

The Incommunicable Attributes of God: Independence

Exodus 3:11-14; Acts 17:24-25

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on August 4, 2013 [Reposted on August 27, 2017]

Introduction¹

- ❖ Turn with me to Exodus 3. We're beginning a four-part series on the attributes of God. Now obviously God has more than four attributes, so we're not going to say everything we could say about God. We're going to look specifically at four attributes. We're going to study what theologians call the incommunicable attributes of God.
 - ▶ ***What's an incommunicable attribute?*** It's the opposite of a communicable one. A communicable attribute is an attribute God shares with us, as beings made in his image. Love is a good example. God is love, yet that's not an attribute unique to him or foreign to us. We too can love and be loved. Love is a shared attribute. The Creator *communicates* it to creatures like us. The same could be said of his wisdom, his justice, his mercy, etc.

- ❖ *So what makes an attribute of God incommunicable?* It would be the opposite. **It would be an attribute that is unique to God and largely foreign to us.** It's an attribute we don't share. One that he does not communicate to us. Now in theology there are four attributes of God that have been classically defined as incommunicable. They are God's independence, his eternity, his omnipresence, and his immutability.

- ❖ If you have no idea what those words mean, that's okay. That's why we want to teach them to you over the course of the next four weeks. If you worship here regularly, you know our practice is to preach through select passages, often going straight through books of the Bible. But every once in a while, we like to cover a subject, like the attributes of God.
 - ▶ The goal is not just to fill up your head with information but to move your heart with truth – truth about God from his own Word. And then we pray that same truth moves you to action, to live differently, to live in accordance to the truth of who God is.

- ❖ *But why did we pick the incommunicable attributes?* Why this subject of all things? What's the big deal? Consider this: *If I were to ask you to describe God for me, what are the first things that come to mind?* I'm not surprised if the first things you think of are his love, his patience, or his kindness. Don't get me wrong. It's good and right for you to think of those.
 - ▶ **But it's because our natural bent is to focus on his communicable attributes, there is a tendency to forget how wholly different God is compared to us.** We're tempted to see our difference with God only in quantitative terms. As creatures made in his image, we're like microscopic versions of him. He's the sun; we're the candle. He's the ocean; we're the raindrop. He's the Arctic; we're the snowflake.
 - That kind of imagery is helpful to communicate God's immensity, but it can be misleading. Because the difference between God's being and our being is more than a difference in degree. It's a difference in nature. God's being is qualitatively different than ours.

¹ Due to inclement weather caused by Hurricane Harvey, all HCC worship services were canceled for August 27, 2017. This 2013 sermon was reposted and made available for church members to utilize in private and family worship.

- ❖ We tend to think about God like we'd imagine an ant would think about us. To an ant, humans are godlike. We are astronomically bigger. We could crush them at our whim. We're like gods to them. But then again, we're not. Yes, we're much bigger, but we're made of the same stuff. Yes, we can crush an ant, but we can't create an ant.
 - ▶ The better image is to compare God and us with the difference between Shakespeare and any one of his characters. Shakespeare and Macbeth differ not in degree but in nature. One solely created the other. They are interconnected but not interdependent. Macbeth needs Shakespeare to exist but Shakespeare does not need Macbeth.

- ❖ **Shakespeare alone is author, everyone else is a character. Likewise, God alone is Creator, everyone else is a creature.** We mustn't neglect nor downplay this crucial distinction or else we come away with too low a view of God. I like what Martin Luther once said to a theological opponent. He said, "*Your thoughts of God are far too human.*"
 - ▶ What an indictment! Against us, that is. Our thoughts of God are far too human. We view him as a bigger, better, stronger, wiser, kinder version of ourselves. But God is so much more. He's something else. He's in a class of his own.
 - We need a corrective, and we get that by focusing our eyes and our hearts and our praise on his incommunicable attributes. That which is unique to God.

- ❖ Today we begin with God's independence. This where we're going: 1) I'll **define** what I mean by God's independence. 2) I'll **demonstrate** this attribute in the Scripture. 3) I'll **draw** out implications of this truth for our lives.

Defining God's Independence

- ❖ Let's begin by defining terms. *What do we mean when we say God is independent?* We mean this: **God is independent in that He does not need us either to exist or to persist.** Now to guard against misunderstanding, we need to add: **And yet He still wants us and loves us.**

- ❖ The theologians of old used to call this attribute God's aseity. That word is Latin meaning *'from himself'*. **What aseity is trying to say is that God has life in himself.** No one or no thing had to give him life or anything else. He has it all in himself. He has aseity.
 - ▶ Now there are two aspects to God's independence (aseity): his self-existence and his self-sufficiency. **Self-existence** means God needs nothing else (no one else) to exist. **Self-sufficiency** means he needs nothing else (no one else) for any other reason.

- ❖ So when we stress the first aspect we're saying that God was never created. He is dependent on no other being for his existence. God is self-existent.
 - ▶ Imagine a conversation between two little kindergartners. One sees a little tree sapling growing in the middle of the backyard and asks the other, "Who made this little tree?" "Where did it come from?" The other says, "The acorn made it."
 - "Well who made the acorn?" "The oak tree made it." "Well who made the oak tree?" "God made it." "Well then who made God?"

- ❖ That's a question any child will naturally raise. *Who made God?* A child knows innately that everything around him came from something *not* itself, and he simply extends that logic upward to God. He is reasoning correctly based on human categories.
 - ▶ But here is where we have to introduce a new category that a child will be unfamiliar with. We need to introduce an **Uncaused Cause** – a self-existent being. A being who never needed to be made. A being who always was, always is, always will be. A First Cause who has no cause, no origin.

- ❖ At first glance that appears to contradict our childlike instincts to look for and to expect a cause or origin to all things. *Doesn't everything have a cause?* No, every effect has a cause. That's the law of cause and effect. But there is nothing irrational about an uncaused cause. It doesn't contradict any law of logic.
 - ▶ Now an 'uncaused effect' would. That's irrational. You shouldn't believe in that. But that's not how we're describing God. He's an uncaused cause, and there's nothing irrational about it. It's just in a category beyond human terms. And well it should be – since God should not be limited to human terms and categories.

- ❖ **So if you're thinking of anything with an origin (a cause), then you're not thinking of God.** You're picturing something in his creation. Likewise, if you're thinking of anything with needs, anything that lacks, anything that's incomplete without something or someone else, then you're also not thinking of God. You're thinking of something he made.
 - ▶ God is not only self-existent but self-sufficient. God draws from within himself an unending supply of power, wisdom, glory, joy, etc. He is not dependent upon us or anything else for these things.
 - Listen to **A.W. Tozer** on God's self-sufficiency. He writes, "*To admit the existence of needs in God is to admit incompleteness in the divine Being. Need is a creature-word and cannot be spoken of the Creator.*"

- ❖ Need is a creature-word. It's only make sense when used in relation to creatures like us. **But properly-speaking, the Creator doesn't need anything.** Now I know I have to tread carefully here because I don't want to give you a distorted the image of God.
 - ▶ When I describe him as independent, don't interpret that as being far and removed. I don't want you to think that means God could care less about you because he has no need of you. No, that's the God of the Deist. The God of the Bible is independent and self-sufficient. But that doesn't means he's cold and distant.
 - Now I know I'll have to show you this in Scripture. So let me turn there now to biblically demonstrate these two aspects of God's independence.

Demonstrating God's Self-Existence

- ❖ First, let's consider his self-existence. Let's look at the one passage in Scripture where God reveals to us his very nature as he reveals, for the first time, his very name.

- ❖ Look at Exodus chapter 3. Here we read of how Moses was leading a flock of sheep one day, when he sees a bush burning not being consumed by the flames. So he approaches to see this great sight, and we read in v4, *“When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, ‘Moses, Moses!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’”* ⁵*Then he said, ‘Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.’* ⁶*And he said, ‘I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.”*

- ❖ God goes on to send Moses on a mission back to Egypt to stand before Pharaoh – the most powerful man on the earth at that time – and to demand the release of the Israelites, God’s people. Understandably Moses is intimidated and feels grossly unqualified.
 - ▶ Look at v11, *“But Moses said to God, ‘Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?’”* ¹²*He said, ‘But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.’* ¹³*Then Moses said to God, ‘If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?’”*

- ❖ So here Moses is projecting his own self-doubt onto the very people he is being sent to deliver. He’s conscious of his lack of qualifications, and he fears the people will see it too. They’ll see right through him! They’re going to ask, *“Who sent you? What’s his name?”*
 - ▶ In ancient cultures, a name was more than just a form of identity. A person’s name communicated something of that person’s character or essence. You learn certain attributes about me through my name.
 - So Moses is certain that the Israelites are going to ask for a name. They’ll want to know more about whoever sent him on this mission with this ‘too good to be true’ promise of deliverance.

- ❖ So God answers in v14. *“God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ And he said, ‘Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”*
 - ▶ Now the clause “I AM WHO I AM” could be translated “I AM WHAT I AM” or “I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE”. Either way, I don’t think that is the name of God itself but a comment before the name is given in the second half of v14. *“Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”* So God’s name is I AM.

- ❖ In modern times, we’ve translated that into YAHWEH or Jehovah. And in most English translations of the Bible, if you see the word LORD in all caps, you know it’s a reference to YAHWEH or quite literally I AM.
 - ▶ Now the question is: ***What does the name I AM tell us about God?*** As we just said, you learn something of a person’s essence or character through their name, so what do we learn about God through the name I AM?

- ❖ I AM is a conjugate of the Hebrew verb ‘to be’. “*So who am I?, God says, “Well I just am.”* He just is. God has being in himself. He's self-existent.
 - ▶ And to say “I AM WHO I AM” is to suggest that his essence and character is self-determined. I am who I am. I'm not measured against any one or anything. In other words, God is independent. He has aseity.
- ❖ But we're not like that. We are dependent, totally dependent. Just think about it. ***Do you realize how fragile your life is?*** Your life could be snuffed out just like that. I think the recent news reports of airline crashes, train derailments, and church bus accidents are tragic, and yet they function as rude awakenings reminding us of how much we take for granted.
 - ▶ If one oncoming vehicle were to veer into our lane, if one elevator cable were to snap, if one bridge or overpass were to collapse, it would be over.
- ❖ I know that's depressing. Yes, it's morbid. No, you shouldn't think about that all the time. But I do think it's good to be reminded every once in a while of how dependent we are on so many variables being just right for our survival – God's mercy and grace being ultimate.
 - ▶ But God is different. God is independent. He doesn't have to worry about all the variables being just right – because he controls all the variables! His existence is dependent on no one and no thing. By very nature, God exists. He simply is.
 - That's what it means to be self-existent. That's what it means to be God.

Demonstrating God's Self-Sufficiency

- ❖ Now let me show you where the Bible describes God as self-sufficient. Turn with me to Acts 17. But before we read the text again, let me ask you a rather deep question: ***Why did God create you? Why did he create me? Why did he create any of us?***
 - ▶ If you were to ask an ancient Greek that question – someone who believed in Zeus and the whole pantheon of gods and goddesses – you'll get some sort of answer that basically suggests that the gods need us. They need humanity. They need us to supply them with sacrifices, to give them our prayers, to volunteer our service.
- ❖ If you've seen the recent *Clash of the Titans* movies, they illustrate this perfectly. The central plot line is about how the gods are growing weaker because humanity no longer believes in them, so people are no longer praying to them. We're told that, “*Man's prayers feed the gods' immortality.*” In other words, they need you.
- ❖ In Acts 17 Paul begins to preach to people who believe such things. He's in Athens, the cultural and religious center of ancient Greece. **In those days, what we know as Greek mythology was viewed as Greek reality.** Well Paul see this altar dedicated to the unknown God, and sees the perfect opportunity to make him known, to proclaim who God is.
 - ▶ So where does he begin? What attribute does he start with? God's love? God's mercy? His kindness? Nope, he begins with an incommunicable attribute. He starts by describing God's independence, his self-sufficiency.

- ❖ Look at v24. *“²⁴The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, ²⁵nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.”*
- ❖ So unlike Greek gods and goddesses, YAHWEH does not need us to serve him. He doesn't need anything, Paul says. Or as one theologian put it: **God is worshipped by human hands, but those hands are raised in praise and thanksgiving.** They're not used to supply God's needs, as if he had any. No, God has life in himself. We're the one with the needs, and God is the one who fills them up with *“life and breath and everything”*.
- ❖ But if he has no need of us to exist or to persist, if he's completely self-existent and self-sufficient, then **why did God create in the first place?** I can see why some would assume he must have been needy of something – perhaps company or an audience. Otherwise why go through all the trouble of creating?
 - ▶ **To answer, we need to dig deeper beyond his attributes to the very nature of God himself – as One God who eternally exists in a community of three.** I'm talking about the Trinity. Christians believe that between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit there has been perfect love and communion from all eternity.
 - The fellowship share among the Godhead is infinitely sweeter than any fellowship we can offer God by entering into relationship with him. The glory that each person of the Godhead reciprocates to each other is infinitely greater than the glory we give him even in the highest form of our praise.
- ❖ With that understanding of what it means for God to be a Trinity, theologian Daniel Fuller would answer the question like this: **Why did an absolutely independent God create us? Because of love.** But if the answer is love, then it still sounds as if God has needs. As if he was lonely and looking for relationships.
- ❖ Well this is where Fuller differentiates between what he calls **need-love** versus **benevolent-love**. He says need-love is the kind of love that is given out of a desire to fill an emptiness within you by means of the object of your love.
 - ▶ But benevolent-love is different. It's the kind of love that is motivated – not by an emptiness in you – but a fullness. It's love that says, *“I'm full. I'm content. I'm happy, so I just want you to be happy. I'm not loving you because I need to use you to fill me up. I'm already full, so I'm just loving you because.”* That's benevolent-love.
- ❖ So Fuller's point is that God, in creating us, was not motivated by a need for something he doesn't have but rather out of a delight in displaying to us what he already possesses. Fuller says, *“The moment we understand that all of God's need-love was met in being a Trinity, then we see that he is free to act toward us, his creation, solely in terms of the freedom of a benevolent love.”*²

² Daniel Fuller, *The Unity of the Bible*, 134.

- ❖ He goes on to give a great illustration. He says if God created you out of need-love, it would be like God inviting you to a banquet only to discover you're the main course. But that's not YAHWEH God. He invites you out of benevolent-love. He sits you at his head table. He spreads a banquet before you in order that you might enjoy the feast with him.
- ❖ That's the God who created you. **He's not trying to use you or manipulate you for selfish gain, and frankly that's because he doesn't need you.** I know that makes it sound like we're insignificant to God. It's like we're ants and God is the human who passes over us without a glance, without even noticing our existence. That's so discouraging.
 - ▶ But again the better image is to see ourselves as characters in God's story. **As the Author, he doesn't really need us, but he still wants us in his story!** And of course we're significant to him since he's the one who thought us up. He knows everything about us. He knows our backstory, our current predicament, and where our story is going. He's the Author.
- ❖ I hope you're starting to see that true benevolent love can only come from a God like that. The false gods of this world are only benevolent to you because they need you. They're empty and trying to satisfy their need-love through you.
 - ▶ **But because God satisfies his need-love within his own Trinitarian existence, he alone is able to freely love you with true benevolence.** An absolutely independent God who doesn't need you to exist or to persist is, in fact, the most loving, most benevolent God you could imagine.

Drawing Implications

- ❖ But there's no need to leave it to our imaginations because such a God does exist and he's here today. You're in the presence of a self-existent, self-sufficient, independent God. I believe there are two proper responses, two implications to be drawn.
- ❖ **First, fall on your face before this God.** Throughout Scripture the consistent response when anyone encountered the Great I AM was to fall flat on your face. Isaiah fell down before I AM and said, "I am undone." Ezekiel said he fell facedown. John records in the book of Revelation that he fell at I AM's feet as though dead.
 - ▶ And that's because each of them were cognizant of who they were in the light of God. Not only were they mere creatures, they were wretched sinners. Sin manifests itself in various ways in each of our lives, but in the end it's really just one thing: treason. **At the root of every act of sin is a dependent human being – created to worship before the throne of God – setting up his or her own throne, sitting on it and from that elevated position declaring, "I AM".**
- ❖ That's the essence of sin: Declaring your independence from God. Spitting in God's face and saying, "No, I am who I am. I determine my own existence. I am the author of my own story." That's the sin of the Garden, trying to supplant God and take his place. But our declaration of independence is nothing short of a cosmic act of treason.

- ❖ And here is where the other attributes of God get scary. Because this independent God is also a just God who will not let our treason go unpunished..
 - ▶ Now since God doesn't need anything from us, we're in big trouble. Because there is nothing we can give in exchange for mercy. Are you going to give him more worship? More devotion? More prayer? More service? He doesn't need any of that. There's nothing you can do or give to curry his favor. You have nothing to barter with.
 - If God were merely independent, we'd be doomed, but thank God he has more attributes. Thank God, in particular, for his kindness and grace.

- ❖ **The first response is to fall on your face, and the second is to repent and receive his grace.** Remember, Paul began his preaching in Athens focused on God's independence and self-sufficiency, but notice how he ends with a call to repentance. Repentance of sin is the proper response once you grasp this attribute of God.
 - ▶ Acts 17:30-31 says, *“³⁰The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”*

- ❖ The Apostle proclaims the good news – that the very God who does not need you for anything, the God who does not need to be in a relationship with you, chose (out of the freedom of his benevolent-love) to love you and pursue a relationship with you.
 - ▶ **He's the independent Author. You would expect him to be distant and removed, and yet in love he wrote himself into the story.** God became man, and this appointed man was named Jesus.

- ❖ The good news is that One who owes you nothing, who could never be put in your debt, has graciously paid the debt of your sin by sending Jesus to die on the cross in your place. He paid the punishment of your treason. And the One who is not obligated to give you anything, has graciously given you assurance of his love and mercy by raising Jesus from the dead.
 - ▶ And now this self-existent, self-sufficient, absolutely independent, Supreme Being calls for you to repent, to turn from your sins and to freely receive his grace by trusting in Jesus and what he has done for us.
 - Friends, he doesn't need anything from us, but he sure is worthy of our everything!