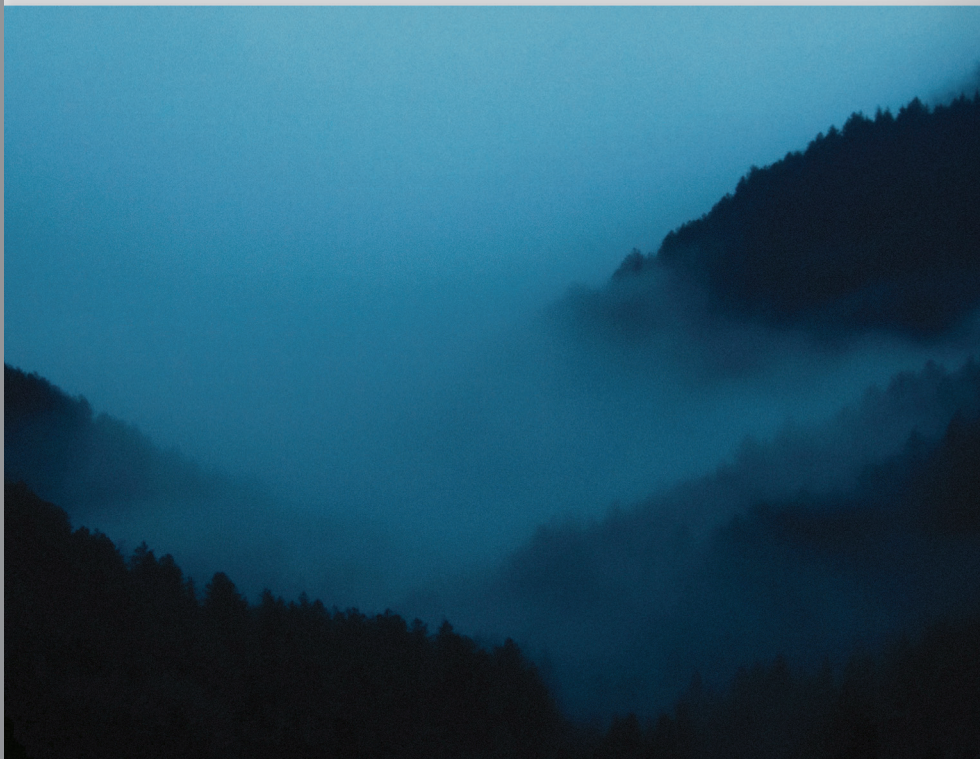


S T U D Y G U I D E



The Attributes of God

by R.C. Sproul



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LIGONIER MINISTRIES

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Introduction

In the Book of Proverbs we read, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov. 9:10). In order to fear God, however, we must know something about who He is. A desire to know more about our God should be the desire of every Christian. Yet we must never seek such knowledge with the wrong motivation. The study of the nature and attributes of God is one of the most awe-inspiring studies any human being can engage in, but the depths of the subject have led many to be puffed up in their minds and filled with pride.

As a Christian begins to learn more about the nature and attributes of God, his response should be humble adoration, praise, and worship. The knowledge of God gained by the Christian cannot be an end in itself. It is to draw closer to God in loving faith. There are millions today who, like the ancient Athenians, are worshiping an “unknown god.” The Christian is not to be one of them. The Christian is called to know God, to love God, to fear God, and to worship God.

May this series enable you to continue growing in the knowledge and fear of the living God.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "R.C. Sproul". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned to the left of the printed name.

R.C. Sproul

Ice Cream Cones & The Study of God

MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

Who is God, and how do we as finite human beings conceive of Him? In this lesson, Dr. Sproul explores the ways in which believers think about God. He introduces the doctrine of the incomprehensibility of God and the nature of human language as it attempts to meaningfully express the nature of God.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. To understand the limited nature of our images of God.
2. To be able to define the doctrine of God's *incomprehensibility*.
3. To introduce the idea of *anthropomorphic language*.
4. To understand the importance not merely of knowing about God, but of knowing God Himself.

QUOTATIONS

We know God but as men born blind know the fire: they know that there is such a thing as fire, for they feel it warm them, but what it is they know not. So, that there is a God we know, but what He is we know little, and indeed we can never search Him out to perfection; a finite creature can never fully comprehend that which is infinite.

— Thomas Manton

There is infinitely more in God than the tongues of men or angels can express.

—Thomas Brooks

LECTURE OUTLINE

I. Introduction – The Ice Cream Cone Game

- A. Close your eyes and try to imagine a visual image of your favorite kind of ice cream cone.
- B. What kind did you imagine?
- C. The point of this game is to see that we can, in fact, create mental images in our mind's eye.

II. The Game – Part Two

- A. Close your eyes and think in terms of concrete images; what do you visualize when you think of God the Father?
 - i. The image from the Sistine Chapel
 - ii. Light
 - iii. A rainbow
 - iv. A shepherd
 - v. Christ
- B. This experiment has been done in numerous settings with different age groups and different types of people, yet it is difficult to discern a difference in the types of answers people give.
- C. When it comes to our ability to imagine the character of God and to think concretely about God, humans tend to think alike.

III. Examining the common answers from the Game

- A. An old man on a throne – Many have this image, but do we believe that God really is an old man like the image on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel? No.
- B. Light – Although this is a common biblical image, is God identical with light? No.
- C. A rainbow – The rainbow is a sign of God's covenant with Noah, but is God a rainbow? No.
- D. A shepherd – This too is a biblical image that communicates aspects of God's character, but do we believe that God is a literal shepherd? No.
- E. Christ – Jesus does say that those who have seen Him have seen the Father, but Christ is not identical with the Father.

IV. What do we learn from this experiment?

- A. Whatever image we have of God the Father cannot comprehensively grasp His essence.
- B. Yet all the images we have suggest something that is meaningful about God to us.
- C. This is important because when we begin the study of God, the very first thing we teach under the heading of "theology proper" is the doctrine of the incomprehensibility of God.
 - i. The term "incomprehensibility of God" can be somewhat misleading.
 - ii. It does not mean that we have no way of knowing anything about Him.

- iii. It means that no human mind can fully comprehend all that God is.
 - iv. It means that our knowledge is not exhaustive.
- V. The doctrines we learn are expressed in concepts; concepts are expressed in words; and these words are symbols.
- A. The word “God” is a symbol.
 - B. Neither the word “God” nor the vocal sound “God” captures God.
 - C. God is not the word “God.”
 - D. Even our true statements about God are not God.
 - E. What we want to do ultimately in our study of theology is not just to know about God, but to know God.
- VI. The one common thing among all the images people come up with is that they are anthropomorphic.
- A. Anthropomorphic language is language communicated in human forms.
 - B. All of our language about God is anthropomorphic because we are *anthropoi* — human beings.

STUDY QUESTIONS (MULTIPLE CHOICE)

1. The point of R.C.’s “Ice-Cream Cone” Game is to see that we can, in fact, create _____ in our mind’s eye.
 - a. Theological concepts
 - b. Mental images
 - c. Comprehensive concepts of God
 - d. Anthropomorphic language
2. Having done the “Ice Cream Cone” exercise with numerous groups, R.C. concludes that when it comes to our ability to imagine the character of God and to think concretely about God, we have a tendency to be somewhat _____.
 - a. Alike
 - b. Abstract
 - c. Different
 - d. Vague
3. The very first thing we teach under the heading of “theology proper” is the doctrine of the _____ of God.
 - a. Infinity
 - b. Inconceivability
 - c. Holiness
 - d. Incomprehensibility

4. "Incomprehensibility" means _____.
 - a. No human mind can fully comprehend all that God is.
 - b. Man has no way of knowing anything about God.
 - c. Man's knowledge of God is real but inadequate.
 - d. Man's knowledge of God is comprehensive.

5. The doctrines we learn are expressed in _____.
 - a. Symbols
 - b. Anthropomorphisms
 - c. Concepts
 - d. Analogies

6. The word "God" is _____.
 - a. An Anthropomorphism
 - b. Incomprehensible
 - c. A symbol
 - d. All of the above

7. Even our true statements about God are not _____.
 - a. God
 - b. True
 - c. Adequate
 - d. Analogous

8. _____ language is language communicated in human forms.
 - a. Symbolic
 - b. Anthropomorphic
 - c. Anthropological
 - d. Metaphorical

BIBLE STUDY

1. What are some of the more common biblical images of God? Provide specific examples.
2. What is the basic truth communicated by each of these images? Where does the analogy between the image and God break down?
3. What does Jesus mean when He tells Philip, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9)?
4. How do we know from Scripture that the incomprehensibility of God does not mean that God cannot communicate truth about Himself to man?

5. What do the following Scriptures have to say about the difference between knowing about God and knowing God Himself?
 - a. John 5:39–40
 - b. James 2:19
 - c. 1 John 2:3–6

6. What are some specific examples of anthropomorphic language in Scripture? Is it accurate to say that the entire Bible itself is written in anthropomorphic language to one degree or another?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. If all human language about God is anthropomorphic, is the word “God” itself anthropomorphic? What does it mean to say that the word “God” is language in human form about God?
2. Were the images you had of the Father similar to those discussed in the lecture? Would the same general observations apply?
3. Why do we have such a difficult time imagining God the Father? Do we have the same difficulty forming a mental image of the Son?
4. Do you believe it is possible to speak or think about God without forming some type of mental image? If we do so, are we violating the second commandment?

APPLICATION

1. What does your mental image of God communicate to you about your understanding of God?
2. What does your mental image of God communicate to you about yourself? Why do you think this way about God?
3. How can you more fully conform your concept of God to the truth of God Himself?

SUGGESTED READING FOR FURTHER STUDY

Bavinck, Herman. *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol. 2*
Bray, Gerald. *The Doctrine of God*

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