

Wheelersburg Baptist Church

Life Application Sunday School Class

The Attributes of God Series

Session 1 – "The Means to Knowing God"

June 9, 2002

"A spiritual and saving knowledge of God is the greatest need of every human creature."

- A.W. Pink

I. The Schedule of Topics

Date Topic Key Scripture

June 9 "The Means to Knowing God" Jeremiah 9:23-24

June 16 "The Uniqueness of God" Exodus 15:11

June 23 "The Sovereignty of God" Ephesians 1:11

June 30 "The Decrees and Immutability of God" Malachi 3:6

July 7 "The Omnipresence and Omniscience of God" Psalm 139:7-10

July 14 "The Holiness of God" Isaiah 6:1-7

July 21 "The Justice and Mercy of God" Romans 3:26

July 28 "The Love and the Wrath of God" Romans 9:13

II. What are divine attributes and why should we study them?

The American Heritage Dictionary defines the word attribute as follows:

Attribute - A quality or characteristic belonging to a person or thing; a distinctive feature; An object associated with and serving to identify a character, personage, or office.

Attributes are the qualities and characteristics that define a person. How do we determine the attributes of another person? It comes by observing their words and actions. Words and actions are a product of a person's character and nature. They are an exposition of the inward being of that individual. For example, an honest person demonstrates honesty in his dealings with others. A person with wit demonstrates that attribute through his clever speaking. An artistic person displays that attribute through producing works of art, or writing a story, or painting a picture. Holy acts have their origin in a principle of holiness, and truth comes from one who is truthful. Loving actions come from a loving person. Thus we see that works and words

display attributes. To know the true nature and character of God, we must know His attributes, and to know His attributes, we must observe His words and actions as recorded in Holy Scripture. The foundation of all true knowledge of God must be a clear mental apprehension of His perfections as revealed in Holy Scripture. Our aim is to determine from God's words and works what qualities, dispositions, determinations, and powers He has revealed to us.

Our purpose in this study is to come to know Him better. This study is intended to be more than just mere intellectual expansion and stimulation. We don't just merely want to know more facts about God, but come to know Him in the Biblical sense. God, our heavenly Father, desires that we come to know Him intimately. Because He is infinite and eternal, this pursuit of knowing Him has no end. Knowing God is an essential element of His purpose for us. God has saved us to display His image and glory in the earth. If you want to be like someone, you certainly need to get to know them well. God's purpose in revealing Himself is to affect a change that will result in His glory. Whenever a person is faced with the revelation of the true God, they are always affected. The revelation of God to an individual will either serve to glorify God's mercy and grace through their lives as they respond in faith and repentance, or serve to glorify God's justice in His judgment of their indifference or resistance to that revelation.

III. Why should we pursue a greater knowledge of God?

Listen to this prayer of the Apostle Paul in Colossians 1:9-12.

9 For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. ¹⁰ And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, ¹¹ being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light.

Paul was constantly asking God to fill fellow believers with spiritual wisdom and understanding, and knowledge of God, so that they might live fruitful lives abundant in good works, and be ever increasing in their relationship and knowledge of God. It is only through knowing God that we can stand strong and endure trials and hardship in a way that glorifies Him.

Our strength to live the Christian life doesn't come from our own wisdom, riches, or intellect, but rather from a close, abiding relationship with God. Jesus said in John 15:5 that apart from Him we can do nothing. Spiritual strength doesn't originate from within us. It comes from abiding in Him. This abiding comes through knowing Him, and knowing Him comes from understanding and assimilating what He has revealed about Himself as contained in His Word.

We must not only know the true God to be strong, we must also know God to worship Him acceptably. Listen to the words of Jesus, as He spoke very plainly to a Samaritan woman in John 4:

John 4:21-24

21 Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. ²⁴ God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."

Jesus made it clear to this Samaritan woman that there is only one true God, one true worship, and that the Father only seeks one type of worshiper, the one who worships in spirit and in truth. To worship God in truth, we must know the true God as revealed in the Word. Otherwise we will worship a god manufactured from our own fallen thoughts and concepts, which is equivalent to idolatry which is an abomination to God.

Turn to Exodus 32. I want you to take special note of something from the account of the golden calf and the children of Israel:

Exodus 32:1-8

*When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, "Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him."² Aaron answered them, "Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me."³ So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. ⁴ He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, "**These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.**"⁵ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, "Tomorrow there will be a **festival to the LORD.**"⁶ So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry. ⁷ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. ⁸ They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have **made themselves an idol** cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.'*

Note carefully what these people did. In their minds, they hadn't forsaken the true God. They called their perverted acts a festival to the Lord! They had fashioned a god to their own liking, and then called it the God that had delivered them from Egypt.

Before we become too critical of the Israelites, I fear that we have all been guilty of the same practice. Whenever we retain false concepts of God; concepts from our religious tradition, or from our shallow understanding of the Bible, or just from our own deceitful hearts, that god of our thinking becomes the god we worship. We are guilty of idolatry. What I am about to say may sound shocking, and may even be offensive to some. But I believe that it illustrates our deep need to pursue a true knowledge of God as revealed in His Word.

Many have fashioned a god in their minds that has little resemblance to the true sovereign, omnipotent, almighty, unchanging God of Scripture. This modern day god is a feeble, grandfather figure who is at the mercy of the whims and will of sinful men. He is a god who asks permission before he tampers with our lives. He is a pathetic whimpering figure who begs for men to accept Him, but seems powerless to accomplish any change in them unless they are willing to cooperate. He can be accepted or rejected, and ready to thank anyone who will accept him, and is pleased even with the slightest amount of attention or interest.

This is an example of why we must submit our thinking to the Scriptures, and allow the truth to tear down such abominable idolatrous concepts and cleanse our minds of such vain and destructive thoughts. The true God of the Scriptures bows the knee to no creature. He is the Supreme Ruler and Sovereign over all creation, including every man, woman, and child. He brings all of His will to pass in every detail, having ordained and decreed His purpose from before the foundation of the earth. He is all powerful. He is holy. There is none like Him.

Listen to the words of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4: *"His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation."³⁵ All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: "What have you done?"*

We need to ask God to show us His holiness, justice and righteousness. Then we will understand His utter hatred of sin. When we see God for who He is, we will also see ourselves aright, apart from His grace,

undone sinners under His wrath. We will recognize that our righteous Creator that has every right to demand our obedience. As we gaze upon His perfection, then will we recognize our desperate condition, and our utter inability to meet His high and holy demands. Only when we recognize the true divine character will we also see our true condition, under His condemnation and wrath and in desperate need for mercy and salvation.

This revelation of the divine character forms the background for understanding grace. We see that this God who brings His will to pass has ordained and decreed to have a people for His own praise and glory. According to Ephesians chapter 1, He has chosen this people from among all tribes and nations and kindreds to display His glory, goodness and mercy. He sent His Son into this world to redeem this people, to set them free from their wickedness and rebellion by bearing the guilt and punishment for their sins. We see the beauty and grace of God in the person of Christ, who offered His very life upon the cross to purchase this chosen people, and then rose from the dead as confirmation that the work was completed and accepted by the Father. God effects this great work of salvation by His Spirit, that effectually calls this people to repentance and faith as this great gospel of Christ is proclaimed. He adopts these chosen as His sons, seals them with His Spirit, and keeps them until the appointed day when He will bring this great salvation to fullness and manifest His glory through their changed bodies.

The degree of our appreciation for this great plan of salvation will be in direct proportion to our knowledge of the author and finisher of our faith.

IV. How do we get to know God?

We cannot come to know God through our thoughts and intellect. Psalm 94:11 says

11 The LORD knows the thoughts of man; he knows that they are futile. Inward contemplation and speculation is vain and fruitless. Our own thoughts will not lead us to God. In fact, our thoughts will lead us away from God, and cause us to deny the revelation that God gives.

Isaiah 55:6-9

6 Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near. ⁷ Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon. ⁸ "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. ⁹ "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

It takes meekness and humility to get to know God. We must be teachable, and willing to lay aside our thoughts, emotions, opinions, traditions, preconceptions, and sentiment and yield to God's revelation in His Word. Many today have minimized the Word of God, and are trying to know God through their feelings, experiences, and general revelation. What a pity and shame. God has provided a sufficient, complete revelation of all we need to know for life and godliness in His precious, inerrant Word. We're just asking for deception and heartache when we go looking other places to find and know Him, especially into our own deceitful hearts.

Why is it that we can't get to know God and find Him by our own reasoning, wisdom, and understanding? Doesn't the Bible teach that creation reveals God? Why can't we come to an intimate knowledge of God by looking at creation?

The problem isn't that God is hidden. The problem is our spiritual condition. Left to ourselves, we don't want to know God because we are depraved. Listen to the first chapter of Romans:

Romans 1:18-23

18 The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness,¹⁹ since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.²⁰ For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.²¹ For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.²² Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

This passage teaches that God is clearly revealed in nature. The problem is our response to that revelation as sinners. Because our nature and our hearts are wicked, we suppress that revelation. We refuse to acknowledge God and fall before His awesome power in worship and submission. It's not that we don't see God, it's that we do see Him and refuse to submit to Him and glorify Him because we are wicked. As we suppress the truth that is so evident, our hearts become even more corrupt and darkened, our thinking becomes perverted and vain, and we start to worship each other and the creation instead of the Creator. This is why to have any hope of knowing God, He must intervene in our lives.

For us to know God, He has to produce a fundamental change in our nature and heart. Only then will we properly respond to His revelation and come to know Him. Only then will we respond to His call, and exercise the faith and repentance necessary for salvation.

This is why the general revelation of God through creation alone cannot save us. A saving knowledge of God comes only through the specific revelation of the gospel of Christ to our hearts. The gospel is the truth about Jesus Christ, and is all about what He has done to save wretched sinners. God uses the proclamation of the gospel to save sinners. As it is proclaimed, the Spirit of God comes and effectually calls and quickens those that God has chosen to be saved. Listen to Jesus words in Matthew 11:25-29

Matthew 11:25-29

25 At that time Jesus said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children."²⁶ Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure.²⁷ "All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

For us to know the Father, the Son must choose to reveal the Father to us. And He does just that. He reveals the Father to those who come as little children, spiritually poor, crying for mercy, forsaking their own wisdom and ideas. They come heavy laden and laboring under sin and dead religion, ready to forsake all of this vanity for that wonderful treasure that God has opened their eyes to see.

I Corinthians 1:18-25

18 For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.¹⁹ For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."²⁰ Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?²¹ For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.²² Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom,²³ but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.

Verse 21 says that we can't come to know God through our own worldly wisdom, or philosophy, or intelligence. No, God calls His chosen through the preaching of the cross, which is foolishness to those who are perishing, but is the power to bring salvation to those who God has chosen and effectually called. Why has God chosen to do it this way? Continue in verse 26:

26 Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.²⁷ But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.²⁸ He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are,²⁹ so that no one may boast before him.³⁰ It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.³¹ Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."

Paul goes on in chapter 2, and explains how as believers, we continue to get to know God. Now that we are saved, we don't revert to our own thoughts and thinking. We depend on the Spirit of God and God's thoughts (which are recorded in His Word), to teach us about God.

I Corinthians 2:6-16

6 We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing.⁷ No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began.⁸ None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.⁹ However, as it is written: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him"—¹⁰ but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.

The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. ¹¹ For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. ¹² We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. ¹³ This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. ¹⁴ The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. ¹⁵ The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment: ¹⁶ "For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.

I challenge each of us to submit ourselves to the revelation that God has provided, and to ask the Spirit of God to teach us and impart a deeper relationship with our Savior and God.

II. What are divine attributes and why should we study them?

- A. Definition of attribute
- B. Attributes define the person
- C. Our purpose in the study is to come to know God.
- D. Knowing God is an essential element in His purpose for us.

III. Why should we pursue a greater knowledge of God?

- A. We are exhorted to pursue it. Colossians 1:9-12
- B. We can stand strong and endure trials in a way that glorifies God. John 15:5
- C. We must know God to worship Him acceptably. John 4:21-24
- D. We need a true knowledge of God to avoid idolatry. Exodus 32:1-8
- E. A revelation of the divine character forms the background for understanding grace.

IV. How do we get to know God?

- A. We cannot know God through our own thoughts and intellect. Ps 94:11; Is 55:6-9
- B. We cannot come to know God through general revelation of creation. Rom 1:18-23
- C. To come to know God, we need a fundamental change in our nature and heart.
- D. For us to know the Father, the Son must reveal Him to us. Mt 11:25-29
- E. We can't understand the gospel apart from an effectual call. I Cor 1:18-25
- F. As believers, we can only come to know God better by the Spirit I Cor 2:6-16