

# Wheelersburg Baptist Church

Life Application Sunday School Class

The Attributes of God Series

Session 5 – *"The Immutability of God"*

July 14, 2002

## REVIEW

In our first session, we introduced the subject of God's attributes. God's attributes are various aspects of who He is. In this series of lessons, we are considering the attributes of God to gain a true concept and knowledge of God by considering His self revelation in His Word. It is only by God's Spirit applying His Word to our hearts that we can know Him. A true knowledge of God does not come by discovery, or by human reasoning, philosophy and musing, but rather by revelation. When the true God is revealed to our hearts, it will produce a reverential fear and worship in our hearts. Such true worship is expressed in a confidence and faith in God, and in holy living.

In our second session, we examined the uniqueness of God. God is solitary, self existent, stands alone, needs nothing, is complete within Himself, superior to all, and has created all for Himself and for His good pleasure, and not out of necessity. God is self-sufficient.

In our third session, we contemplated the sovereignty of God, which is the exercise of His supremacy over all. God's sovereignty is an expression of His uniqueness, for He alone is supreme and holds absolute control over creation. He answers to none, does as He pleases and always as He pleases. None of His will is frustrated, and He brings all things to pass in accordance with His sovereign plan.

In our fourth and most recent session, we surveyed the holiness of God. TP Simmons states *"The holiness of God is His perfect moral and spiritual excellence. God is perfectly pure, sinless, and righteous in Himself. Holiness is the ground of all other moral attributes in God."* The basic meaning of the word holy is separate. God stands alone and is unique in His moral excellence. Even the holy angels that worship at His throne cover their faces in His presence. He stands above all in His utter perfection of moral character. We looked at three divine/human encounters; Moses at the burning bush, the call of Isaiah, and the revelation given to the apostle John. Whenever the human encounters the divine, the human response is awe, fear, and worship. When sinners appear before a holy God, they stand guilty, exposed and naked, facing wrath and judgment. An understanding of God's holiness brings such deep appreciation to our hearts for the cross of Christ. As the holy and perfect sacrifice, He bore the judgment and wrath of God on our behalf that we might stand before God in Christ accounted as righteous and absolved of our sins. We see that in Christ alone we have entrance and audience before our most Holy God.

## INTRODUCTION

Today we are going to look at the immutability of God. What is the meaning of the term "immutable"? It basically means unchanging. God is unchangeable in His nature and purposes. The immutability of God is clearly stated and established in the Scriptures.

## THE SCRIPTURES AFFIRM THAT GOD IS IMMUTABLE

Let's read three passages that establish this attribute. First, in comparing God with creation, the Psalmist writes the following in Psalm 102:24-28:

*24 So I said: "Do not take me away, O my God, in the midst of my days; your years go on*

*through all generations. <sup>25</sup> In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. <sup>26</sup> They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. Like clothing you will change them and they will be discarded. <sup>27</sup> But you remain the same, and your years will never end. <sup>28</sup> The children of your servants will live in your presence; their descendants will be established before you."*

We know that God is eternal. To say that God is eternal is to say that He exists outside the constraint of time. Time was created by God for us. What is time? Time is really just a measurement of change. It is an expression of the rotation of the earth in relation to the sun. Before the dawn of creation, the immutable God existed alone. Therefore in eternity past, there was no time. So to say that God is immutable is just another way to state His eternity.

Second, listen to the classic passage on God's immutability in Malachi 3:6:

*6 "I the LORD do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed.*

Think about the relationship of God's immutability with His infinity and perfection. He cannot increase, because that would imply that He is not infinite. He cannot decrease, because then He would no longer be infinite. He cannot get better, for that would imply that He was not already perfect, nor can He get worse, because He would no longer be perfect. He has no need to learn or acquire knowledge, for then He would not be all knowing. God does not even need to think or reason, because He already knows everything perfectly.

Third, listen to James in James 1:16-17

*16 Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. <sup>17</sup> Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.*

Notice how God's goodness, purity, and perfection are related to His immutability. He can give nothing but good gifts, because He is always good, and remains good, and never varies or changes from that goodness. John 1:5 says that God is light and in Him there is no darkness at all. He is an unchanging beacon of pure light and goodness. His absolute holiness is related to His immutability. He is totally, 100% pure, with no change or alteration in that purity or perfection.

Not only is God unchanging, the Scriptures affirm that His plan is immutable. Let's consider a few passages that teach us about the unchanging nature of God's purpose, plan, and promises. Listen to Numbers 23:19

*19 God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?*

Because God does not change, the implication is that we can rely completely on what He says. God's promises are a revelation of His plan, and because His plan does not change, His promises will always be fulfilled and come to pass.

One reason that we struggle with trusting God and taking Him at His word is because we think that He is like us. We change. We are not steadfast. At times, we do not keep our word, and we do not always have the ability to fulfill our desires plans. But God is not like us. He never changes, is always the same, always keeps His word, and is completely powerful and able to fulfill all that He has promised. Listen to 1 Samuel 15:29

*29 He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a man, that he should change his mind."*

Consider this. God has decreed all that He has planned to come to pass. All that He will accomplish has been established before the foundation of the world, and because He does not change His mind, what He has decreed in eternity past will come to fruition. Another passage, Psalms 33:11

*11 But the plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations.*

Again, this is why we can rely completely on Him to accomplish what He has promised in His Word. But someone may ask, "What about man's plans, and doings? Don't they frustrate and change the purpose of the Lord?" Listen to Proverbs 19:21:

*21 Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails.*

Finally, let's consider one final passage concerning the unchanging purpose and promises of God. Turn to Hebrews 6:13-19. Again, we're looking at how God's immutability is related to His purpose as revealed by His promises:

*13 When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, <sup>14</sup> saying, "I will surely bless you and give you many descendants." <sup>15</sup> And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised. <sup>16</sup> Men swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. <sup>17</sup> Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. <sup>18</sup> God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged. <sup>19</sup> We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, <sup>20</sup> where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf.*

Why can we be secure in our salvation? How can we rest in peace and know for certain our eternal destination? Where is our anchor when all about us seems to be in turmoil, and people falling away at our left and our right? Our hope is rooted in the unchanging promises of God. God has granted us salvation solely based on the work of Jesus Christ, who entered the holy of holies in heaven and sprinkled the mercy seat with His blood. Our entrance into heaven has been secured by Christ, who gave His life as a propitiation for the sins for all that God purposed to save, those that God chose in eternity past to be His people, vessels to express His mercy and glory and praise forever. Our security is based in God's promise to save all that are in Christ. If God has effectually called you and placed you in Christ, then He unchanging purpose is to safely bring you home. And if God has decreed it, nothing in heaven or earth can change that plan. If you have been justified, then you surely will be glorified.

Now we are going to turn a corner, and examine some passages that seem to teach that God does change His mind and purpose in response to man. We must interpret and understand these passages in the light of what we have just learned, so buckle your seat belts – here we go.

Turn to Exodus 32. Moses is on the mountain with God. The people were tired of waiting for him to return, so

they got with Aaron and fashioned a golden calf, and bowed before it, and committed idolatry. They basically had a pagan religious festival in the Lord's name, and worshiped this idol of their own making. God sees this abominable activity and speaks to Moses, starting in verse 7:

*7 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. <sup>8</sup> 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.'*

*9 "I have seen these people," the LORD said to Moses, "and they are a stiff-necked people. <sup>10</sup> Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation."*

The Lord in His righteous anger threatens to judge and destroy them for their spiritual adultery and rebellion. But acting as a true mediator, Moses steps in:

*11 But Moses sought the favor of the LORD his God. "O LORD," he said, "why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? <sup>12</sup> Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. <sup>13</sup> Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: 'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.'" <sup>14</sup> Then the LORD relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.*

On a surface examination of this passage, it appears that Moses changed the mind of God. How do we reconcile such passages with what we just learned concerning the immutability of God and His purpose? It is clear from other passages that God does not act in accordance with man's desires or will, nor are His actions dependent in any way on ours. Consequently, this passage cannot teach that God changes His sovereign purpose in response to man. Consider this. If God's ultimate purpose was to destroy this people in response to their wickedness, why would He first bring the situation to the attention of Moses? Why would there even be such a dialog? Would He not just sent forth His judgment immediately and consume all of the rebels? Obviously, His sovereign plan in this incident was to answer the prayer of His servant Moses on behalf of the people, and stay His judgment and show mercy. God had only threatened judgment, and not decreed it. In fact, Moses beseeches God for mercy by appealing to the promise made to Abraham, which was a previous declaration of the established purpose of God. From the human perspective, it appeared that God changed His mind. From Moses' viewpoint, God seemed to change direction. But from the divine perspective, this was the path ordained from eternity past. But what we need to also see is that God's plan included the intercession and prayer of Moses. If you read further, you will see that this plan also included the preservation of those who repented, and the destruction of those who persisted in their rebellion.

So why does the passage say that God relented, and seemingly imply that God changed His mind? Such passages are recorded and written in human terms so that we might be able to better relate to God. It is similar to anthropomorphic passages that refer to God having arms, ears, and eyes. God does not really have human parts, for He is spirit. Such language is used so that we might be able to understand and relate. In this passage, we understand God's great anger toward rebellion and sin, and that such sin and disobedience will always result in judgment unless there is an intercessor and sacrifice. God does not discover man's actions, and then respond accordingly. He is not taken by surprise. He is omniscient, and knows the end from the beginning. God does not change. He is always pleased with righteousness and displeased with sin, for that is His eternal, unchanging nature. Passing from God's displeasure to His pleasure happens when a change occurs in man, not in God.

Listen to this statement from Bancroft's Theology: "*God's unchanging holiness requires Him to treat the wicked differently from the righteous. When the righteous become wicked, His treatment of them must change. The sun is not fickle or partial because it melts wax and hardens the clay - the change is not in the sun but in the objects it shines upon. When a man bicycling against the wind turns about and goes with the wind instead of going against it, the wind seems to change, though it is blowing us as it was before"*

Let's consider one other passage that display this same principle.

*Jonah 3: <sup>1</sup>Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, <sup>2</sup>"Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you." <sup>3</sup>So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three-day journey in extent. <sup>4</sup>And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day's walk. Then he cried out and said, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" <sup>5</sup>So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. <sup>6</sup>Then word came to the king of Nineveh; and he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes. <sup>7</sup>And he caused it to be proclaimed and published throughout Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them*

eat, or drink water. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. <sup>9</sup>Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish? <sup>10</sup>Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it.

The question to consider is this: Who actually changed in this account? Was it God or the Ninevites?. It was the people that changed, and turned from their wickedness unto God. God is not arbitrary in His just wrath and anger toward sinners. He will always judge and punish all evil, for He is no respecter of persons. But this passage clearly teaches that God is also longsuffering, and patient, and that His patience is a display of His willingness to forgive and have mercy on those who will repent and turn away from their wickedness and to Him.

The rest of the story is that this: It was God's eternal plan to save Ninevah. He sent His prophet to preach judgment, and through his message produced repentance in the hearts of those wicked people. For a sinner to be willing to change his ways, God must first change his heart. No matter how long God waits, and no matter what appeals are made, no matter what threats of divine judgment come, no one would ever turn away from their sin and to the Lord unless they have a changed heart. And only God can change a heart of stone into a heart of flesh. In the words of Jesus to Nicodemus in John 3, you must be born again to see the kingdom of God.

Now let's turn to Matthew 23:37-39 and consider this passage concerning Jesus' sorrow and lament over the Jewish people:

*37 "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. <sup>38</sup> Look, your house is left to you desolate. <sup>39</sup> For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"*

Is this an admission of inability of Jesus to gather ones unto Himself because they refuse to come? Did Israel's unwillingness to submit to God and His prophets and the Messiah thwart God's purpose? Is God incapable of saving those who are not willing to come to Him? Based on the whole council of God as revealed in all of Scripture, we have to say emphatically no. All that the Father has chosen for Himself will be saved. Listen to just one of many passages that teach that truth: John 17:1-3:

*John 17: <sup>1</sup>Jesus spoke these words, lifted up His eyes to heaven, and said: "Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You, <sup>2</sup>as You have given Him authority over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to as many as You have given Him. <sup>3</sup>And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.*

Jesus grants eternal life to all that the Father has chosen and given to Him. Each elect sheep is called by name, and shall be protected from the evil one and saved for eternity. God's immutable purpose will stand, and none can alter that course. But with that stated, we need to also understand that God takes no pleasure in the judgment of the wicked. For certain, His justice and holiness demands punishment, and He will be vindicated and glorified by the expression of His wrath toward rebellious sinners. But the joy and delight of heaven is in the salvation and resulting repentance of sinners. Jesus said He had not come into the world to condemn it, but rather to seek and save the lost.

Listen to the prophet Ezekiel, in [Ezekiel 33:10-11](#):

*Ezekiel 33: <sup>10</sup>"Therefore you, O son of man, say to the house of Israel: 'Thus you say, "If our transgressions and our sins lie upon us, and we pine away in them, how can we then live?" ' <sup>11</sup>"Say to them: 'As I live,' says the Lord God, 'I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?'*

God hates and despises sin and its consequences, which is eternal judgment. Yet according to Romans 9, He endures the vessels of wrath fitted for destruction for reasons of His own purpose and plan. We need to see that this passage in Matthew 23 is not an expression of failure, but is rather an expression of the Son of man's sorrow over the rejection of God by His chosen nation. Jesus foresaw the judgment that Jerusalem would face, and was deeply grieved. It is the same response that we experience in our hearts as we proclaim the good news of Christ, and watch people turn away. It is the same grief that we feel as we see those that we love suffer the consequences of their rebellious actions and refusal to submit to the Lordship of Christ. Christ fully realized the end facing those that had for centuries rejected the prophets, and now the Messiah of Israel. Within this passage is expressed a great mystery, that at times God expresses a desire for something that He does not ultimately decree and choose to bring to pass for His own unchanging purpose and glory.

In conclusion, here are some application questions to stimulate discussion:

1. Since God is unchanging, what is the purpose of prayer? Is it to change God's purpose or mind? How should we pray in light of today's study?

To answer that question, I quote from TP Simmons:

Prayer does not change God. It changes us and the things and circumstances with which we have to do; but it does not change God. We shall never have the right attitude toward God so long as we think of prayer as a means of getting God to do things that He did not intend to do. We must pray according to His will if we expect to get an answer. I John 5:14 states "This is the confidence that we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us." It is the Holy Spirit that causes us to pray, and we should look to him for direction and leadership as we pray. Romans 8: <sup>26</sup>*Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.* <sup>27</sup>*Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God.*

Prayer then is the work of God in our hearts getting us ready for the most profitable use and grateful enjoyment of His blessings. It is God's key that He uses to unlock the floodgates of His blessings. God ordained prayer as one of the means of accomplishing His will. Prayer no more changes God than the faith of the repentant sinner changes God. Both are simply the means in the working out of God's eternal and immutable purpose. A primary objective in our prayers should be to seek and discern the wisdom, will, and purposes of God. As we ask and pray in accordance with God's revealed will, we are assured that He will answer us. In fact, there is nothing that can prevent the answer from being fulfilled, because it is in accordance with the unchanging purpose and plan of God.