

Understanding Theology in 15 Minutes A Day for 40 Days

Day 8

What Characteristics of Himself Does God Share With Humans?

Even the characteristics of himself that God shares with humans—communicable attributes—are not quite the same in us. All of these are perfect in God but imperfect in people. Nevertheless, it is with regard to these attributes that we as humans can most relate to God.

Justice/Righteousness

Closely related to God's holiness is his *justice* or *righteousness*. Both English words are used to translate the Hebrew and Greek terms that are biblically applied to this aspect of God's being, and while they share a moral sense, there are other nuances as well.

First, a person is said to be "righteous" if he personally conforms to moral standards, that is, obeys laws. In this sense, God's righteousness is essentially the same as the moral aspect of his holiness (see chapter 7). God perfectly conforms to the moral laws that reflect his nature in the first place.

Second, a person is said to be "just" if he rightly applies moral standards to other people and situations. This is the job of judges, whom we all hope are just. Considering this specific facet of God's being, the meaning of his righteousness/justice is that he requires all morally responsible creatures to conform to his own perfect morality, and he judges accordingly if they do or do not—he rewards the righteous and punishes the unrighteous. God, the judge of the universe, is always a just judge (Genesis 18:25; Deuteronomy 32:4; Psalm 51:4; Revelation 16:5–7). And this is at least reflected in us all, for we have a built-in sense of right and wrong and long for justice. Even very young children are known to say, "That's not fair!"

It isn't unusual for God himself to be charged with unfairness. The prophet Habakkuk struggled with God's justice when he thought God was overlooking the sin of his people and also when God told him he would use a pagan nation to punish his sinful people (Habakkuk 1:3–4, 12–13). Job struggled with God's justice for allowing him, a righteous man, to suffer extensively (Job 9:14–22).

Most of us feel this way at times, when something God is doing (or not doing) strikes us as being unjust. Those are the times when we must remember that no matter what we're thinking or how we're feeling, God *is* just. He knows everything we do not know and has wisdom we lack. We must trust him always, and never more so than when we struggle. That is exactly the point of Habakkuk (3:17–19) and Job (42:1–6).

We're also to keep in mind that a day is coming when God will render perfect and eternal justice (Acts 17:31; 2 Thessalonians 1:5–8); let us be content to wait for that (Isaiah 30:18). We must also remember that God calls us to be just as well. We are to treat all people with equal fairness (Isaiah 1:17; Amos 5:24; Micah 6:8).

Love

“God is *love*” (1 John 4:8, 16), and so he acts in love. The exodus is the great Old Testament symbol of this; because of God's love, he redeemed his people from enslavement in Egypt (Deuteronomy 7:7–8; Hosea 11:1). The cross is the great New Testament symbol; because of God's love, he sent his own Son to die for sinful people (John 3:16; Romans 5:8; Galatians 2:20).

What does love mean? Here is a generally accepted definition: Love always does what is best for the object of love, regardless of the cost. If you really love someone, you will *desire* the best for them, and to the extent that you can, you will *do* what is best for them—even when they may not think it is best and even when it may require self-giving and even sacrifice.

Love was what motivated God to send Jesus Christ to die for our sin so that we could have what is best—God himself! He paid the highest price for our well-being. Many of us grew up singing, “Jesus loves me; this I know,” so we can easily take God's love for granted. But we should battle against this. In fact, we should be stunned by the very thought that *God loved us so much* that he gave his only Son to bear his wrath in our place.

God rightly expects us to love and obey him because he loved us first (John 15:15; Romans 5:8). He wants us to channel his love to others (Matthew 22:39; John 13:34–35), even to the extent of dying for them (1 John 3:16) and even when they are enemies (Luke 6:27–35).

Mercy and Grace

Closely related to God's love is his *mercy* and *grace*, which really are two sides of the same coin. God's mercy means he is good to those who are suffering, even when that suffering is the

result of their own sin. Biblical words such as *compassion*, *longsuffering*, and *kindness* illustrate this point (Exodus 34:6–7; Psalm 103:8–11; Luke 1:77–78; Philippians 2:27). Another way of describing God’s mercy is that he does *not* give us what we *do* deserve. Though we all deserve to suffer because we are sinful people, God, in his mercy, helps us patiently, kindly, and compassionately. It’s clear to see that his mercy is closely related to his love for us.

God’s grace refers to his goodness toward those who ought to experience his judgment, that is, he *does* give us what we do *not* deserve. “Unmerited favor” or “blessing” is a shorthand definition. Again, we do not deserve—we have not earned—anything good from God. But because he is gracious, he gives us his goodness (Romans 3:24; Ephesians 1:6–7; Titus 2:11). This is why we receive salvation through Christ totally apart from anything we do (Romans 3:27–28; 11:6; Ephesians 2:8–9; Titus 3:5–7).

As with God’s love, we must never take for granted God’s mercy and grace demonstrated through Jesus Christ. When we remember we are sinners who deserve punishment and can do nothing to impress God, that he is just, owes us nothing, and ought to give us what we deserve—eternal death—grace becomes truly amazing.

Not only are we saved by grace but we also live as saved people through God’s grace by the power of his Holy Spirit within us. This is one of the themes of Paul’s letter to the Galatians, who, even though they knew they had been saved by grace, had been duped into thinking that the rest was up to them (e.g., Galatians 3:1–6; 5:4, 16–18). The point is our lives as Christians are totally dependent upon God’s grace from beginning to end. This also means that just as God has shown us mercy and grace, so should we treat others in the same way. We should care for others in need and do what we can to alleviate their suffering. We should treat others better than they deserve to be treated, even those who have mistreated us.

INTERESTING FACT

Another aspect of God’s love for the righteous is his discipline. The writer of Hebrews (12:5–6) quotes Proverbs: “My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastens everyone he accepts as his son.” While discipline is not enjoyable initially, God does it for our good because it brings about greater holiness (vv. 10–11). That is what love does.