why even try? That was her resolution of the matter. I can't love God and might as well quit trying.

What was her problem? It's that she misunderstood what loving God is. She mistakenly thought that it is a direct freedom. She mistakenly thought that we can simply choose to do that without doing anything else first. She was like an alcoholic trying to do steps 5 through 12 without doing steps 1-4 first.

So I explained to her what she, and all of us as well, desperately need to know. Loving God is an indirect freedom not a direct one. All of us can love Him but indirectly.

That means that we cannot do it just by trying to do it. We have to do something else first – understand and know Him. Trying to love Him without understanding and knowing Him is like an alcoholic trying to break his or her addiction without going through steps 1-4. So, we don't do that. What we do instead is to understand and know Him.

That of course is what this study has been all about. We have learned how to understand Him. We build a purposeful, objective, and thorough vision of God. We have also learned how to know Him. We exercise the direct freedom we have in our minds and place them constantly on Him. Those two activities then cause us to love Him.

Now, this love for God that understanding and knowing Him generates has two aspects.

One is obedience. Both the Old and New Testaments directly link loving and obeying Him together. Jesus Himself declares the connection between obedience and love in John 14:15,21,23. 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 God is in direct proportion to the degree that we obey Him.

That only makes sense doesn't it. To love someone means to always and only seek his or her benefit and gain. God is benefited and gains when we obey Him. Thus, if we love Him, we will 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 have 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 aim to be on fire for Him and feel deeply about Him.

That then is what it means to love God with our whole being. It means to seek His benefit and gain by obeying Him and to 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 a pervasive and habitual love, peace, and joy. That is the ultimate consequence of achieving our first aim. We attain what every human being of every generation in history has sought – to be at home in the universe.

God is the dominant reality in the universe. Thus to be at home in the universe, we must relate rightly to Him. And to relate rightly to Him means to love Him with our whole being. It means to obey and have a deep affection for Him. Loving God then is the way and only way to fulfill our greatest desires.

Conclusion

We have now concluded our six-month study entitled *The First Aim*. A particular issue now confronts each and every one of us. Was this study a merely academic exercise for us or simply the first step in a life defining and life changing experience of loving God?

Each of us will choose to make it one of those two. I challenge you to make it the second. Rehearse and remember what we've discussed about God and practicing His presence. Then go out into the everyday routines of your lives and live consistently with that.

The study itself is not an end but a means to an end. Now, that it's over, I hope and pray that each of us will use it to achieve that ultimate end – loving God with our whole being.