

The Incommunicable Attributes of God: Immutability

Psalm 102:25-28; James 1:17

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn to HCC on August 25, 2013

Introduction

- ❖ It is often said that the one thing in life that never changes is change. There was a Greek philosopher (Heraclitus) who once said: *Nothing endures but change*. What he meant was that nothing lasts, nothing stays the same, expect for the fact that everything changes.
 - ▶ If you look around the world, it's definitely true. **We live in chaotic world where things are constantly changing.** Fashions come and go. What's "in" today is "out" tomorrow. All of us have looked at old photos of ourselves and thought, "What was I wearing?" And the crazy thing is that outfit was fashionable at the time. Everyone was dressed like that! So trust me, those clothes you're wearing right now, you'll look back to regret it. Face it, things change.

- ❖ And when it comes to technology, change occurs at lightning speed. What's considered cutting edge right now will be obsolete in a year. I love my iPhone 5. It's perfect. But in a few weeks the next iPhone is rumored to be released, and I can just predict that my phone will suddenly lose its shine. Suddenly it'll feel too heavy or too slow or the camera is suddenly too grainy. Suddenly I'll feel the need to upgrade. Fashion and technology change all the time, and for that reason so do our tastes, our wants, and our needs.

- ❖ As the world changes, we change with it. Our weight changes. Our health changes. Our appearance changes as we age. People change their thinking. People change their attitude. People change their personality. Now much of our change can be for good but also for worse.
 - ▶ People change sides. People change loyalties. People change their minds. That's why you get hurt and disappointed by those you thought you could trust. That's why marriages fail and business agreements are broken. In fact, that's the very reason why covenants and contracts are made in the first place. It's because people change.

- ❖ **And it's because we live in a world of change, that all of us, deep down, are longing for stability.** We all long for something or someone reliable. Someone sure and steady. Someone who won't let us down. Who won't fail. Who will always be there, no matter what, steady like a rock. It's like we're all floating in a sea of change, and we're grasping for a permanent, immovable, unshakable Rock – a Rock upon which we can anchor our souls knowing we're going to face constant waves of change from within and without.
 - ▶ And that Rock, my friends, is the immutable God of Creation. **This is where God's immutability becomes so relevant to our lives.** Today we're concluding our series on the incommunicable attributes of God. These are the attributes that God does not share (communicate) with his creatures made in his image. He reserves these attributes uniquely to himself as the one and only Creator.

- ❖ So far we've studied God's independence, his eternity, and his omnipresence. Today it's his immutability. First, I'll define what that means. Second, I'll demonstrate where this attribute is taught in Scripture. Third, I'll draw out implications of God's immutability for our everyday lives.

Defining God's Immutability

- ❖ Let's begin by defining terms. The word 'immutability' comes from the Latin *mutare* meaning 'to change'. So something is mutable (it mutates) if it changes in form or nature, but it's immutable if it does *not* mutate. It does *not* change in form or nature.
 - ▶ **So in theology, when we speak of God's immutability we're referring to the unchangeableness of his nature.** His essential being never changes. It's consistent. And likewise, we'd say the same regarding God's character, his purposes, and his promises. These are four immutable aspects of our unchanging God.

- ❖ Now the Bible commonly describes God as a Rock. He is also called a fortress, a refuge and a stronghold (Ps. 18:2). These are metaphors meant to communicate that God is stable while the world is not. God is reliable while people are not. God is constant while life is not. God is a Rock that does not change.
 - ▶ **But just because God is a rock, it doesn't mean he's impersonal or inactive.** In affirming his immutability, we have to be careful to avoid a static view of God that strips him of any personality or the ability to personally relate to creatures like us.

- ❖ In calling God a Rock, we don't want people to walk away with a view of God that is so lifeless that he really is no more than a rock. *Because really, how can you have a personal relationship with a rock? How much love can you have for a rock?*
 - ▶ So here is a definition that attempts to keep a balance: **God is immutable in that he does not change in nature, character, purposes, or promises; and yet God is neither indifferent nor impersonal, for he responds and relates to mutable beings with reliable consistency.** This is the definition we'll work with.

Demonstrating God's Immutability

- ❖ Now let me demonstrate God's immutability from the Scripture. We'll start with the first aspect. **1) God is immutable in his nature.** This means God in his essence, in his very being, does not change for better or worse but remains exactly the same.
 - ▶ **But some would disagree with this view of God and claim that it's the result of Greek philosophy's influence on early Christian theology.** They argue that such a view of God can't be defended biblically. That it's a philosophical conclusion, not a biblical one. So what do we say? Is immutability taught in Scripture? I believe so.

- ❖ Look at **Psalm 102:25-27**. Here the psalmist is contrasting God against creation, specifically the heavens and the earth. Look at v25, "*Of old you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands.*" Notice how the psalmist purposely chose two objects that are commonly thought of as constant and unchanging. We just assume the heavens and the earth will always be around.
 - ▶ Yet read on in vv26-27, "*They will perish, but you will remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away, but you are the same, and your years have no end.*"

- ❖ In other words, everything in creation admits of change, but God the Creator is the one thing that never changes. According to J.I. Packer, “*the first and fundamental difference between the Creator and His creatures . . . they are mutable and their nature admits of change, whereas God is immutable and can never cease to be what He is.*”¹
 - ▶ So mutability is said to be one of the key characteristics of what it means to be a creature, while immutability belongs to the Creator and Him alone.

- ❖ Another passage that clearly teaches this doctrine is **Malachi 3:6**. Here the LORD reveals to his people in no uncertain terms that “*I the LORD do not change.*”
 - ▶ And likewise in **James 1:17** we read, “*Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.*” The emphasis is on the fact that there is no variation in God.

- ❖ In the late afternoon, as you walk along a sidewalk, I’m sure you’ve noticed your shadow stretching longer and longer. That’s because one of the great heavenly lights, the sun, is constantly changing (moving) across the sky and thus casting a shadow that is constantly changing. Because the sun is shifty, your shadow is shifty. It changes all the time.
 - ▶ But God’s different. Heavenly lights change but the Father of lights does not. He’s not shifty. He doesn’t change. That’s the big difference between God and the rest of us.

- ❖ Now because his very nature does not change, **2) God is also immutable in his character.** A traumatic accident or a stroke can completely alter the character of a person. A mild-mannered, kind-hearted man can wake up from a coma ill-tempered and foul-mouthed. That actually happens to people. But nothing can alter God’s character. His love, his compassion, his patience, his justice, his wrath – all remain the same. His character is consistent.

- ❖ There was an episode on Mt. Sinai in **Exodus 34** where Moses asks God to show him His glory. Previously God already revealed his name to Moses at the burning bush. He is the Great I AM. “*I AM WHO I AM.*” The implication is that God is both self-existent and immutable. **There is no outside force that caused him to be. And there is no outside force that constrains him to be anyone other than who he is.** “*I AM WHO I AM.*”
 - ▶ So now in chapter 34, Moses wants to see the glory of the Great I AM. So the LORD hides Moses in the cleft of a rock, descends in a cloud and proclaims his name. Now in the Bible a name is more than just a name. A name often reveals something of the person, something of his character.

- ❖ So as the Lord passes by, he proclaims his name once again to Moses but expands on the various aspects of his eternal, unchanging character. We read, “*The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty.”* (Ex. 34:6-7)

¹ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 77.

- ❖ Since that day on the mountain, the LORD has not changed. He is still the same God today. He is just as gracious, just as slow to anger, just as abounding in steadfast love, just as forgiving of sin. And to this day, he is just as just – he will by no means clear the guilty. He won't let their sin go unpunished. **God's character has never and will never change. He is the same yesterday, today and forever.**
 - ▶ Now granted, in humans, the inability to improve or mature in character would be considered a weakness. But it's different when it comes to God because he has no need to improve. He's perfect. So the inability to mature is not a limitation. He can't be any more loving, any more patient, or any more just. He's perfect in character.

- ❖ Now what about God's purposes? Where do the scriptures teach that **3) God is immutable in his purposes?** Let me just read a couple of verses affirming this. **Psalm 33:10-11**, says "*The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations.*"
 - ▶ **Isaiah 46:9-11** says, "*Remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose. . . . I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it.'*"

- ❖ There is no other God like our God. What he has purposed, he will do. His counsel shall stand. Theologian A.W. Pink explains why: "***One of two things causes a man to change his mind and reverse his plans: [lack] of foresight to anticipate everything, or lack of power to execute them. But as God is both omniscient and omnipotent there is never any need for him to revise his decrees.***"²
 - ▶ Now we change our plans all the time. Because we can't foresee weather patterns, we end up canceling that trip to the beach we had planned for weeks. Because we don't have the power to make traffic jams disappear like that, we have to postpone our dinner plans. We experience the frustration of having to change plans all the time.
 - But because God knows all things and can do all things AND because these are never-changing attributes of his never-changing nature, no plan of his can ever be thwarted or is ever in need of adjustment (Job 42:2). His purposes never change.

- ❖ *But what about those passages that speak of God changing his plans like when he threatens to destroy a city but ends up not doing it?* A good example would be in the book of Jonah. God sends Jonah to the ungodly city of Nineveh to preach that in forty days the city will be overthrown. But in response to his preaching, the inhabitants of the city repent and so God relents. He doesn't go through with it.
 - ▶ So how do we make sense of this? Did God change his mind? Did he change his plans? If so, then he's not immutable, at least when it comes to his purposes.

² Arthur W. Pink, *The Attributes of God*, 33.

- ❖ I would argue that this is *not* God changing his mind. This is just God being consistent – doing what he always does in response to a person (or a group of people) who heed his warnings and turn away from their sin.
 - ▶ **The Bible says that if we change, if we repent, God will always respond accordingly by forgiving and relenting.**
 - Some would still insist on calling that a literal change in mind, but the Bible just calls that a reliable response by a gracious, all-knowing God who is reliably consistent in his eternal purposes.

- ❖ A literal change in mind would be if God suddenly refused to relent even after a sinner genuinely repents. But God never does that. He is reliably consistent. So if God ever withdraws his threat of punishment, if he ever forgives and relents, it's not because he has changed in his character or purpose. Rather it's because sinful man has changed. We have humbled ourselves and repented.
 - ▶ Theological A.H. Strong puts it well. He writes, "*When a man bicycling against the wind turns about and goes with the wind instead of going against it, the wind seems to change, although it is blowing just as it was before.*"³ God is reliably consistent. The wind of his kindness that leads to repentance always blows away from sin and destruction, towards God. We have to stop riding into it. Stop resisting his kindness. Let it turn you and propel you towards God. He doesn't change. We do.

- ❖ Now fourthly, **4) God is immutable in his promises.** That means God remains faithful to his covenants. When he gives his word, you can take it to the bank. Let me read to you **Malachi 3:6** again. Earlier I didn't read the whole verse, so here it is in its entirety. "*For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.*"
 - ▶ The preceding context of Malachi 3 emphasizes God's coming judgment on those in Israel who refuse to follow his ways but God is merciful and will not consume the children of Jacob, the Israelites.

- ❖ *Why?* Because God does not change his promises to his people. Just as we can count on the certainty of his judgment against the wicked, we can count on the certainty of his faithfulness to his people. God made a promise to their ancestors, so in spite of their unfaithfulness, God remains faithful and will not bring about their utter destruction.
 - ▶ People make promises all the time, and people break promises all the time. But God alone is the Rock and God alone makes rock-solid promises that cannot be broken. His promises never change.

Drawing Implications from God's Immutability

- ❖ From Scripture we see it clearly taught that God is immutable in his nature, character, purposes and promises. Now let's draw out some implications, four in particular.

³ A.H. Strong, quoted in William Evan's *The Great Doctrines of the Bible*, 24.

- ❖ **1) God’s immutability is a strong encouragement to pray.** Think about it. *Could you imagine what it would be like to pray to a mutable God who only had loose plans for your life – plans that could change at the drop of a hat?*
 - ▶ Listen to the words of the Puritan Stephen Charnock. “*What comfort could it be to pray to a God, that like the chameleon changed colors every day, every moment? What encouragement could there be to lift up our eyes to one that were of one mind this day and of another mind tomorrow?*”⁴
 - But we don’t have to worry about God changing his plans. His purposes are eternal and unchanging. If they were mutable, then we would have no idea how to pray according to his will since everything would always be changing. Prayer, as prescribed in Scripture, would be next to impossible if not for his immutability.

- ❖ But some would argue that immutability would make prayer meaningless – that it shatters any motivation to pray. “*If nothing we do can change God’s mind, then why bother even praying to him? What’s the point?*” Well what does Scripture say? **Does prayer change the mind of God? The Bible says No. But does prayer change things? The Bible says Yes!**
 - ▶ Prayer is not meant to inform God with new information that he was previously unaware of. Jesus makes that clear in **Matthew 6:8**. He says the Father knows what you need even before you ask him. *But does Jesus go on to conclude that there is no need to pray since God already knows what you need?*
 - No, he goes on to teach *how* to pray, giving us the Lord’s Prayer. **Prayer may not change the mind of an all-knowing God but it certainly changes things!**

- ❖ **James 4:2** says, “*You do not have, because you do not ask.*” James is teaching that many of our unfulfilled desires remain unfulfilled because we have yet to ask God. So prayer is necessary! Apparently things don’t happen because we don’t pray. We’re not asking.
 - ▶ But again, it’s not because God doesn’t know what we need until we ask. Not because prayer has the power to force God’s hand. **But because the immutable God has determined that the prayers of his saints will be the means by which he accomplishes his purposes.** He has ordained our prayers to be his very instruments of change in the world.

- ❖ Now, of course, there is no blanket promise that we’ll receive everything we ask for. James goes on to say in v3, “*You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.*” And even if our motives are pure, we have to remember that not everything we ask for is what God knows we need.
 - ▶ My point is this: **Prayer should not seek to change God’s purposes. Prayer should seek to receive that which the Father has immutably purposed to give to those who humbly seek and supplicate him in prayer.**

⁴ Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 348.

- ❖ **2) God’s immutability is a strong comfort to His children.** Just consider our Psalm 102 passage again. After magnifying God’s immutability in relation to the mutability of everything else, what does the psalmist turn to next? In v28, he draws out the implication, the take-home lesson. God, because you’re immutable, the psalmist says, “*The children of your servants shall dwell secure; their offspring shall be established before you.*”
 - ▶ Because you’re immutable, because you stay the same, not only are we secure, our children are secure, and our children’s children are secure. Your immutability is a strong comfort and source of security.

- ❖ **James 1:17** says the same thing. In the preceding verses, James asserts that God never tempts anyone. So if you’re being tempted don’t say “God is tempting me to sin”. Instead recognise that, “*Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.*”
 - ▶ **Because God does not change, James deduces that God’s goodness towards his children also does not change.** So if in the past good and perfect gifts have always come from our unchanging God, then we can be sure that *only* good and perfect gifts will come from him *in the now* and in the *future*.

- ❖ Now I realize that many of you are in a difficult season of life. Prayers are not being answered. God seems distant while difficulties are all around. It feels like God is putting you through quite a trial (Jas. 1:2).
 - ▶ But here’s the comfort: **Because God is immutable in his goodness towards His children, you can be sure that this trial you’re going through is not meant to tempt you or hurt you BUT to help you – to refine your faith.** This trial is exactly what you need right now for your spiritual growth. For that reason, we can count it all joy when we face trials of many kinds.
 - Everything He gives you, even that which is hard and painful, is a perfect gift for your good. His immutability guarantees that.

- ❖ **3) God’s immutability is a strong warning to the unrepentant – to those who refuse to turn away from their sin.** While his immutable character is good news for his children, it is bad news to those who are resolved in their sin. Remember in **Exodus 34:7**, the LORD reveals himself as the one who *will by no means clear the guilty*. That’s one of his unchanging attributes.
 - ▶ And the guilty are those who have transgressed his holy law, which is not just an arbitrary code of ethics. No, the law reflects the immutable, holy character of God. So to trample the law is to trample on the holiness and honor of God himself.

- ❖ Charnock says, “*Being the same God, he is the same enemy to the wicked as the same friend to the righteous. . . . Without repentance, the sinner must irrevocably perish, or God must change his nature: there must be a change in man; there can be none in God.*”⁵

⁵ Ibid., 353.

- ▶ The unrepentant sinner is headed towards certain judgment *unless* one of two things happens. **Either the sinner repents or God changes his holy character.** It's like playing a game of chicken – that dangerous game where two people drive their cars headfirst towards each other to see who will swerve first.

- ❖ **In the same way, those who remain unrepentant of their sin are playing a dangerous game of chicken with God, driving right at him hoping that at the last second he's going to swerve.** “*Maybe God will change. Maybe he'll change his character and clear the guilty this one time.*”
 - ▶ It's all wishful thinking. God never swerves. If you plan on standing before the God on your own merit, just remember that **God's holy character is immutable.** He will never condone the slightest sin. **His omniscience is immutable.** He will never forget a single trespass. **His omnipotence is immutable.** He will never tire or lose the power to inflict his righteous punishments.
 - What a dreadful thing to stand before a holy, omniscient, omnipotent, immutable Judge on nothing but your own merit! Like I said, immutability is a strong warning to those who are unrepentant, who are content in their sin, who feel like they don't need Jesus.

- ❖ But that leads to our fourth and final implication, **4) God's immutability is a strong assurance to those who do repent and trust in Jesus.** Remember, our immutable God who does not clear the guilty is *also* the immutable God who forgives iniquity, transgression, and sin.

- ❖ It's for that very reason that the Father sent his Son who, without any change to his divine nature, added to himself a human nature. He humbled himself as a servant and became obedient to death, even death on a cross in the place of guilty sinners.
 - ▶ When Jesus set his face like a flint to the cross, it was as if – in that game of chicken – **Jesus took our place in the car and drove head first towards the immutable justice of God, knowing that his Father would not swerve but would unleash his wrath against our guilt – upon his Son.**
 - Upon the cross, Jesus bore *our* guilt and God punished him *because* he does not clear the guilty. But on the third day, God raised Jesus from the grave, announcing to the world that his sacrifice was accepted.

- ❖ Announcing that, because guilt of sin is cleared in Christ, the wind of God's kindness blows immutably towards those who turn to Christ for salvation. Those who stop riding into the wind, who turn from their sin, who trust in Jesus, will be saved.
 - ▶ Immutability is a fearful doctrine to those who insist to stand on their own before God. But it is a great assurance for those who repent and trust in Jesus. Because of Christ, God will never change his love towards us who believe.

- His face will continually shine with favor on you with the same strength and brightness, the same yesterday, today, and forever! All because God does not change.