

Jason Upchurch - Systematic Theology - Theology Proper - Oneness and Simplicity

Turn to Deut 6:4-9. This morning we return to our semi-regular study of systematic theology. We began looking at Theology Proper last time. Theology proper means that we are actually studying God himself. We're not focused on the Bible (Bibliology) or the doctrine of salvation (Soteriology) or last things (eschatology), although God is involved in all those things.

But Theology Proper asks the specific question: What does the Bible say about God himself? Who is God? Or what is God?

And last time we defined God using the 1689 London Baptist Confession: "God is a Spirit; infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth." The Westminster Confession says the exact same thing.

And we unpacked that definition just a little bit. The rest of our time we talked about that the purpose of studying theology proper isn't to arguing or boring naval gazing or speculating. The purpose is to actually know who God is by what he has told us about himself.

If you think about a resume. The goal of a resume is to get people who don't know you to understand who you are and what you do. You're trying to communicate a very specific set of information to other people. It's not all the information that could be revealed about you - there's always more that could be said. But what you write down has been very intentionally selected and crafted so that other people can know you specifically in the way you want them to.

That's how we should understand God in the Bible. He has very intentionally written these things down about himself so we can know him in our fullest capacity. Is this all there is to know about God? No; God is infinite so there is always more to know about him. But what we have here is written, like a resume, specifically by God so we can know him how he wants us to know him.

And the more we know about God, the more we will worship him truly and rightly. That's why we are slowly working our way through systematic theology: to know God and love God as a result.

Now, in the months to come we'll get to all the classical attributes of God: the omnis (omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent, so on), love, mercy, others.

By the way, systematic theologians have a really hard time deciding just how to approach the doctrine of God. Why? Well, God is infinite and so trying to figure this out is hard.

But this morning we're going to focus on just 2 things. The oneness of God. We'll look at that first and then we'll spend some time talking about just one of the names of God.

1. The Oneness of God. What do we mean by the oneness of God? Well, we mean two things and we'll unpack them both. First, we mean that there is only one God. There's not 3 or 5 or 743 or 3 billion like the Hindus believe. We believe that there is just one God.

Second, when we say we believe in the oneness of God what we mean is that God exists in perfect unity. We call this divine simplicity. We'll talk about that in a bit, but I think both of these are going to be helpful to focus on as we think about God this morning.

And, again, I want to encourage us as we study this to ask the Lord to open your mind and your heart to want to know who he is more. That these things we're looking at are not to scrutinize God and nit pick him but to try to understand his vastness and greatness.

So let's talk about the fact that there is only one God. This is basic to our Christian faith: in all of the universe there is only 1 God. **Read Deut 6:4.**

This is the **John 3:16** of the OT. This is the verse every good Jewish boy and girl would have memorized from the time they could talk because this is fundamentally who God is. And we'll get into this when we talk about the names of God in a little bit, but here it's important to understand that Moses is using God's own name here.

When you see LORD in all caps, it's actually Yahweh in the Hebrew indicating his name. Lord is a title, Yahweh is a name. Like pastor is my title or dad is my title, Jason is my name. Here, Yahweh is our God, Yahweh is one.

Two truths that are inseparably welded together. Yahweh is our God and Yahweh is one. He is the only one. There are no other gods out there on any level. No one else who can be legitimately called God in any sense. No one who matches Yahweh.

In the ancient world people believed in all kinds of gods. In the Bible you'll see reference to Ashteroth, of Milcom, Dagon, Baal, Chemosh, on and on. People believed that they were all real divine beings.

People still believe in all kinds of gods. Hindus believe in millions of gods. There's a presidential candidate right now who talks about god all the time - in fact probably more than anyone else and if you didn't know any better you'd swear he's a baptist or something. But he's Hindu and believes in millions of gods. I'm sure he believes in Yahweh - but Yahweh among all the rest.

Oprah believes that everyone is divine in some manner. All kinds of people believe in Norse mythology - the pantheon of gods of Oden and Thor. Not just in Marvel comics, but in reality. Mormons believe you can become a god and create a world where the people you make can also become gods. And so forth.

I think your average garden variety pagan believes that it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you believe in whatever god you want. Just be sincere and that's okay.

And the reality is that that's not true. The fundamental teaching of the Bible is: In the beginning God - one, singular God - made the heavens and the earth.

We call this monotheism. Mono meaning one, theism meaning God. We are one-God people because that is the truth, that is the reality. Which is a radical statement because what we're saying is that every single person who believes in some other god is absolutely, fundamentally wrong.

They are worshipping nothingness. They are worshipping something out of their own imagination or someone else's imagination. **Turn to Isa. 41**

This is God talking about the futility of idols and the state of those who worship them. **Read 41:21-24**

This is meant to be funny. God is mocking idols. Come on down and tell me what you know. Tell me of the former things. "Tell me about the past" says God. Tell me what happened millennia ago. Ironically even humans can talk about the past. But God says that idols can't tell us anything about the past. Why? Because they don't exist.

He also says "Tell me about what is to come" in **Vs. 22-23** What that means is that part of what it is to be God is to have exhaustive knowledge of both the past and the future. That's central to God's own definition of what it is to be God: can you tell someone about the past and can you tell them about the future?

"Do good or harm" do something, anything to let us know you're real.

What is the book of Genesis? It's a record of the past. No one was there when God created, so he gives us the information. How do we know about these guys like Noah and Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Moses? How do we know anything about the past? Because God - the only God - told us.

How do we know about the future? How do we know Jesus is coming back and there's a judgment and there's rewards and there's a New Heavens and New Earth? Idols can't tell us that. Only a God can, and since there's only one God all of our source of information comes from him and what he chooses to reveal..

By the way, people who choose idols are not just sort of morally neutral in the eyes of God. Look at what God says about them. **Read 24**

An abomination is someone who is detestable to God. The interesting thing here is that usually it's the idol itself that God calls an abomination. Who's he calling an abomination here? The person who chooses the idol. What's an abomination? It's something who God despises. Idolatry is not some sort of innocent mistake. Idolatry is offensive to the true and living God. Those who commit idolatry are offensive to God.

And by the way, before we were saved we were all idolators. It may have not been a trinket on the shelf we bowed down to. But it was something we functionally worshipped until God in his grace rescued us from our sin. **Turn to Isaiah 43.**

This is God talking about the reality that he is Israel's only Savior and that he is the only God. From Isa 40 through the end of the book it's God's testimony of his own grace and salvation of the Jews. And tucked into all of that is God making it clear that he is the only God. **Read 43:10-13**

Now, just as a side note I underline these verses here in **Isa**. In case I'm talking to a Mormon because they need to understand that there are no other gods. And this is a great place to take them because over and over God is so clear.

There is no god that existed before God. And he's not making any gods. Where did God come from? Nowhere - he is the one who has always existed! He is eternal, he is the uncreated one. When your kids ask you where God came from you can just tell them "That's what makes God so special: he's always existed. He always lives."

And what he's saying here is that there was a time when Israel acknowledged that reality. There was a time when there was no strange god among them. Now they're filled with false gods and that's why he's judging them. **Look at 44:6-8 Read**

Same thing. God is clear, there are no other gods. And interestingly, God is challenging any other god to make himself known. "If you're out there, show yourself!" Nothing.

God couldn't be any clearer: there are no other gods. Our God - who is one - tells us specifically that he doesn't know of any other gods. Now, think about that. That is either unconditionally true or it's not.

If there are other gods, and God knows about them, what does that make God? A liar.

Or if there are other gods and God doesn't know about them, what does that make God? Not omniscient. Either way it's bad.

See, the Mormons say there are other gods. And I'm not trying to pick on just Mormons, but in our society they're the ones we'll meet most often who say there are multiple gods. In other societies people believe in multiple gods too. So this is just as applicable. But in America, for the most part, people are monotheistic.

Here, our God says he doesn't know of any others. So what polytheists are saying is that they are smarter than our God. Because God says there are none and he doesn't know of any.

God then goes on to give a parable. And it's a silly parable. But it shows the ridiculousness of idolatry. It shows just how foolish it is to make an idol and worship it. **Read 9-11**

So God is saying that idolatry is not only foolish, but one day God will terrify the idolators. He will frighten them in judgment. **Read 12-20**

This is the ridiculousness of idolatry. The foolishness of saying there are multiple gods. If you make your god out of wood, how do you know which part to bow down to and worship and which part to burn to keep your house warm and cook your meat with?

If it's metal you've got this blacksmith who works really hard to make it by his sweat and strength. He finally gets it all done - this piece of metal he made - and then he falls down and says "save me."

It's comical. And the judgment of **Vs. 20** is that what you're holding in your right hand is a lie. That's what you're worshipping: deceit and lies. **Read 20**

They're all lies. **Read 45:5-8, 46:8-11**

Same thing. Over and over. **Turn to 1 Cor. 10** for a minute. This is where Paul is talking about eating meat sacrificed to idols. Remember all that? And the gist is basically that in a pagan culture they would often sacrifice their animal to an idol. So if you're in the meat market looking for some ribeye, don't ask where the meat came from.

If you know, then you're complicit. If you're ignorant, you're fine. But the reason we can't eat meat offered to idols is because that would be taking part in this wicked act. Here's what Paul says. **Read 19-22**

So when people offer sacrifices or worship to idols, who are they really worshipping? Demons. There's no divine person back there, but there is a spiritual reality.

Put another way: Allah is demon. Buddha is a demon. Ancestral worship is worship of demons. The Unitarian god of unbelieving Jews is a demon - Jesus himself says that unbelieving Jews worship in the synagogue of Satan.

Here's the irony of that: Even demons believe that God is one - and they shudder. **James 2:19**

Demons have a good theology proper. They know God is one. They know what they're running with this idolatry stuff is a total sham to lead people away from the true and living God.

God is one. All other so-called gods are demons and non-gods.

Now, most of us know this. I don't think too many of us have a problem with that.

Here's where we need to be careful as Christians. As Trinitarian Christians.

And we'll talk about the Trinity...well a long time from now. But we will. But how many gods do we worship? One. We are monotheists. One-god-ists.

We worship the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They are 3 persons, but 1 God. It's easy as Trinitarians to become Tri-theists in our thinking. That Jesus is a god, the Spirit is a god and the Father is a god. I mean we see them interacting with each other. Jesus prays to the Father and the Spirit descends on him. So it can seem like there's a sense in which there are 3 gods.

But we have to be very clear, there is only one divine being: God is one. But there are 3 divine persons: Father, Son and Spirit. There is only one God, eternally existing in 3 persons.

How does that work? I have no idea. The Father is fully God, the Son is fully God, the Spirit is fully God. But they are the one God. Three in one, one in three. Eternally existing together.

You want an analogy. Here's the perfect analogy. Imagine there's one God out there who created all things. But imagine there are 3 persons that make up that one God. That's my analogy. Perfect isn't it?

Our cry, along with the saints of old, is “Behold, O Israel, Yahweh our God. Yahweh is one.” And only one. And only ever one.

Now, here’s the other thing I want to mention about that. If you’re taking notes, write this phrase down: Divine Simplicity.

What is that? Well, usually when we think of simplicity we think of something that’s simple. It’s easy or straightforward. That’s not what we’re saying about God. God is infinite and beyond searching out.

What we mean by Divine Simplicity is that God is not made up of parts. God just is.

So imagine a puzzle. How we often think of God is like a puzzle with all these pieces. We’ve got the piece of omniscience here, and a piece of justice over here, and we’ve an edge piece of grace, and a corner piece of mercy. And if we just put all these pieces together we have God.

That’s not how it works. There are no pieces of God. He has no parts. Even when we talk about the attributes of God we’re not talking about God like he’s a car with the brakes of peace over here and headlights of sovereignty up front and muffler. No.

But we often talk about God like that. Imagine talking about a person like that. I went fishing with Jim last week. And let me tell you about the love of Jim. Jim’s love is good. And the knowledge of Jim is vast on the subject of fishing. Jim is omnifishing - he’s always fishing.

If we described Jim like we often described God it would be really weird. As though somehow we’re dividing up Jim into his attributes. But that’s not it works. Jim is just Jim.

Jim loves fishing and he knows a lot about it and he goes a lot.

In the same way, when we’re talking about God don’t forget we’re talking about a being - three persons - but one being. And God just is these things. God is love, he is just, he is omnipresent. But those aren’t puzzle pieces; they’re just descriptions of the one God.

And the one God has all of those attributes in infinite fullness.

God is infinitely holy. Infinitely just, loving, merciful.

There has always been this weird bent among heretics to somehow pit the attributes of God in the OT against the attributes of God in the NT. And so you’ll hear people say “The God of the OT was mean and judgmental and angry all the time, the God of the NT is so nice and loving.” Really? Have you heard Jesus call the Pharisees sons of hell and read Revelation where he’s stomping on his enemies and the blood is splashing everywhere?

And have you read in the prophets how God took Israel like a abandoned child and brought her in and showed her grace upon grace even though she forsook him?

Because God is one - divine simplicity - God has always acted and will always act according to his same nature at all time. There’s no change in God. And some of his attributes aren’t more important than others. They’re all just apart of who he is.

I’ll give you an actual analogy this time. Imagine a diamond. It’s just a singular object made out of exactly one element: carbon. How could we describe this diamond? If you go into a jewelry shop it’s the 4 Cs of diamonds: cut, color, clarity, carat. I had flashbacks of engagement ring shopping 21 years ago.

So we can describe this object in various ways. How clear it is: is it smoky or pure? We can talk about how much it weighs - that’s the carat. We can talk about the shape: princess cut or oval or pear or heart? We could talk about the color of the diamond. We could talk about the weight of the diamond - how big it is.

But at the end of the day we're not talking about different parts of a diamond. We're simply describing different attributes of what this one object is in its unity.

That's what the doctrine of simplicity is getting at. Yes, God has all these attributes. But they're not pieces of God. They are ways of describing the one glorious being of the God we serve and fear.

Now, we'll get to the names of God next time. But for now think about this: there is only one infinite, magnificent, glorious God who is a knowable being in three persons. And that same God has mercifully made himself known to us. He didn't have to. No one made him.

All on his own he gave us a glimpse of his goodness and grace. And invites us to know him more and more through his Son, Jesus.

Pray