

Understanding God

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Introduction.

- A. As I always say, anytime anyone has a question they want addressed from the pulpit, I'm happy to spend as much time as necessary dealing with that question. This evening's lesson is based on questions that came to me from the high school class. This is actually not the first time this year that I've preached such a sermon; apparently, the Genesis class has been boggling a lot of young minds. In this particular instance, they want to know about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and the interaction between all of them.
- B. As we deal with questions like this, though, we need to remember the limits under which we operate. It's human nature to want to have all the information possible, so that we can separate everything spiritual into nice neat tidy categories that we can understand. However, God does not necessarily share our interest in that. Look with me, for instance, at Deuteronomy 29:29. This passage tells us both what the Bible is and what it is not. The Bible is a practical guide on how to get to heaven, and it tells us everything we need to know about that. It is not, however, an infinite library of spiritual data designed to satisfy our idle curiosity. There are some things that are hidden and belong to God, and the Bible is silent on those matters. A precise theological description of God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit is one of those things that are hidden. God doesn't tell us everything, and even if He did, there's no guarantee we could understand it.
- C. Having said that, though, there are clues to the nature of the divine scattered throughout the pages of Scripture, and they can help us come to at least some answer for some of the questions we have. Let's look at some of those passages this evening to help us with understanding God.

I. God's Nature.

- A. The most logical place for this study to begin is with a look at how the Bible answers some questions about God's nature. The first of these questions asks, quite straightforwardly, **"How can God be Jesus and Jesus be God?"** We don't have to consider the Bible very long before this question presents itself to us. In our everyday lives, we don't have to deal with such an apparent unity between two beings. In our experience, there are either two people there, or one person there, and there's no in-between. That, however, is not the way that the Bible presents the relationship between the Father and the Son. The gospels make quite clear that Jesus and God have two separate identities. They are recorded as conversing with each other and interacting with each other. However, even though that is so, they are not as separate from each other as I am from any of you. Look at Jesus' description of the relationship in John 14:10. He depicts Himself as being so unified with the Father that He is nothing more than an instrument of the will of the Father.
- B. That really leaves us hanging. We want God to tell us which way it is. We want Him and Jesus to get off the one or two fence and describe Himself/Themselves to us in non-mind-bending terms. The thing is, though, friends, that there is no reason for the Creator to make complete sense to His creation, who are bound by the laws He made up. What looks to us like a logical contradiction is simply the expression of a deeper truth we aren't equipped to understand. Let me give you an example. The classic way to explain logical contradiction is by talking about something that is a square circle or a square triangle. We would recognize that as a logical contradiction because it's simply not possible for a figure to have both three and four sides at the same time. Consider, though, the picture of the Pyramids in the upper left-hand corner of my slides. Those pyramids have a four-sided base and four three-sided sides. They are very real. You can go and walk on them if you want. Yet, if you try to express them in terms of two-dimensional shapes, you end up with something like "square triangle"—something we all acknowledge can't be. The same is true of the nature of God. It makes sense. The only problem is that we don't have languages that can explain the kind of sense that it makes.
- C. Our second question in this section asks, **"Is God a spirit? If so, what's the difference between God and the Holy Spirit?"** Typically, the answer given to the first part of this question is "Yes." We flip over to John 4:21, 24. From that, we declare that it says that God is a spirit. Case closed, right? The thing is, friends, that the text doesn't actually SAY God is a spirit. It says God IS spirit, and that's not the same thing. Look at John 6:63. Here, Jesus defines the word as spirit, exactly the same thing as He defined God as, yet none of us would take that to mean that the word is some kind of insubstantial being. In fact, all these passages are saying is that both God and the word appeal to the spiritual side of our natures. The duality of flesh and spirit is very useful for explaining the created things around us, but it's less useful for defining the Creator who exists entirely outside of His creation. Let's quit trying to buttonhole God like that.
- D. Even though the first question is difficult to answer with certainty, the second one is much easier to handle. The difference between God and the Holy Spirit is much the same as the difference between the Father and the Son. We know they are different because they interact with each other. Look, for instance, at the interaction described in Romans 8:26-27. Here, we have the Christian praying to God. The Holy Spirit, as a

separate entity, intercedes with the Father for the Christian, while Jesus, who is "He who searches the hearts" is similarly occupied. Even the Greek words used here indicate the presence and operation of several separate beings, not merely the spirit of the Father Himself listening to us. The Father and the Spirit are not the same.

- E. Our third question inquires, **"Are Jesus and the Holy Spirit one? If so, why doesn't the Bible talk about it?"** In answer, I would say that yes, Jesus and the Holy Spirit are one, but that the Bible does indeed talk about it. In a good translation, you just aren't going to have a passage that talks about the oneness of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, but there is a passage that says functionally the same thing. Remember how we talked about Jesus showing His oneness with the Father by not acting on His own initiative? He describes the Holy Spirit in the same way in John 16:13. Just as Jesus is a perfect instrument of the will of the Father, so too is the Holy Spirit. Now, if both of them are one with the Father, they are necessarily one with one another.

II. Seeing God.

- A. Now that we've got the nature of God hashed out as far as we can hash it, we can turn our attention to the Biblical idea of seeing God. We're going to start out by answering two questions in one fell swoop: **"Why does the Bible say that no one has seen God, yet Jesus says that if you've seen Him, you've seen God?"** and **"What does it mean that Jesus declared God?"** Both of these questions are actually pulling from the same two texts: John 1:18 and John 14:9. When you put them together, it appears that Philip, for instance, had both seen God and not seen God at the same time. Actually, there's a sense in which both are true. Let's take the seeing-God part first. First of all, when Jesus says that those who have seen Him have seen the Father, He doesn't mean that to be taken literally. The Bible tells us in Isaiah 53 that Jesus didn't have any particularly handsome appearance, and there's no reason why the Father should be limited to a human body anyway. Jesus means instead that those who have seen Him have seen the nature of the Father. They know how the Father would act if He came to earth because that's the way Jesus acted when He was on the earth. Jesus declared God by living out the morality of the Father in a way we could understand.
- B. That's how we've seen God. It is likewise true, though, that no one has seen God, despite the half-dozen or so occasions in Scripture where God reveals Himself to Moses or another one of the prophets. We see an illuminating comment on these at the end of one of those descriptions of God in Ezekiel 1:28. In Ezekiel 1, the prophet has seen a spectacular vision of the Almighty, but that wasn't a literal, physical depiction of God anymore than the face of average-Joe Jesus was. Instead, as this verse says, it was something that looked kind of like something that looked kind of like what God actually was. It was a metaphor of a metaphor, and folks, with our limited human senses, that's all we can expect. God is not of this creation, and He cannot be perceived with the tools of this creation. He doesn't "look like" anything, so we can't truly see Him now.
- C. The next question is a little bit easier. It inquires, **"Has anyone seen the Holy Spirit?"** The short answer is yes. This occurs during the baptism of Jesus, in Matthew 3:16. The dove that descended on Him was the Holy Spirit. Now, of course, this doesn't actually mean that in some ultimate reality that the Holy Spirit is dove-shaped, or has anything we would recognize as a shape at all. Once again, this is a useful metaphor that imparts a spiritual truth to us, in this case, the truth that Jesus, while He was on earth, was a human being with whom God could actually be at peace because Jesus was sinless. However, that's all we get out of the Father or the Son as well, so it's true that man has seen the Holy Spirit just as much as he's seen them.
- D. Our final question for the evening asks, **"If Jesus is God and people have seen Jesus, have they seen the Holy Spirit too?"** Once again, the short answer here is yes. This seeing the Holy Spirit is a different kind of seeing than the mere perceiving of the Holy Spirit as a visual phenomenon. It doesn't mean that Jesus looked like a dove, any more than it means that Jesus looked like whatever unimaginable thing is the reality of the Holy Spirit. However, it does mean that through Jesus, we are able to perceive the essential moral qualities of the Holy Spirit. Look, for instance, at Paul's comment in Romans 8:9. This, naturally, is a verse that false teachers love to go to town with. They claim that it means that unless you manifest the miraculous spiritual gifts imparted by the Holy Spirit, you aren't really a Christian.
- E. In reality, the truth is considerably different. Throughout Romans 8, Paul uses the idea of indwelling by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in the same way as He uses the idea of the indwelling of sin in Romans 7. When we are indwelt by sin, we are controlled by sin. We take our marching orders from sin. In the same way, when we are indwelt by the spirit of God, we are controlled by the spirit of God. We are taking our marching orders from the word of God, and we are constantly behaving in ways that are pleasing to Him. Once we grasp that the Biblical idea of indwelling is one of influence or control, this verse tells us something important about the uniformity of purpose shared by Jesus and the Holy Spirit. In this passage, the Spirit of God and the spirit of Christ are used as interchangeable ideas. It means the same thing to be under the influence or control of the Spirit of God as it does to be under the influence or control of the Spirit of Christ. Both Jesus and the Holy Spirit are entirely good, so they both want us to do exactly the same thing. Just a few verses down, in Romans 8:11, the spirit of the Father Himself is also used as one of these interchangeable spiritual influences. That means that if we have seen the example of the morality of Jesus, we've seen the Spirit too.

Conclusion. If you want to be indwelt by the Spirit of God, tonight is the time to begin.