

What God is Like

(Musings on the character of God)

I wonder...

I wonder about God a lot. I used to wonder if he existed, but since I got that settled (to my complete satisfaction), my wonder is now of a different sort. “Wonder” itself has a number of connotations, some of which are part of the kind of wonder I have about God. There’s wonder that includes some frustration with it, another is more of a curious sort of wonder, and then there’s the kind that connotes total marvel. My wondering about God includes all three.

To be honest, sometimes my wonder about him is of the *frustrated* sort. It’s when he acts in a way I don’t understand or appreciate in the immediate that I wonder about the wisdom of his decisions. I often get that sorted out in my mind, but even when I don’t, I shelve it for the time being and continue trusting him in spite of my frustrations. At other times my wondering is more of a spiritual inquisitiveness. Sometimes I can be annoyingly curious about God’s Word and his ways. I wonder what a certain passage of the Bible means or I am curious to understand an action he took or decided not to take. We, like the Pharisees of the Gospels, can never underestimate our power to be wrong about God and God’s view of things. Sometimes I wonder how right or wrong I am about the God I love. The last sense in which I wonder about God is the sense in which I’m amazed and blown away about him! What a “Wonder” he is! When I think about it, this might not be so different from the other two types of wonder, and might, in actuality, include them both. Bottom-line – he’s pretty “wonderful” – which is an interesting word when you think about it, since we’re the ones who are *full of wonder*.

This relatively brief essay includes musings of all three sorts of wonder. If you read it through you might notice a hint of frustration in my voice, which I trust comes short of petulant unbelief or any disrespect for God. You’ll probably also pick up that I’m still quite curious about the God in whom I believe. I certainly don’t have all the answers about him, and sometimes it feels like I have even less than I used to have. I want to know more about what he’s like – how he thinks, what he feels, why he does what he does and doesn’t do what he doesn’t do. And then hopefully you’ll see – and maybe even catch for yourself – some of the marvel, the amazement that I have about the God of the Bible!

Tiny holes...

So, I’m going to tell you “*What God is like.*” Sounds pretentious, right? I heard a story of a teacher that had instructed her 2nd grade class to draw something of their own choosing. She looked over the shoulder of one of the little girls and asked, “Julie, what are you drawing?”

It’s a picture of God.

“OK, but no one knows what God looks like.”

They will when I get finished.

I can only draw as clear a picture of God as I *have* to date; and I have no illusion that I contain in my puny mind a particularly large percentage of what can be known of the God of the Bible. We're pretty much like tadpoles swapping stories of blue whales, ants discussing the elephant, or pots pondering the potter!

*“We, like the Pharisees in the Gospels,
can never underestimate our power
to be wrong about God
and God’s view of things.”*
Brian McLaren

I want to limit the picture that I draw in this essay to some of the things that I have come to believe about God's *character*. I won't be talking so much about his *capabilities*, his "Omni's" – *Omniscience, Omnipotence, and Omnipresence*. And I won't be providing any sort of study about God's *essence* – that he exists as one God in three Persons, that he's eternal, transcendent, or sovereign, etc. I'm not going to try to dissect him like a frog and study his "parts." I simply want to limit my observations to the topic of his *personality* – what he's *like, what kind of Person he is*.

The starry night sky seemed like a black canvas with holes poked through it so that the light shining on the other side could be seen glistening from the other side as I looked through my friend's telescope. I imagined this as the way God exists in relation to his world. He's the Light behind the thick shroud that encompasses the earth, and into this shroud he cuts small openings so that we earthlings can get glimpses of his brilliance. We "see" God and know him only through these tiny gaps in the shroud. Though he's the brilliance surrounding our world, we experience him only as much as he chooses to punch these holes. Of course, our decision to *look up* has something to do with it too. And to my understanding, it's not like we see *him* as much as we experience his *outshining* through the tiny slits. This is probably for our own protection.

Our progressive understanding of him begins with one or two pinpricks, then, as our revelation increases, the holes increase in diameter and other slices appear in the shroud. As the stars seem like they have been placed in patterns, which we call "constellations," God leaves clues about the way he is as these holes form discernible shapes. I'm convinced that the Eternal wants us to know him as best as we can!

Someday the shroud will be removed altogether and we'll live where God lives with nothing in between. For now we get only glimpses of him "through a shroud vaguely," but there we'll gaze upon him and see him as he actually is! I trust we'll be able to stand the sight. In the meantime, we have to take some responsibility for the widening of these God-sighting pinholes in the curtain. We do so when we read the book he wrote through special God-gazing men and women, have lots of concentrated conversations with him, enjoy his beauty in creation, notice his personality in each other, and respond in delight-filled worship. He loves to show himself to seekers who apply themselves to knowing him as much as he can be known.

When somebody asks me what God is like, I don't usually list a bunch of *data* about him – *he's big, he's smart, he is everywhere at the same time...* I'd much rather talk

about his *character*, things that I've read about in the Bible and things that I've discovered about him during my friendship with him over the last four decades. Instead of a bullet-point list of traits, I prefer to tell people *what he's like*, how he treats his friends, the way he acts when his enemies reject him.

Think about it. If I asked you to describe the person that you love more than anyone else in the world; would you describe his or her nose, or feet, or shape? How about her skills? Would you tell me how he cooks or that he fixes things? Would you talk about his physical traits or abilities, or would you describe her personality? Would you tell me about this person's *characteristics* or their *character*?

It's my goal to think of God more nearly as he actually is, not so I can win any Sunday School contests or theology debates. I hope to *think* rightly about him because it positively affects how I *believe* and how I *live* my life in response to him. Having more accurate thoughts about God makes my faith stronger, and has a dramatic influence on the way I conduct myself. Because it will help you also to know and rely on *the God who is*, I want to urge you also to strive to get as clear and correct an idea of God as you can. An accurate idea of God's character is to faith what the foundation is to any building. The structure will stand or fall depending on how "true" it is.

When I refer to our "idea" of God, I'm talking about our *actual thoughts* about him, and not merely what our church's creed or doctrinal statement says. I've found that my *actual idea* of God, while it may be aided by the creeds and teachings of others, is exposed by challenging or difficult circumstances of life. That's where my real thoughts about him come to light; and the degree to which my thoughts about him are correct. It's those thoughts that sustain me.

My musings here are not an attempt to reduce God to *manageable terms*. I think we tend to want a God we can, in some measure, *contain* and then *control*. I assure you he's neither containable nor controllable. We won't be able to "define" him, but we can *know* him as much as he's pleased to reveal himself to us. I think that the degree to which we know him (as he actually is), we'll be empowered to follow him and do what he wants us to do.

One day the theologian Augustine was walking along the shore of the Mediterranean contemplating the nature of God. He came to a small boy who had dug a hole in the sand and was running back and forth from the sea collecting water and then pouring it into the hole. Augustine asked what he was doing. The boy said, "*I'm putting the ocean in this hole.*" The scholar realized that expecting to figure out God is as absurd as attempting to fit the sea into a ditch!

Oh, how great are God's riches and wisdom and knowledge! How impossible it is for us to understand his decisions and his ways! For who can know the Lord's thoughts? Who knows enough to give him advice? And who has given him so much that he needs to pay it back?

Romans 11:33-35 NLT

Rather than a bullet point list of God's traits or a systematic exposition of passages related to the subject of his character, the approach I take here is more of a *biblically informed philosophical meandering*. You'll find relatively few biblical passages cited

until Addendum #1; and even then, the list of verses is not intended to be an exhaustive one. You can find many more passages in any number of good systematic theologies and other good books about God's personality. I'm sure that these helpful resources have influenced my thinking; nevertheless I haven't directly consulted *the experts* in preparation for this writing. I didn't want to regurgitate what others have already written, but rather tell the story about how I see him to date. My opinions, of course, have been influenced, not only by the teachings of others, but my own study of the Bible and my personal interaction with him over the years, which has sometimes looked a lot more like *wrestling* than *interacting*.

This is more of a workingman's (and woman's) approach to theologizing, a little more hands-on than what you might find in a book with lots of germ-free definitions of Greek and Hebrew words. My hope is that these musings will be as directly applicable to you and how you live out your faith as they have been to me.

I might also mention that the aspects of God's character that I've included here are not all the topics that more comprehensive studies would include. The following are merely the qualities of God's personality about which I've been pondering lately. The things I've said here are obviously not the only things that are true about God. These are just *some* of the things that I have come to believe so far.

By the way, one's *character* is not the same as their *reputation*. Reputation is what people think you're like, while character is what you're actually like. Abraham Lincoln said, "*Character is like a tree and reputation like its shadow. The shadow is what we think of it; the tree is the real thing.*" In some circles, God doesn't have a very good reputation – mostly because of the attitudes and actions of some of his followers. Nevertheless, misunderstood or not, his *character* is intact.

This essay is intended to be more of a musing, the goal of which is to inspire some of your own better thinking – and more than *mere thinking*. I pray that your *thinking* about God, and what he's like, will readily translate into you *loving, trusting, and worshipping* him with all of your heart.

*"It is better to worship the great
Divine than to explain him."
(Philipp Melanchthon)*

"Do you know what you really need?"

I want to know God. I mean I really do want to *know* him. It's a core value for me. It's not that I don't want to *do* things for him – that too. But I figure that I can't *show* him any better than I can *know* him. When I was just over 20 years old I had my first ministry assignment as Interim Pastor of a small church in a rural town in Northern California. I had been a Christian for all of about five years, and was the youngest adult in that little church. I went into the church office prior to my first service, feeling desperate and a little bit afraid of what I had gotten myself into. I just didn't know what exactly I was desperate *for*. I had been to Bible College, and was full of knowledge and concepts about God, but it was pretty clear to me that on this day I was way over my head. I got down on the floor, flat on my belly, and buried my face in the carpet - I

think it was shag (this was still the '70's). This seemed to be the posture that best expressed how frantic I felt. I started to pray, "*Lord, I need...*" (Pause.) I didn't have much time before the service began, and I wanted my request to be as economical as possible. I don't remember exactly what I said, but I must've begun by asking for "anointing" to give the sermon (they taught us that in the preaching class in college). I probably also started to ask for "peace" to calm my screaming nervousness. But God, as he often does with me, interrupted my anxious prayer, and whispered to my mind what I actually *needed*. I very seldom get particular *words* when God communicates with me, but I guess he saw my pitiful state, and made his message clear enough for me to remember it for a long time. I didn't hear it with my ears, but these were the words that I "heard" inside me.

"Do you know what you really need?"

Umm, not really. OK, what?

"Your greatest need is to *know me*."

Really? Just that? Know you? Wow, I can do that. --- I think.

It's actually pretty simple. ("Simple" and "easy" are not the same thing.) That short conversation put me on a life-long quest. I mean it. If you know me, you know it's true that there's nothing I talk about more than *knowing God*. It's more important to me than pretty much anything else. I don't remember how long afterward it was that I ran across Daniel 11:32, which became my life verse. It still reminds me (about 35 years later) of that conversation with God while I was on my face in the shag carpet.

"... they that know their God shall be strong and do exploits."

I knew that I wanted to be "*strong*" in God and "*do exploits*" for God. But that day it became clear to me that my first tier priority was to "*know God*." I mean really *know* him, not just meet him, not just know stuff about him, but know him for who he is. He introduced himself to me when I was born-again in 1972 and yet on that church office floor he was inviting me to spend the rest of my life getting better acquainted with him.

I've come to believe that *strength* and *exploits* are usually the consequence of *knowing God*. I decided then, as a young man, if I was to pursue anything, it was going to be this. I have to admit that I haven't been entirely loyal to this goal, but my life since then has only been worth living in proportion to how consistently I've followed God's advice that day.

"We say that God is 'infinite.' In the sense that his knowledge and power extend not to some things but to all, this is true.

But if by using the word 'infinite' we encourage ourselves to think of him as a formless 'everything' about whom nothing in particular and everything in general is true, then it would be better to drop that word altogether."

(C.S. Lewis)

No bad days and no bad parts...

“Holy, holy, holy...” **Revelation 4:8**

Everyone has a character. We have either a *good* character or a *bad* one, or – most likely – a mixture of both. We’ve all used the figure of speech, “*That guy has character,*” or, “*She has no character at all.*” But in the strictest sense, everyone has character – of one quality or another.

God has character, *a good one*; in fact, the best character in the world, the only one that has no flaws in it. God is the only Person who never has to apologize to anyone at any time for anything! And fortunately for us he doesn’t have any *bad days*, times where he acts contradictory to his reputation of perfection. I have days like that, and I assume that you do too. That’s because we’re an annoying combination of virtue and the lack thereof. Even if you’re considered a “good person” – a person of good character – there will be times when it looks like you don’t deserve to be called “good.” It’s predictable; you’re going to let people down, even those that you care about most. But God has no such mixture. He has no flaws or inconsistencies; he possesses unmitigated integrity.

Another way to put it is that God is consistent with himself at all times. Not only does he not have any *bad days*; he has no *bad parts*. A.W. Tozer said, “*All of God does all that God does.*” In other words, there is no conflict among his characteristics. His love and his justice never collide. His truth and his grace are never at war with each other. He never has a *schizophrenic moment* where one part within him feuds with another. All of his perfections work in collaboration with each other. He always acts consistently with who he is. His excellencies operate in collusion with all the rest of himself. In my case, instead of a consistent *collusion* within me at all times, there’s often a *collision* between my intentions and my actions. Not so with God – he’s got complete integrity and never acts “out of character” with himself.

We could also say that God’s personality traits are equal with respect to one another. He’s not more “loving” than he is “just,” or more “holy” than He is “merciful.” When we imagine one aspect of God to be more important than another or elevate one of his attributes above another, we create a lopsided God, and are in danger of a form of idolatry. All his attributes are compatible and there is perfect unity among all his perfections. All of him cooperates with all of the rest of him.

When we’re informed that God is “holy” I’m not convinced that the Bible is speaking of a separate characteristic of his, an attribute to be distinguished from the rest. It seems to me that his holiness is the sum total of all of his characteristics. Holiness is another way to say that he is whole. All that God is, he is perfectly. He’s missing nothing, a holy God.

The words *integrity*, *whole*, and *holy* are all related. Someone with *integrity*, i.e. a holy person, is someone who is whole, who has no gaps in their personality. All of their parts *collude* rather than *collide*. God has the premium on integrity. He’s the only one

of us who is whole. Unlike us, he has nothing missing! He's the "whole-est," the holiest of all.

I said that God "has no bad parts." But, since he exists in a single and un-complex unity with himself, it might be more accurate to say that God has no "parts" at all. What we call his "attributes" are simply the way he is and how he reveals himself to us. When he loves us he's simply being himself, the God who is love. When he treats us mercifully, he's just acting like the merciful one that he is.

Since his actions always match his character, forgive the language that God is "simple." That is, because of his integrity we can always count on him to be the same person every time we encounter him. He may or may not do the same thing he did in the past or do it in the same way, but we can always expect him to be the same God of integrity that he's always been. When we come to him we don't have to wonder whether or not he's in a receptive mood. In fact, he doesn't have moods – which swing him in one direction or the other. He's never out of the office or out of sorts. He's always available and is always the same.

He said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He's faithful and good and merciful and gracious and loving and just... *all the time*. There's never a moment when God is anything but himself. He never has to say, "I'm just not myself today!" He is who he is all the time.

*"Every poet and musician and artist, but for Grace,
is drawn away from love of the thing he tells,
to love the telling till, down in Deep Hell,
they cannot be interested in God at all but
only in what they say about Him."
(C.S. Lewis)*

A beautiful holiness...

"One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek... to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord..." Psalm 27:4 NIV

"Worship the Lord in the beauty of his holiness" Psalm 29:2 KJV

God's holiness is beautiful, like a beautiful person, rather than simply functional, like a robot. So what? How does that relate to his character. I mean, doesn't the Bible say that "beauty is fleeting"? Outward appearance is not our most important quality. Right? Right, but we're not talking about us, but about him. Our human beauty (for those who actually have some) is superficial and short-lived. But when the Bible talks about God's beauty my guess is that it's referring to his character, his *insides* rather than his *outsides* (I'm not even sure that he has "outsides"). His personality is beautiful. He's a beautiful Person. The only time I can think of when he was referred to as having "no beauty" was when he became *one of us* (Isaiah 53:2)!

If I think about the things that I consider beautiful it's usually because they possess a confluence of their parts. A woman that I think is beautiful, for instance, is not just because one part of her (and we'll just be talking about her face, OK?) – her nose, or

her eyes. It's how all of the aspects of her face look together. And of sunsets; the most beautiful ones I've seen are a combination of colors wafted against the dusk sky. I don't judge the beauty of a painting by one corner of it, but by the whole. Poems, songs, landscapes, a starry sky – they're all beautiful to my mind due to blend of beautiful parts.

God is and has a confluence of beautiful parts and is therefore beautiful. I said it earlier, that he has “no bad parts,” and that all his parts work together in harmony with one another. They not only work in a sort of functional harmony, but an aesthetic one, which I call “beauty.” He's beautiful because of he's “together.” He's beautiful because his characteristics are never at odds with each other, because he's a God of integrity and holiness.

The God I love is beautiful and “altogether lovely.” It's not just what he does, but how he appears when doing it that stirs my heart.

Faith in his character...

When I think about God my primary musings have to do with his character. Though I have a great appreciation for his *capability* it's his *character* that makes me love him. I don't love him because he's omnipotent, omnipresent or omniscient. I'm glad that he can do anything, is everywhere at once, and knows everything there is to know; but what makes him so loveable to me is his character. When he says he's going to do something, he does it. He isn't selfish, but loves to help us whenever we let him. He has an impeccable character. It makes me happy to sing: “*Holy, holy, holy – merciful and mighty...*” He's both *merciful and mighty*. He is *capable* and has *character*. But I love him not so much for what he can do (his might), but for what he's like (his mercy)!

*...it's his character
that makes me love him.*

By the way, can you imagine a world in which God is not both “*merciful and mighty*”? One without the other would be disastrous. Pity the God who had a heart for the miserable but could do nothing about it. And pity the people whose God had the *might* to do anything he wanted, but hadn't the *mercy* to spare us sinners from the judgment we deserve!

I had just lost my 30-year marriage, broke my neck, and was diagnosed with cancer all within a two-month period. I mused about whether or not God was as consistent as I had previously thought. It seemed to me that he was good one moment and not so good the next. He didn't appear to be doing the same things the same way in which he'd once done them. Was it me? Did I do something to make him not like me as much as he had in the past, or was it he who had changed?

I was sniffing around the trap* that the devil had set for me. Did the Lord have the character that I'd read about in the Bible or was he something less than that? How could a just and faithful God let this happen to me all at once? My idea about God was being challenged. My concept of him was, by necessity, shifting from the theoretical to *survival mode*. Platitudes would no longer cut it. Was he or was he not who the Bible implied he was? I was at a crossroads regarding God's character.

*I call it a “trap” of the devil, because luring us into doubting God’s goodness is one of his most effective snares. “*Did God really say you shall not eat from any of the trees in the garden?*” The snake was burrowing into Eve’s naïve head. “*God is not good, he doesn’t want you to be happy, he’s hoarding his best!*” Satan’s been propagandizing this reasoning ever since, and with much success.

It began to seem that his blessings were more *randomly* than *uniformly* distributed than I had once believed. The “*God-always-does-this-and-not-that*” approach to which I had previously ascribed didn’t seem nearly as valid as it once had. I used to think that he distributed blessings at more predictable increments along our path. Now it seems like he tosses them out like dice. He doesn’t seem so nearly as “in control” as I had once believed. That’s why I call him the “Sometimes God” and claim that he’s “In control but not controlling.”

He’s the God who watched as one apostle was beheaded, and then shortly afterward, rescued another from the same fate (Acts 12). What’s up with that?! I guess if I knew a conclusive answer to that, I wouldn’t be *me* – I’d be *him*, and I’m pretty sure that’s not the case. I’m not even a very good *me*, let alone a good *him*.

Anymore it’s not often that I ask him “why” he does what he does. To the *why* question he usually gives me answers that all pretty much sound like “Trust me.” Over time I’ve become more content not knowing *why*. I don’t need all the answers as long as I know *he* has them. I guess I could say that I’m a bit more at ease with his decisions these days.

A little girl sleeps peacefully in the back seat because she trusts that her dad knows how to drive. Dad must be a good driver, so why worry? (That is, he *was* a good driver until the day she got her *own* drivers license. Now *she’s* behind the wheel, and he doesn’t know what he’s doing!)

I’m confident that God is a good driver, even if he does terrify me sometimes with how near the cliff’s edge he sometimes comes and takes me places I wasn’t anticipating (“Leads me where I don’t want to go” John 21:18). But that’s what makes a life with him an adventure. I don’t have to artificially induce adrenaline with video games and thriller movies. My adrenal glands get plenty of work in the work of God! Meanwhile, between adventures, I try to get as much sleep in the backseat as I can and avoid as much backseat driving as possible.

God is more of a *moving target* than I had once thought. *What he does* is not as predictable as *who he is*. There’s no real challenge to trust a coke machine. I put the money in and it dispenses the Mountain Dew. It’s predictable – unless I happen to be particularly desperate for caffeine, which is the most predictable time for it to eat my money. In which case, I’m tired and irritated!

If God were predictable where would the adventure be in following him? He’s not only capable of dispensing blessings, he is wise enough to decide when, where, and how to dispense them.

The question in the book of Job is not so much, “Why is there suffering?” The question it addresses is “Why do people serve God even when he doesn’t do things the way they

want him to?” We don’t get to call it *trust* when we understand everything that he does. It’s when we don’t understand that trust steps up to the plate.

If our faith is primarily in the *capability* of God rather than in his *character*, then when he doesn’t, for whatever reason, wield that capability in a way that makes sense to us, our faith fails. If I trust him because he heals and provides, and then one day when he doesn’t heal or provide (at least in the way I had expected), what happens to my faith? But I’m learning that when my confidence is more focused on his *character* (which doesn’t fluctuate), then my mind is more at rest, believing that he will act consistently with who he is.

Would I prefer that God intervened more often and more consistently displayed his might? You bet! What he chooses to respond to or not to respond to with his power often puzzles me (that’s putting in lightly). It seems to me that there are seasons and sites in which he intervenes more regularly with *power* than in other seasons and sites. Sometimes we call that “Revival.” And then there are other times when he seems to *observe* more than *intervene*. He sits back and watches rather than displaying his might to radically transform an undesirable circumstance.

OK, maybe “sits back” is not the best description of what he does. But since I don’t know what he’s doing when he doesn’t intervene, I guess I imagine him sitting. Although, at Stephen’s stoning we do have the one instance in Scripture when it says that Jesus, rather than “sitting at the right hand of God,” he “stood.” He didn’t intervene and prevent the brutality (along with countless other atrocities in our world for that matter), but he *stood up* for a man that had *stood up* for him!

Another three would-be martyrs seemed to trust his character as much as his capability – “He’s able to save us from your blazing furnace, but even if he doesn’t, we won’t bow down.” In their case, though they trusted his judgment and were prepared for him to stand up for them, but not necessarily jump in to their rescue, he chose to intervene and wield his capability. Sometimes he does and sometimes he doesn’t. Can we trust a God like that? Since he’s the only One we’ve got, we’ll have to learn to.

My good friend Dan, whose two daughters were killed by a drunk driver says, “An attitude that I’m trying to develop in order to stave off disappointment is to want only what God wants for me; be happy if he gives it to me, and content if he doesn’t.”

Some musings from my Memoir about faith...

Whether or not I get what I want when I pray, my faith is built, I’m closer to God, and I enjoy him more when I trust him. I’m beginning to see faith as something other than simply utilitarian. It’s not just something that helps me acquire stuff from God.

It’s true that we gain faith when we get what we want from God. But I think I also grow in faith when I *don’t* get what I want. And it’s the kind of faith that loves and trusts him for *who he is to me*, more than for *what he does for me*. Yes, I must have faith in his power (his capability), but now I’m paying more attention to his personality (his character), and letting him work out how he’s going to wield his power.

“Though he slay me, yet will I trust him.”

“Lord, I do believe, but help me with my unbelief!”

“The single most important fact about you is what comes to your mind when you think about God.” (A.W. Tozer)

Predictably good...

The Jesus character in The Chronicles of Narnia series by C.S. Lewis is a fierce lion named, “Aslan.” One of Aslan’s most notable characteristics was his unpredictability. He seemed capricious, almost fickle at times. He would show up sometimes and save the day, and at other times he would wait and sort of let things run their course. There were times when he would only show himself to one person and remain invisible to the rest. One of the characters in the first book of the series asked another about Aslan, “*Is he safe?*” He replied, “*No. He’s not safe, but he’s good.*”

When I’m talking about God and the way he acts I try not to use the words “always” or “never” – in this case, “usually” or “often” are more accurate. “He usually does this or that.” But when we’re talking about God’s character, I think we may say with confidence, “always” and “never.” He is who he is all the time. Since he’s perfect he doesn’t have to change anything. He’s not getting better. He’s already better! So when I say, “*God is always* this way or *is never* that way,” it’s not the same as saying he always *does* this thing or never *does* that thing. To my mind, his actions are not nearly as predictable as his character.

Am I making sense? I’m proposing that God’s character is predictable, but how he expresses his character might shock us. He might do something one day with one person, and then on another day with another person do it an altogether different way. His actions are not as predictable as his character. He’s predictably good, predictably just, and predictably kind. But when he expresses his goodness or justice or kindness in particular situations, he can’t be so easily anticipated. He doesn’t always heal everyone, he doesn’t always alleviate every person’s suffering, he doesn’t always do what we want him to do even when we have the right faith, say the right words, or push all the right buttons.

Since only God is like God, it’s pretty tough for me to grade his work. His performance, which exudes from his Person, is unique to him because he is unique. I can’t very well grade him if I’m not like him. Only he is as wise as he is. I try to remember this when he doesn’t “perform” in a way that would tend to please me.

I was thinking that if God weren’t good, what would he be? What are the alternatives to him being *predictably good*? I guess it’s possible that he is only *partially good*. I don’t know that this is very likely since I’m pretty sure he isn’t *partially anything*. That would introduce the possibility of mixture in God, and it makes me shudder to think that the Maker has evil as part of his makeup! When he claims to be holy and commands us to be holy also, how wicked would it be for him to be anything but perfect!

The only other alternative, I suppose, is that he's *entirely wicked* and has no good whatsoever in his personality. I think met some *people* that could be described this way, but God? How bad would our world be if it turned out to be true that God is all bad!

Thankfully, the reality is that God is not bad, but is the quintessential do-gooder! Goodness is such an integral part of his character he can't help himself; he has to do good.

During a time of intense struggle I ran across an obscure verse that changed the way I think about God's goodness. I wrote a chapter about it in my Memoir. Here's an excerpt from it.

Be strong and let us fight bravely for our people and the cities of our God. The LORD will do what is good in his sight. 1 Chronicles 19:13

I know what *my* job is – to be strong and fight bravely. *God's* job, on the other hand, is to do *what is good in his sight*. I have to do what I'm supposed to do, and then trust that he'll do what only *he* can do, i.e. *what is good in his sight*. What's good in his sight might not always be what's good in mine. He and I don't always agree about what is *good*. And guess whose opinion – about what is good and virtually everything else – actually matters!

The Bible says a couple of other things about what is *good*: “No *good thing* will he withhold from them who walk uprightly...” That's one of those super-promises in the Bible. In another place it says that God “works all things together for *good* to those who love him...” which is another super-promise. But then Jesus said, “There's none *good* but God.” In other words, God is going to do *what is good* in his sight, but since we're not good, we wouldn't know good if it slapped us in the face!

Joab made it clear that God would do what was good *in his own sight*, and not necessarily in *theirs*. All they knew to do was to be strong and fight bravely. They could do that. That was *their* job. *God's* job, on the other hand, was to be involved in the outcome. And if they did their part, God would do his and see that things turned out, “*good in his sight*.”

What's good in his sight is what is commensurate with his good character. He is good, the only good, and what he thinks and does is good. Since I'm not in charge of “good,” I'll have to trust him to do his job well and make *good out of bad* every chance he gets. I do still tell him what I think he ought to do – about this thing and that. It just seems impossible to withhold the urge. But I usually include an addendum of something like, “But feel free to go ahead and do what is good in *your* sight.”

Full of mercy...

I want to say again that it's not my intent to dissect God, like a frog, into pieces so we can study him. Nothing life-changingly good comes from anyone's attempt to take him apart and examine him. I simply want to know him as best I can *the way he actually is*. We're not trying to build a God-model out of a box of parts. These qualities of his that we're talking about don't so much add up to be God. These aren't "God's parts" as much as they are a few of the things about his ineffable character about which he chose to grant us a glimpse.

There's not way that he's shared everything about himself with us. We wouldn't be able to contain it if he did. There are still zillions of "secret things" about the Lord that he hasn't revealed us (Deuteronomy 29:29) and maybe, even in the eternal state, he never will. He's always going to be bigger than we can comprehend.

*"The Lord is good to all: his tender mercies are over all his works!
Goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life..."*
(Psalm 145:9; 23:6)

Fortunately for us, one of the things about himself that God is quite explicit is that he's *merciful*. I revel in his mercy every time I think about how amazing it is that know I get to know anything at all about him. That I am sane – sort of – instead of committed to Bellevue is an act of mercy on God's part. That I am not in prison, not friendless, not dead – it's all due to God's mercy that keeps washing over me.

Mercy and grace

The Bible writers often spoke of God's "*grace and mercy*" in the same breath as if sisters. At face value mercy and grace might look like synonyms but, judging by their usage in the Bible and their relative definitions, I think there are noteworthy distinctions between them. They both convey that we're undeserving of their benefits and both are essential for our spiritual rescue, but mercy and grace, though related closely to each other, are not really the same thing.

Grace is something that God had and that he's happy to distribute free of charge. I like the acrostic: **God's Riches At Christ's Expense** or better yet, **God's Righteousness And Corresponding Enablement**. Grace is: *Jesus for us* and *Jesus in us*.

But if we're talking about what God is like, in my opinion, grace is not on the list. Grace is more about something God *has* than *who he is*. Mercy, on the other hand, is an aspect of his personality, what he's like. God's mercy is part of *who he is* and grace is *what he gives* because of who he is. Mercy is God's *disposition* while grace is what his disposition *disposes him* to distribute. Because he's saturated and spilling over with mercy he hands out grace like candy.

Because God *is merciful* he *gives grace*.

What does mercy look like?

Bible writers tell us that God is *rich in mercy, full of mercy, great in mercy*; and the immoderate source of *tender mercies*. As previously promised, I'll avoid the technicalities of original language or theological complexities. Suffice it to say, there are several original words in both testaments that are translated "mercy," the nuance of each is a shade distinct from the others: *pity, kindness, loving kindness, kindly affection, compassion*. One of the terms even means to be so moved with empathy that the insides of the mercy-giver convulse!

Jesus, the image of the invisible God, put a face on the Father. So looking at Jesus we should be able to see examples of what mercy looks like on earth. His mercy spilled over onto

diminutive extortionists sitting in trees and sex workers who came to his meetings. He showed mercy to fearful disciples who should've done better than to abandon him to the soldiers and on the soldiers who were wounded by impulsive disciples. His mercy-tank was full all the way to the end when he gifted a heaven pass to a thief and requested forgiveness for ignorant crucifiers. He was "acquainted" with his own grief and identified with the grief of widows at the funerals of their only sons. This is the way he was – merciful.

I confess that I'm a weeper. It started on the day Jesus broke in and stole my heart. Though I was his only taker that day, the pastor who called repenters to his altar missed his lunch hour waiting for me to stop my grateful sobbing. It was the first of many such mercy appreciation sessions for me. That day – and almost every time since then – when volcanic sobs erupt from my core it's usually because I'm overwhelmed by a sense of mercy. Sometimes I *cry out* for mercy to help me in a season of great need and at other times I *just cry* in appreciation for mercy already abundantly given. Whether I'm *crying out* or *just crying*, it's mercy that's on my mind.

Mercy-full

When sick, blind, poor, and miserable people called on Jesus in the gospel stories, they usually pled for mercy – "*Have mercy on me!*" In their desperation they cried out: "*I don't deserve your kindness or compassionate intervention, but I'm asking you to forego giving me what I deserve and treat me mercifully. You seem to be so brimming with mercy, I suspect that you have some to spare. Please use some of that spare mercy on me.*"

Because mercy is the way he is, it's the way he treats twisted, wretched, and all manner of undeserving souls – like us. It's what he exudes when squeezed and what splashes over when he's clutched.

This is nothing new, it's the way he's always been. If he hadn't been so replete with mercy, our original parents would've keeled over before they ate to the apple's core. God's free-will experiment would have been awfully short-lived; instead he approached the naked produce thieves with mercy. Ever since he's been kindly disposed toward us and found a way to ransom us from the slavery into which we sold ourselves.

God is so full of mercy that we can be confident that he won't run out of it when we need it most. When my gas tank is full I don't worry about stalling half way across the Golden Gate Bridge. Unless I refill it, my tank will eventually go completely dry, but not mercy. To worry that God's mercy supply will prove inadequate when I need it is paramount to a sardine who hesitates to take a sip from the ocean lest he drink it dry! God has plenty to spare in his immense supply of mercy for all of us who admit our need for it.

"Mercy never began to be, but from eternity was; so it will never cease to be. It will never be more since it is in itself infinite; and it will never be less the infinite cannot suffer diminution." (A.W. Tozer)

As though the singular – "mercy" – were inadequate to express the surplus stock of God's kindness, and how this quality of his exudes from his heart to many points of our need all at once, it is sometimes referred to as his "mercies." Our neediness, as complex and overwhelming as it may be, can always find a relentless supply from the God of many mercies, a new ration of it shows up every morning. There's an infinite quantity in the personality of an

infinite Creator. It has no limits anywhere; its center is everywhere and its circumference is nowhere.

He's a lover...

Of all the ways to describe what God is like, this is the most legendary. He loved the world enough to send his Son, he loved us while we were still sinners, he loves us in our state of paltry sanctification. How great is the vast and fearless love of God! His love endures forever. As long as God lives, God loves. Pardon the double negative, but God will never not love!

- *Greater love has no man than this... John 15:13*
- *Love comes from God... 1 John 4:7*
- *Perfect love drives out fear... 1 John 4:18*
- *How great is love that the Father has lavished on us... 1 John 3:1*
- *This is how we know what love is; Jesus Christ laid down his life for us... 1 John 3:16*
- *God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners Christ died for us. Romans 5:10*

In my Memoir I wrote a chapter called, **“God Kissed Me On The Head...”** Here's an excerpt from it:

I could tell you - man, could I tell you - about the unpleasant side effects of chemotherapy, but neither you nor I would be the least bit happy about the telling. I will say this - that though it's poison, chemo poisons *bad cells*, and that's what you want it to do. Problem is, at the same time it poisons a bunch of *good cells*. But a while back the Lord gave me a better take on that. I began to see that when the unpleasant side effects occurred, I could celebrate this as an indicator that the chemicals were doing their thing. The assassins were hitting their targets. I could see it and feel it for myself. I didn't need a blood test or an x-ray to tell me that cells (some bad and some good) were being gunned down by *the new sheriff in town*. The evil doers are being brought to justice and getting what they deserve. So now when I feel like... Anyway when I feel *bad*, I can somehow boost my morale by knowing something *good* is happening.

Yeah, the chemo took all my hair away! The interesting part of instant baldness for me is that it uncovered a surprise - a birthmark that I didn't know I had on the top of my head. After all, I've never seen my scalp before. As long as I can remember, it's been covered. My friend Mark says the birthmark looks like Africa. Dan says, Brazil. My daughter in law, Tori says it resembles *a heart*. I'm going with the heart and claiming that God kissed me when I was entering this, sometimes heartless, world. When my children were babies, I just couldn't get enough of kissing them on the head. Besides killing cancer cells, maybe another good quality of chemo is that it uncovered a clue of God's love for me!

Love is the way he is... He not only loves, *he is love*. This doesn't mean that there is nothing in God but love. Once you've said everything about the love of God, you haven't said everything about God. As I've already affirmed, “all of God does all that God does,” so none of him is more

prominent than another, but if you must emphasize one aspect above another, emphasize this one.

But love is not all there is to God. Love is not God's equal. God is love, and more than love – he's also just and holy and faithful and... As we've suggested, his is a *collaboration* of excellencies. His qualities all work in *collusion*, he being the only Being of which it's so. His wisdom is a loving wisdom, and his love is a wise love. He dispenses justice in a loving way, and administers his love justly; and so on.

God is eternally balanced, his characteristics each display an aspect of his character in an equilibrium with all the others. In his holiness he is unapproachable; in his love he approaches us. As a holy God he is transcendent, and as the God of love he is immanent. It's in Christ that these two seemingly irreconcilable excellencies come together. What his holiness demanded his love provided.

We shouldn't reverse the phrase and claim that "*Love is God.*" That would be to equate the two. It's true that when you see love – a pure and unadulterated *agape* – you might suspect that God is somewhere near. If it's the genuine article, we'd have to admit that it was inspired in some way by the God who is love. But to claim that this manifest love "is God," would be to forget that God is a *Someone* rather than a *Something*. Love is one of the ways that he relates to his creation, but neither his creation, nor the way he relates to it is essentially *him*. To think otherwise is to deify love and to make it a "god" of sorts.

Love is the way God is. It's not just how he behaves on good days. He doesn't act loving just when it's called for. He embodies a titanic love like no one else. His love isn't elicited by something good in us. It flows out of him because of his nature. God's love is an *action toward us*, not a *reaction to us*. It's dependent not on what *we're* like, but on what *he's* like.

No one loves like God. Even the most unlovable of us have evidence of his kisses on our heads, his invisible benevolent "brand" on everyone who comes into this otherwise unloving world. He wants everyone to have a good beginning. Sometimes we just have to lose something (like hair or something even more important than mere hair) in order to see the heart-shaped brand.

I wonder if before God made us, all his love was sort of pent up within himself (among the Three) with no one outside of himself, with whom to share it. Though nothing from *outside* of the Sovereign can force him, it might be true to say that he was *compelled from the inside* of himself. His love demanded an outlet, somewhere to go, someone to brand with a kiss. He burst with passion and made free-willed creatures on which to lavish his bottomless ocean of love!

A stubborn lover...

Most Bible students are quite familiar with the Greek terms in the New Testament for love. The most prominent of them is "agape," which denotes unconditional self-giving. It's this kind of love that God *displays to us*, *deposits in us*, and *demand of us*. It's the ultimate unselfishness, the deepest regard for another, even when the lover receives no reciprocation of his love in return. It's the riskiest of loves, the one that "*lays down its life for its friends.*"

There's another term for love used a bunch in the Old Testament – "Hesed." (The "h" has that guttural sound that you make when you're getting ready to spit. You should practice saying it only when alone and with a tissue in hand.) Pronunciation aside, "hesed" is God's stubborn, relentless, unrestrained, and insistent love. Hesed is when you refuse to give up loving, even when you have every reason to. That's the way God loves. When he's rejected, when his

proposal is refused, when his overtures are all rebuffed; he keeps on “hesed-ing” and “agape-ing!” He’s a stubborn lover!

A jealous lover...

- *Keep yourselves in the love of God... Jude 21*
- *If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love... John 15:10*
- *I am a jealous God... Exodus 20:5*
- *The Spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely... James 4:5*

Does it seem strange that the Lord is a jealous lover and that jealousy is an *iniquity* for us but a *quality* for God? It’s because he knows that what’s best for us is *him!* It’s only right that he should hate it when we prefer another above (or instead of) him. When we fail to reciprocate his love, it’s not as though we love nothing at all; we become enamored with something else. He’s jealous when we find alternatives with which to share our affection.

On the other hand, when returned, God’s agape is a source of limitless joy to him. When his passion is mutually shared by his beloved, he *sings and dances over us*. Eternal love in its width, length, height, and depth – received and reciprocated – is his free-will experiment is all about. Mutually enjoyed divine love is the highest and purest of life now and forever!

The initiator...

- *May you have power to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge... Ephesians 3:18-19*
- *“If we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.” 1 John 4:12*
- *God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us... 1 John 4:16-17*
- *We love because he first loved us... 1 John 4:19*

God’s love is mutually enjoyed; it looks for a resting place and yearns for reciprocation. His love is only “complete” when those he’s reaching out to reach back. Tozer wrote, *“It is a strange and beautiful eccentricity of the free God that he has allowed his heart to be emotionally identified with men. Self-sufficient that he is, he wants our love and will not be satisfied till he gets it.”*

*When his love is rejected, when it’s refused,
when his overtures are all rebuffed;
he keeps on “hesed-ing” and “agape-ing!”
He’s a stubborn lover!*

In this way love is different than the other characteristics that describe God. This particular character quality of his calls for a response, a return of the love that he extends. In order for it to be complete, and both parties to benefit from it, his love has to be returned.

More directly than any other aspect of his disposition his love is to be reciprocated. As he is holy, we aspire to be holy. He’s longsuffering with us, and so we aspire to be the same. But love is something that we were made to receive and then return back to him. He loves us thoroughly and unconditionally, and with commensurate intensity we’re inspired to love him back.

It’s true that he continues loving me even when I don’t return it, but when I return his advances; the joy of mutual love is realized in both of us. I can only receive the full benefits of his love

when I return it back to him. I experience his love the most in the *reciprocation*. How can I ever feel the warmth of how he feels about me if I don't return his love? When I receive and return his *agape*; the world is as it should be. It's what we're all put here to do – *love the Lover of our souls!*

“*God so loved the world...*” He loves a world full of people, many of whom will never love him back. Though his offer will continue to stand, those who reject his proposal won't directly benefit from it. For instance, if I love someone, and yet they never choose to counter my affections, then both of us miss the joy of mutual love. If they reject me, neither of us enjoys love's benefits. We both miss the elation of loving and being loved. Everybody loses.

- *God's heart was grieved... and his heart was filled with pain. Genesis 6:6*
- *And don't grieve the Holy Spirit of God... Ephesians 4:30*

When he dreamed us up, God's heart must have been filled with an intense desire to share himself with us. He wanted us to know him as he is, become smitten, and in this way, stumble onto life's most profound joy. He made us in such a way as to find our greatest delight in the delight of knowing we're loved and reciprocating the same back to him.

To put it mildly, it's hard for us to love people who don't love us in return. I don't do it very well; but the One who loved first loves those who pay him no attention. His unrequited love remains constant regardless of our response to it. It's who he is. When we don't love him back we miss out on the benefits of being “*so loved.*”

Until we return his adoration; his *agape* – though constant and fixed – won't be savored by us, and his own outstretched heart is in some way unfulfilled. Those who don't return his love miss out on its warmth – and because his passion has no place to alight – I have no doubt that God himself feels the heartache. Unrequited love becomes more of an ache in the heart of the lover than a joy to it. Human love, in such a cases, hurts more than it heartens. I can only imagine that with the mass of humanity that rejects him, on one level, God's heart lives in a sort of unremitting state of restlessness and grief. He offers his love to all his creatures, and so few return it. How would *we* survive if we had so much affection to give, and so few received and returned it? On the other hand, the ecstasy of his love reaching out and finding receivers and reciprocators must be so great that he was willing to risk the grief.

I wouldn't want you to worry about him though. He would not be any less God if no one returned his love. It wouldn't destroy him if everyone he loved rejected his advances. In order to be secure within himself he isn't dependent on us to love him. His security is in himself. He had intimate fellowship among his triune essence before the world began; and though he created us to be loved and to love him in return, his character would remain intact even if he had no takers. He'd still love, because it's his nature.

Perfectly wise...

“... *the only wise God*” Romans 16:27

I include it in a discussion about God's character because wisdom is not the acquisition of a lot of knowledge or some higher form of intelligence. They say, “If you want knowledge go to college,” but wisdom is not gained in a class or a textbook; it's a moral thing, a matter of character. “Wisdom” is *knowing* what to do, having the desire to do it, and the will to go ahead and do it. It may begin with knowledge, but then

resolves itself like a good melody into character. Wise people, says Solomon – a converted Solomon – have moral integrity; they have character.

As is the case with every characteristic of God, wisdom is not something he had to develop, it's who he is and who he has always been. On the other hand, we who choose to follow in his steps, have to passionately and patiently pursue wisdom over time. We didn't leave the maternity ward with it in our little hands, we have to develop it through a lifetime of repeating good choices and repenting of bad ones.

Wisdom isn't injected all at once like a flu shot. It grows like a fruit tree from shoot to sapling to tree. It begins with a few lanky branches and even fewer tiny apples, and ultimately develops into a mature tree with more fruit than you know what to do with.

By contrast, the Creator has always been as perfectly wise as he will ever be. He's not gaining or leaking wisdom as time elapses. While we're told to "get wisdom," God has already got it, and has plenty to spare for those willing to get it over time. We usually learn to make "good choices" by having made a bunch of bad ones, suffering the consequences, and ultimately deciding there's a better way. God, on the other hand, needed no such process to acquire his wisdom. He's "the wise God," the only one who has possessed wisdom as an un-acquired quality of his personality.

When trials piled up all at once in my life, a friend of mine asked me if I doubted the things that I had once taught about God's character. I was in a lot of emotional and physical pain, and quite cynical at the time. I said, "*No, I don't question his character, it's his judgment that I wonder about. I'm rethinking whether or not God always displays good judgment.*" Though he tried to conceal it, my buddy recoiled a bit, but gave me the space I needed that day to vent.

When I heard myself say this, I was a little surprised by it myself, and mused over it later. Is it possible for God to be a person of *good character* and yet have *bad judgment*? As I mulled it over, I came to the conclusion that I was mistaken, and that *good judgment* is a component of *good character*. You can't have good character without having good judgment at the same time. "*Counsel and sound judgment are mine,*" says Wisdom personified (Proverbs 18:14). It takes a wise person to evaluate the possibilities, to know the best path to take, and take it. The wisest people that I know are all like this – the Wisest One in particular.

I was letting my emotions do the thinking that day. God, I have now come to believe, has enough wisdom to make good decisions and display good judgment at all times. What I was struggling with (and sometimes still do) was not having enough of my *own wisdom* to be able to discern *his wisdom*. It pretty much comes down to me having very little appreciation for some of God's decisions. What he chooses to do – or not to do – is sometimes not what I would do if I were him – and aren't we all quite glad that I'm not!

Maybe someday I'll get my own universe, and then I can do things my way! Until then I'll have to trust the only wise God.

*"I'm often put on the spot of being God's defender.
I am expected to explain God to his disappointed clients.*

I am thrust into the role of a clerk in the complaints department of humanity, asked to trace down bad service, listen sympathetically to aggrieved patrons, try to put right any mistakes that I can, and apologize for the rudeness of the management.” (Eugene Petersen)

Worthy of trust...

As I started down my own road of personal loss, one of the things the Lord seemed to convey consistently to me was: “*Trust me!*” I have to be honest, at first it was pretty tough for me to trust him when it seemed like he was either *causing* or *allowing* my losses. Everything I had believed and had encouraged others to believe was being tested. Like anyone else, I’ve had plenty of bouts with doubts over the years, but the temptation to question his trustworthiness intensified during this bleak time in my life. I had to decide whether or not I was going to continue trusting him even though he wasn’t coming to my rescue like a superhero.

Is he *good* even when he does nothing – nothing that I can see – to rescue me from these sufferings? Can I say he’s faithful even when my faith isn’t fulfilled? Platitudes wouldn’t suffice. If my faith were to survive I needed something more substantial than Christian clichés. Was God worthy of my trust or not?

One thing that I realized during those dismal days was how easy it is to espouse a hopeful view of what God is like when things are peachy. Previously I’d only seen suffering from a distance, not so up close and personal. My confidence in his character was something of an *untested theory* that I gained from reading the Bible and listening to others.

I now believe that God doesn’t ever act out of character with himself but is faithful to himself and to those he loves. That he is *faithful* (a term that finds its way into our conversations, creeds, and worship songs) means that everything that he is, he is consistently. He’s dependable and doesn’t change because the *perfect* has nowhere to go to improve. A home run is a home run. It can’t be improved on. It’s either over the fence or it’s not. Faithful means that what God is, he is, and not only when he’s in the mood. If he’s holy, he’s always holy. If he’s good, you can count on him being good all the time. He’s consistent.

If we disown him, he will also disown us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself. **2 Timothy 2:12-13**

He’s not only faithful to us, but to himself. He can’t “*disown himself*,” that is, he can’t stop acting like himself. When a person “disowns” others it’s because they don’t want to associate with them anymore. In response to atrocious behavior a person might disown another person and demand a complete and permanent separation from them. God will never do that with himself. He won’t separate himself from the way he is; he is faithful to himself. He will, only after a person adamantly and permanently disowns him, disown them; but he can’t ever disown himself.

As he is true to himself, he’s true to those he loves. He will never be found to be an “unfaithful” Husband to his Bride. He won’t forget about us, cheat on us, or decide he

wants out of the marriage after all. As he is a “jealous lover,” requiring our full devotion, he will never give us any reason to suspect that we’ve been jilted for someone better than us.

What is it that makes God so trust-able? If I think about the people that I love and trust, they’re all people of good character – trustworthy people. While I might possess *admiration* for a talented person like an athlete or actor, it’s not their talent that inspires me to trust them. I don’t really *trust* my favorite baseball player or musician. I cheer when they come up to the plate or step on stage to play the guitar, but it’s to people with good character that I will give my heart. I applaud virtuosity, but I love and trust my trustworthy friends.

God wants to be loved and trusted, not simply admired and applauded. His power to do anything he wants is impressive; and it inspires a certain amount of faith. But to me that’s the kind of faith you’d have in an older brother who could defend you in a street fight. Yet it’s God’s character that draws me into a romance with him. His trustworthiness frees me to trust him. I know that he can do anything, and I am glad to have a God like that. But he is consistent with himself, that’s what I’m looking for in a friend in whom I can place my trust.

*All that he does
is commensurate
with all that he is.*

All my friends (the human ones) have flaws. Sometimes they have bad days and will inevitably do or say things from their bad side. Everyone has a bad side, and everyone lets it come out from time to time. But our *Best Friend* acts consistently with himself, with his good side – his only side. He is never influenced by anything or anyone from outside of himself in such a way as to be moved to contradict what is within himself. He’s consistent with who he is at all times.

To me, this is the essence of God’s faithfulness. He’s always the same. He doesn’t overpromise and under-deliver. He doesn’t ever act inconsistently with what he’s like. He can’t divide himself. All that he does is commensurate with all that he is. If he could be trusted yesterday, he can be trusted today, and again tomorrow. He “*cannot disown himself.*”

A just God...

My blind spot...

I’m ashamed to admit that I came to the table late on this aspect of God’s personality. Though “justice” is mentioned 134 times in the Bible, in my three decades of pastoral ministry I never gave one message on the concept of justice for the poor and powerless. In fact, until recently, I’d never even *heard* a message on it. (That’s not coming to the table late, as in arriving during the dessert. By the time I became aware of this, the table had been cleared and the dishes were washed, dried, and put away!]

About a decade ago I noticed that some of the new worship songs that we were singing included the term “justice,” and honestly it puzzled me at first. I didn’t know what they meant when they said: *Dancers who dance upon injustice... Let justice and praise become my embrace... Great is your love and justice God... Your justice flows like the ocean’s tide...!*

I’m embarrassed that I’d always thought of *justice* exclusively in terms of God’s approach to sin and judgment, and as such, I couldn’t figure out how it snuck into our praise choruses. It’s only recently that I’ve been catching up to this prominent theme in Scripture.

Lord, forgive me for being so tunnel-visioned, and help me recognize a few more of my many inevitable blind spots before it’s too late to do anything about them.

I’m sure that this particular hole in my holiness had something to do with the fact that, as a white middle class American male, I have had little direct experience as a victim of injustice. I’ve always been pretty comfy in my top-dog status in the world and, as a result, overlooked most of what the Bible says on the subject. Plus, my tiny diameter Christian circle has pretty much equated “social justice” with a “social gospel” and attributed it to the “Liberals” trying to work their way into heaven. (I told you I had something to be embarrassed about.)

I indicated at the beginning that what I’m writing now is not a regurgitation of systematic theologies written by experts and that though I had studied them early in my biblical training I hardly consulted these scholarly works while writing this essay. Nevertheless, for this chapter I succumbed to a cursory glance of a few of my favorites still in my possession. I wanted to see whether or not my overall recollection of their treatment of the theme of God’s “justice” was how I remembered it. Was it possible that I’d just overlooked what they’d written? Maybe they included it by I just tuned it out? Regrettably, after browsing them again I realized that I hadn’t tuned out what they’d taught on justice, because they hadn’t taught it. With all due respect to the conservative pre-postmodern scholars (I guess that would make them “modern” scholars), I propose a broader concept of God’s “justice” that’s found throughout the Bible.

I see now that my early teachers taught only half the story about justice. Their books and lectures were dedicated solely to the concept of God’s **retributive justice** and almost entirely omitted the notion of his **distributive justice**. They seemed to be more interested in bad people getting what’s coming to them than vulnerable people getting what should be coming to them! They taught that a just God is *consistent in retribution* and neglected to show how he is also *compassionate in distribution*.

Justice, I’ve finally come to realize, is the right use of power, while injustice is the abuse of power. This world would be a very scary place to live if God, who is all-powerful, were inclined to abuse it. If he abused his power in retribution and judged us arbitrarily, we would all be in a lot of trouble. It would be equally horrific if he chose to act like a self-serving despot and abuse his capability to act compassionately toward the vulnerable. I for one am glad he is just in both senses and uses his power to the benefit of whole race.

He's consistent in retribution

I've taught and preached this aspect of God's justice since the beginning of my life of service. From my first run at the Bible it was obvious to me that God is not one to shirk justice or let people off the hook for our sins against him. It's nothing if not clear that God is a righteous Judge. Death is the wage we earn for our disobedience and the penalty that he promises for the guilty.

He's a God of justice. He's just as "*just*" as he is anything else. As he is *good* all the time, so is he *just* all the time; and his justice is a good justice, good for everyone except those under its sentence.

When someone is guilty of a crime and is equitably punished for it; we say, "justice was served." Most of us want to live in a world where this kind of justice is the rule of thumb. We expect ours to be a society that punishes the guilty, unless of course, we're the ones who are guilty! If we've been robbed, we want the thief to go to jail, and we expect to get our stolen stuff back. That's *justice*, and fortunately God is just in the way he runs his world. It's his just nature to punish what is morally wrong and reward what's right.

So, the \$99 question is: *How can he be just and yet let us off the hook for our sins?* The Good News answer is that though we deserve punishment for our crimes, instead of condemning us, he took all his justice out on Jesus. Jesus took on our "sinner-status," accepted the penalty we deserved for it, and satisfied God's justice as our substitute.

The Good News is even better than that. Because Jesus was punished for our report card full of F's, Jesus bequeathed to us the straight A's that he had earned; and then the Father treats us like honor students! God can show us mercy and still be consistent with himself. This is how he can be "*just and justifier*" (Romans 3:26). He's "*faithful and just to forgive our sins*" (1 John 1:9).

He did justice to his justice and invites us to receive his righteousness on a righteous basis. We call it "Justification," which is what I like to define as, "*God's righteous way of righteousing the unrighteous with his righteousness.*"

*My tiny diameter Christian circle
has pretty much equated "social justice"
with a "social gospel."*

Awesome, right? It's the greatest!

But there's something else we mean – or should mean – when we say that God is "just."

He's compassionate in distribution

Among us Evangelicals it's a well-known fact, if not a particularly well-appropriated reality, that God is "consistent in retribution." We know that his justice is retributive, and when he forgives, he's being consistent with himself and forgives on the basis of a satisfied justice. Yet, at least in my circles, we

haven't been nearly as familiar with the theme, every bit as prominently taught in Scripture, that his justice is also an expression of his compassion.

As I said, the writers of the systematic theology texts that I have on my own bookshelf, though they make an exhaustive study the retributive aspect of his justice, completely vaulted over the distributive aspect of God's justice. They devote chapters in their treatment of the just God who rescues sinners by substituting Christ but neglect to mention that the same God of justice rescues the oppressed.

Richard Rohr wrote some strong words about how we've overlooked this pervasive theme: *"If you are a white middle-class American and all your beliefs end up making God look like a white middle-class American sharing all of your usual prejudices and illusions, I doubt whether you have met the Eternal God at all. You surely have not met Jesus, who always took the side of the outsider, the handicapped, the excluded and the poor."* Ouch!

It appears to me that we conservative Christians have relegated what we usually call "social justice" to the liberal wings of the Church and have written off their emphasis as a salvation by works. *"Those Liberals only care about the poor because they're trying to work their way to heaven!"* Of course, we're in no position to judge, but even where some truth may reside in our broad-brush allegation, it doesn't expunge the biblical mandate for the justified to "do justly." Somewhere along the line we threw the proverbial baby out with bath water – at least I did.

Here's a tiny sample of passages that I overlooked about God being a God of compassionate justice (see more in Addendum #1):

May he judge your people in righteousness, your afflicted ones with justice.
Psalm 72:2

The LORD works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed. **Psalm 103:6**

I know that the LORD secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy.
Psalm 140:12

Woe to those who issue unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless. **Isaiah 10:1-2**

Yet the LORD longs to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show you compassion. For the LORD is a God of justice. **Isaiah 30:18**

I was surprised when I actually spotted passages such as these and began to understand that God's justice *blesses the oppressed* as well as *blasts the wicked*. Justice both *purges* and *protects*. It protects widows, orphans, immigrants and the poor – "the quartet of the defenseless." In the agrarian culture of biblical times these four groups had no socio-economic clout. They lived at a subsistence level and, in the event of famine, foreign invasion, or social marginalization they were never many days away from starvation. Today,

we might expand this quartet to include such groups as refugees, minorities in a majority culture, migrant workers, single parents, the homeless, the unborn, and others.

That God often sides with *the least, the last, and the lost* is to say that he is “just,” and tells us to be the same. When the powerful take advantage of the weak, God takes the side of the weak. He is *for* the exploited and *against* the exploiter, *for* the victim and *against* the victimizer. Rather than *collide*, this is where both facets of his justice *collude*. He is as compassionate in distribution to the oppressed as he is consistent in retribution to the oppressor.

*God often sides
with the least,
the last, &
the lost...*

*“He has showed you O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” **Micah 6:8***

[More passages on our responsibility to “act justly” in Addendum #2.]

No, really, what is God like?

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.

Romans 11:33-36

How does one conclude a conversation about what God is like? Trying to “finish” a study of the Infinite is like snorkeling to the bottom of the Mariana Trench.

What’s he like? He’s like himself, and he’s the only one who is. But of all that we know about God, to me the most amazing thing about him is that he invites us to know him. He stands at our door, persistently knocking, tenderly calling our name, and proposing intimate friendship.

*“God is a Person and can be known in increasing degrees of intimate acquaintance as we prepare our hearts for the wonder.” **A.W. Tozer***

That he’s *a Person and can be known*, is pretty obvious from one simple and sincere reading of the Bible. It’s those *increasing degrees of intimate acquaintance* that he impressed on me that Sunday in 1977 with my face buried in that shag carpet and said, “*You need to know me!*” I still *prepare my heart for the wonder*.

ADDENDUM #1

What the Bible says about what God is like...

God is not made of clay. We don't get to mold him into whatever form pleases us. We get our information about him primarily from the Bible – at least I do – and I am convinced that the data there is reliable. I believe in the Bible and what it teaches me about God. Though this short essay has taken more of a philosophical approach and is not full of a lot of specific excerpts from the Scripture, please don't take that to mean that I'm making stuff up about God. In this section you'll find a primer of Scriptural support for my musings. Any number of other worthy resources on the character of God can give you a much more exhaustive list of passages, to say nothing of your own thoughtful reading through the Bible. In addition to the Bible itself, if I had to recommend just one book on the Person of God, it would be A.W. Tozer's tiny book, *The Knowledge of the Holy*. It's one of my favorite books of all time.

Don't mistake the following list (or any other systematic study of theology) as evidence that God can be reduced to categories or bullet points. And don't assume that these are all the things that could be said about his personality. It's not as though there's some magic number of attributes that comprise a thorough description of the divine. I'm not saying, "*God's character is six-fold; not seven or eight, just these six.*" On the other hand, to my mind, there is value in having some semblance of organized thoughts about him. Though he wants to be *known*, and not simply *studied*, he does want us to know him *as he actually is*, and not as we *would like him to be*. "*The essence of idolatry is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of him.*" (Tozer)

Reliable information about the way God really is can be found in his Book wherein we are repeatedly cautioned against worshipping false gods and idols. An idol is not only a *wrong god*, but may be a *wrong concept of the true God*. In place of gold or silver, many of our false gods are built of attributes that don't belong to the true God at all. This type of idolatry is often the worship of a God concocted of qualities that *we wish* he had! Yet the true God seeks worshippers who worship him "*in spirit and in truth.*"

The following is a small list of qualities that I consider to comprise God's character and a partial list of passages that affirm these qualities.

He's holy

I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy.

Leviticus 11:44

He is a holy God; and he is a jealous God. **Joshua 24:19**

Who can stand in the presence of the LORD, this holy God? **1Samuel 6:20**

Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the praise of Israel. **Psalms 22:3**

O LORD, are you not from everlasting? My God, my Holy One... **Habakkuk 1:12**

God reigns over the nations; God is seated on his holy throne. **Psalms 47:8**

He's good

Taste and see that the Lord is good. **Psalms 34:8**

You are forgiving and good, O Lord, abounding in love to all who call to you.

Psalm 86:5

*Praise the Lord, for the Lord is good. **Psalm 135:3***

*Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good. His love endures forever. **Psalm 136:1***

*The Lord will do what is good in his sight. **1 Chronicles 19:13***

*No one is good except God alone. **Mark 10:18***

He's merciful

*But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive in Christ... **Ephesians 2:4***

*The Lord is full of compassion and mercy. **James 5:11***

*His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. **Luke 1:50***

*Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. **Luke 6:36***

*Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon. **Isaiah 55:7***

*In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. **1 Peter 1:3***

He's loving

*I have loved you with an everlasting love... **Jeremiah 31:3***

*Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extend of his love... **John 13:1***

*As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. **John 15:9***

*Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. **John 15:13***

*The God of love and peace will be with you. **2 Corinthians 13:11***

*God is love... **1 John 4:8***

He's wise

*Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! **Romans 11:33***

*Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. **1 Corinthians 1:24***

*No, we declare God's wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. **1 Corinthians 2:7***

*By wisdom the Lord laid the earth's foundations, by understanding he set the heavens in place; **Proverbs 3:19***

*He will be the sure foundation for your times, a rich store of salvation and wisdom and knowledge **Isaiah 33:6***

*Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; wisdom and power are his. **Daniel 2:20***

He's faithful

He is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love for a thousand generations.

Deuteronomy 7:9

*Those who suffer... should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good. **1 Peter 4:19***

*Even if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself. **2***

Timothy 2:13

*He who promised is faithful... **Hebrews 10:23***

*Faithful is he who calls you who also will do it. **1 Thessalonians 5:24***

*I will betroth you in faithfulness... **Hosea 2:19***

He's just

Retributive justice

*In all that has happened to us, you have been just; you have acted faithfully, while we did wrong. **Nehemiah 9:33***

*Clouds and thick darkness surround him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. **Psalms 97:2***

*There is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none but me. **Isaiah 45:21***

*The LORD our God is righteous in everything he does... **Daniel 9:14***

*Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne **Psalms 89:14***

Distributive justice

*The LORD works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed. **Psalms 103:6***

I know that the LORD secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy.

Psalms 140:12

*Yet the LORD longs to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show you compassion. For the LORD is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him! **Isaiah 30:18***

May he judge your people in righteousness, your afflicted ones with justice.

Psalms 72:2

*Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne **Psalms 89:14***

ADDENDUM #2

What God is like in us...

The fundamental mistake is to begin with ourselves and not God. God is the center from which all life develops. If we use our ego as the center from which to plot the geometry of our lives, we will live eccentrically. **Eugene H. Peterson.**

When I read this in Peterson's great book, *Run With the Horses*, I had to go and look up the word "eccentric." Having quite a few eccentric friends, I was familiar with it in its psychological and social context, but since it's been a while since I took a geometry class I hadn't heard it used in this particular way. The dictionary told me that eccentric means "not centered on the same point as another... having an axis that's off kilter." An *eccentric* is someone whose beliefs or behaviors (or both) are off center.

When our axis doesn't correspond with the True Center of the universe it's no wonder we don't behave well and our lives don't run right. When we marginalize him, even to the slightest degree, our revolutions are not balanced, and we don't roll right. The smooth circular orbit of our lives directly corresponds with the relative correctness of our idea of God.

Just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy.' **1 Peter 1:15-16**

And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. **2 Corinthians 3:18**

For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. **Romans 8:29**

(You) have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. **Colossians 3:10**

God created us to be like him, a similarity that we bludgeoned to distortion when we broke from him and went our own way. But we who have the Perfect Image of the Father living inside us are being re-created in that original likeness. It's gradual, but we're taking shape. The more accurate our idea of the Pattern and the more intimate our friendship with the Potter, the more efficient our trajectory toward a true resemblance.

The qualities of God's character that we've spoken about above are aspects of the pattern we're shooting for. If he's *trustworthy*, that's what we want to be and what he helps us be. If he's *merciful*, it's our aspiration to treat people like he does, with mercy. Granted, it's an incremental process, a "from glory to glory" progression. But we have to shoot for the moon if we want to get off the ground at all!

Justice is both an *attribute* of God and an *activity* of his followers and he wants us to be just as just as he is.

I've always said the Christian life isn't hard to live. IT'S IMPOSSIBLE! You can't do it. Nor can I. But Jesus can, he proved that in his brief, but intense stint here, and he will do it again in you if you'll let him! The best definition of the Christian life that I've ever heard, and repeated hundreds of times since is: ***"It's the life Jesus lived then, lived now by him in us."***

Jesus lived the way we aspire to live and will live that way in and through us as we cooperate with him. (Isn't that a great term – "co-operate"? He does his part and we do ours, and in that sense we "operate" together to live Christianly here on our earth.) The way God is – the kind of character he has – is *the way he is in us*. He develops his character us in proportion to our co-operation.

What follows is the same list of God's character qualities that he lives in and through "co-operators."

He's in us helping us be holy

To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people **Romans 1:7**

offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. **Romans 12:1**

*For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be **holy** and blameless in his sight.* **Ephesians 1:4**

He's in us helping us be good

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. **Romans 12:9**

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. **Romans 12:21**

I myself am convinced, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness **Romans 15:14**

He's in us helping us be merciful

Be merciful to those who doubt. **Jude 1:22**

Judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. **James 2:13**

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. **Matthew 5:7**

He's in us helping us be loving

Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. **John 13:34**

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. **John 15:12**

Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. **1 John 4:8**

He's in us helping us be wise

If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. **James 1:5**

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. **James 3:13**

I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil. **Romans 16:19**

He's in us helping us be faithful

Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. **Romans 12:12**

Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful **1 Corinthians 4:2**

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness **Galatians 5:22**

He's in us helping us be just

*Do not deprive the alien or the fatherless of **justice** or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge.* **Deuteronomy 24:17**

The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern. **Proverbs 29:7**

Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow. **Isaiah 1:17**

Woe to you Pharisees because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue, and other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. **Luke 11:42**

What does the Lord require of you, but to do justly, love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?" **Micah 6:8**