

Communicable Attributes of God

By Bob Young

Incommunicable attributes

In a previous article, I wrote about ten incommunicable attributes of God. We humans can never be like God in these areas.

- God's "omni" attributes: all-knowing and all-wise; all-powerful; always present (in both time and space)
- God's YHWH attributes: self-existent (beyond creation), eternally existent (beyond time), self-sufficient (beyond need)
- God is infinite: immeasurable, incomprehensible, immutable, and sovereign--unlimited, unrestricted, boundless, absolute, supreme. Sovereignty is more than ultimate power; it is God's ultimate, unconditional totality.

Communicable (moral) attributes¹

The communicable or moral attributes of God are those attributes God shares with us.

Another, perhaps more understandable, way of saying it is that these are attributes we have in common with God. When God created human beings, he endowed us with these attributes.

They are part of our dual nature—biological creatures capable of living on this planet and "image of God" creatures who are like God. These communicable attributes make us like him.

These are reflected in the creation account. This is how we were created, as "image of God" people according to his likeness.

To say that God shares these attributes with us does not mean that we have them to the same extent that God has them. Neither does it say that we could have them apart from God. These are possible in our lives because God has given them to us. He created us in his image.

To make these easier to remember, I usually think of them in two sets of five. The second five are the attributes that get most of the attention when one reads about the moral attributes of God. The first five may be less familiar, but in Scripture it is clear that we also share these attributes with God. The second five relate to the traditional meaning of morals as principles of relationship. The first five are what make it possible for us to be moral beings.

- Living. God is living; we are living. God is alive; we are alive. The God of life gives us life. He gives life, sustains life, and makes possible eternal life. God in Jesus conquers death and demonstrates that he is immortal. Human creation is also immortal, not in the sense of living physically on the earth forever, but in a spiritual or eternal sense. This does mean that he makes us self-existent, but that he makes us participants in eternal life. Living means more than capable of living on this biological planet—we are both living beings (Gen. 2:7) and "image of God" people with spiritual existence (Gen. 1:26-27).

¹ The word moral speaks of standards of conduct or of right and wrong. "Mores" are customs or accepted norms of behavior in the context of a society. Because conduct involves interactions and relationships, morals are related to relationships.

- As God is mysteriously and inexplicably triune, he creates us also as body, soul, and spirit (1 Thess. 5:23 is one biblical example; other verses speak of human beings as body and spirit or body and soul.)
 - God creates us as persons capable of relationships [moral beings]. God is capable of relationship, and exhibits community in his triune nature. We are social beings, made to live in community.
 - God made us with the ability to communicate—to make promises and commitments. This is a part of our relational ability.
 - God originally created everything “good.” God originally endowed his creation with his own goodness. This is a human capacity even when it is not a human reality.
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- Holy, totally separated from sin. The root meaning of the word means set apart for a special purpose or function, i.e. holy oil, holy water, holy days. God’s holiness reflects his purity. The all-power God is able to maintain total separation from sin and all forms of impurity. God through Jesus’ sacrifice makes it possible for us to be declared holy.
 - Just. This word means characterized by “justice” but in the New Testament it is also the word righteousness. We are declared righteous because of Jesus.
 - Mercy. This signifies compassion and forgiveness when punishment is deserved. In the Old Testament, this word (chesed) is sometimes translated loving kindness or steadfast love.
 - Grace. Grace is related to gifts or something received. Grace is thus undeserved, “unmerited favor.” Grace is extended without considering the merits of the recipient. What inheres in the word grace is “unmerited” or “unconditional” giving—the extension of a gift. Those same concepts, when applied to the reception of gift, do not inhere in the word. Gifts that are freely extended without merit and without condition must be received.
 - Love, keeping steadfast love, forgiving. This is a distinct concept from mercy or grace, but in an older, traditional model of explaining God’s nature, they are often combined as one of three descriptions of God’s nature—holy, just, loving/merciful/gracious.

Just as one’s understanding of God is incomplete without considering all of these attributes in combination—living, triune, relational, communicating, good; holy, just, merciful, gracious, loving—so also our understanding of God’s plan for human beings is incomplete without considering all of these attributes. To say that God is love while ignoring his holiness and justice gives a distorted view of God. In the same way, to say that we are to be loving toward one another without considering that God also calls us to justice and holiness gives a distorted view of God’s will for his human creation.

Many more lessons could be drawn from a careful study of these ten communicable attributes of God, but the purpose of this article is to identify them and to describe them briefly.