

EQTH105 Basic Bible Doctrine

Unit 1 Reading 1

Estell, “Introduction to God’s Attributes”

Presented by the



LANCASTER BIBLE COLLEGE
CAPITAL SEMINARY & GRADUATE SCHOOL

For Use by the

Blue Letter Bible Institute

[Web: Study.Bible](http://Study.Bible)

A Ministry of the

Blue Letter Bible

[Web: BlueLetterBible.org](http://BlueLetterBible.org)

Introduction to God's Attributes

by Scott Estell¹

We are about to embark on one of the most important journeys of our lives—a quest to understand and know God.² There is no greater pursuit. As God Himself says in Jeremiah 9:23-24: Thus says the LORD, “Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me.” It is generally agreed that the best way to learn about God is to study His attributes. Before studying individual attributes of God, however, we must first understand what an attribute is. In this lecture, we will define what an attribute is, attempt to classify God's attributes, and determine which, if any, of God's attributes is the most basic one.

What is an Attribute?

Simply put, an attribute is a word which describes what someone or something is like. We use the word “attribute” (n.) when describing what God is like because attributes are words which we “attribute” (v.) to God. To attribute is to ascribe or assign something to someone. We ascribe or assign various words to God which describe what He is like.³

God's attributes are not like the individual pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, which, when put together, make God what He is. Rather, each attribute completely describes what God is like. In other words, God is not part holy, part love, etc.; rather, He is completely holy and completely loving, etc.

God's attributes are intrinsic to His being. In other words, they are that which make God what He is; He would cease to be God without them. God is what His attributes are. “When we speak of the attributes of God, we are referring to those qualities of God which constitute what He is” (Erickson, p. 265). “Attributes are qualities that are inherent to a subject” (Ryrie, p. 35). “The attributes of God are those distinguishing characteristics of the divine nature which are inseparable from the idea of God” (A. H. Strong, quoted in McCune, p. 87). Attributes are not that which God has, but that which God is.

Classification of God's Attributes

In order to help us better understand God's attributes, it may be helpful to classify or categorize them. God's attributes can be divided into two distinct categories:

Attributes of greatness

Attributes of greatness are those attributes which God possesses exclusively. They are descriptive of God and God alone. Theologians sometimes refer to these as “incommunicable” because they cannot be

¹ Source: <http://www.freesundayschoollessons.org/systematic-theology/the-attributes-of-god-lesson-1-introduction-to-gods-attributes/>

² Because God is “incomprehensible,” we will never (not even in glory) fully understand and know Him. This is because God is “infinite,” while we are “finite.”

³ A caveat is in order at this point. I am using the verb “attribute” in a certain, restricted sense. Technically, we don't “attribute” anything to God. As Ryrie (p. 35) states: “God's perfections are known to us through revelation. Man does not attribute them to God; God reveals them to man.”

communicated to (i.e., shared with) mankind. Examples include God's sovereignty, omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence.

Attributes of goodness

Attributes of goodness are those attributes which God possesses to a perfect degree and which may be found to a limited degree in mankind. Theologians sometimes refer to these as "communicable" because they can be communicated to (i.e., shared with) mankind, though not to the same degree in which they are found in God. Examples include God's wisdom, holiness, love, mercy, grace, and justice.

The Supreme Attribute

Theologians have debated for centuries as to whether or not God has a supreme attribute, i.e., one which is more basic to His character than all the rest. Though God possesses all of His attributes to a perfect degree, there does seem to be one attribute which best characterizes the person we call God and which governs or regulates the other attributes. It is the attribute of holiness. See [Isaiah 57:15a](#). Holiness "may be said to be a transcendental attribute, that, as it were, runs through the rest, and casts lustre upon them. It is an attribute of attributes" (John Howe, quoted in Pink, p. 42). As we will learn more fully in a later lesson, the basic idea behind the word "holiness" is that of separation. God is separate from everything else in both a metaphysical (what He is) and moral (what He does) sense (thus, holiness is in actuality both an attribute of greatness and goodness). There is a vast chasm between God and man. This gap is commonly referred to as the Creator/creature distinction (cf. [Psalm 50:21](#)). As mentioned above, God's attributes of greatness are absolute—there is no human corollary to them. Furthermore, though God's attributes of goodness are reflected in man, the reflection is so dim that it almost defies comparison. Thus, fundamental to a basic understanding of God and His attributes is a proper understanding of the attribute of holiness.

Summation

What is an attribute? An attribute is a word which describes what someone or something is like. God's attributes can be classified into two categories: His attributes of greatness (not found in man) and His attributes of goodness (found in man, though to a very limited degree). The attribute of holiness is God's most basic attribute.