

## **HERMENEUTICS AND BIBLICAL ETHICS:**

-- An Illustration --

### **God's Immutability, And Human Integrity**

**“Of old Thou didst found the earth; and the heavens are the work of Thy hands. Even they will perish, but Thou dost endure; and all of them will wear out like a garment; like clothing Thou wilt change them, and they will be changed. But Thou art the same, and Thy years will not come to an end.” Psalms 102:25-27**

God's *immutable* nature is testified to throughout Scripture.<sup>1</sup> He has been, is, and will be eternally inalterable in His attributes, character, and personality. There is absolutely no variability whatsoever in or with God.<sup>2</sup> Immutability not only conveys the idea that God *does not* change, it also carries with it the fact that God *cannot* change. This profound reality about God is undeniably mind-bending for mutable mortals who are ever changing, and who are the personification of variability. Humans are never the same from one minute to the next. Yet God has revealed Himself as the eternal, never changing, immutable **I AM WHO I AM**.<sup>3</sup> The very name, **I AM WHO I AM**, infers the property of immutability.

Contemplating God's immutability immediately brings to mind a number of significant questions. They are questions requiring the “whole counsel” of God's Word to explain and clarify their resolution. The “whole counsel” is required to prevent leaving the reflective thinker with internal contradictions, inconsistencies, or simple misunderstandings. Much is at stake in rightly thinking about God's immutability. Accurate (whole counsel) thinking on this point reinforces a high and exalted view of God. Unconsidered (cursory) thinking, on the other hand, ill-treats the transcendent grandeur ascribed to God by Scripture. Shallow reasoning can inadvertently create an unwarranted, elevated view of humanity. Rather than maintaining a “high view of God” an unintended “high view of humanity” can be introduced that supplants or perverts the truth about God. What are some of these important questions?

Is God a learner? Has He ever learned anything? Does God ever forget anything? Does God ever change His mind, about anything or anybody, for any reason? For example, does prayer change God's mind? God has a will, but does He

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<sup>1</sup> Malachi 3:6; Psalm 102:25-27; Hebrews 13:8; etc.

<sup>2</sup> James 1:17

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 3:13-15

ever modify it? How about God’s “emotions,” like His jealousy and wrath, do they fluctuate and change with circumstances? If God is immutable, and He is, then the answer to every one of these questions must be, NO! The reader, however, may protest and say, “I can quote specific passages of Scripture that provide a ‘yes’ answer to several of these questions.” On the surface, the protest would appear to be warranted. That is exactly why the “whole counsel” of God’s Word is so important in addressing such encompassing questions regarding the character or explicit understanding of God’s immutability.

### The Whole Counsel Of God

The preceding two paragraphs have employed the idea of the “whole counsel” of God four times, without explanation. What thought is being put forward by this expression? The concept is simple. The working out of the concept, however, is not so simple. The “whole message,”<sup>4</sup> the “whole purpose,”<sup>5</sup> or all that is “profitable”<sup>6</sup> in God’s Word is to be taught. Every question should be examined in the light of *all* that Scripture has to say about the matter. This ought to be done because the simple, first apparent message of a particular biblical text *may* be an inappropriate interpretation. For example, Jesus, when teaching the crowd on the mountain, said, “For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.”<sup>7</sup> How is this statement to be interpreted?

The just quoted statement by Jesus could be construed to mean a human must first forgive his or her neighbor before God will forgive the forgiver. There are people who interpret Jesus’ words just that way. The author has been asked on numerous occasions to explain what the quoted passage does mean. The passage needs to be seen in the context of the “whole counsel” of Scripture – *all* that the Bible says about forgiveness.

The Word of God does teach that if a person *refuses* to forgive a neighbor’s sin, the refusing person will not be forgiven their sins.<sup>8</sup> The controlling principles associated with forgiveness, however, are two: (1) our sins have been forgiven us *for Christ’s sake*;<sup>9</sup> and (2) humans are to forgive *even as God has forgiven them*.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Acts 5:20

<sup>5</sup> Acts 20:27

<sup>6</sup> Acts 20:20

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 6:14-15

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 18:35; Mark 11:25-26

<sup>9</sup> Psalm 25:11; 79:9; Isaiah 48:9-11; 1 John 2:12

<sup>10</sup> Ephesians 4:32; Matthew 18:21-35

The first principle, our sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, tells of the true motivation governing forgiveness – first and foremost, God's love of His Son;<sup>11</sup> and second, His desire to give Christ an inheritance in the saints (holy ones)<sup>12</sup> set apart for Him from the foundation of the world.<sup>13</sup> The second principle, because we have been forgiven we are to forgive others, is best exemplified in the parable told by Jesus in Matthew 18:21-35 where a slave is forgiven a great debt but in turn *refuses* to forgive a fellow slave a very small debt. The forgiving lord then comes back and demands full payment from the previously forgiven slave. The parable is **not** teaching that God withdraws previously granted forgiveness. It is teaching that those who, upon being convicted of their sin nature and their specific acts of sin, and have subsequently *truly apprehended* God's forgiveness will gladly and willingly forgive those who have sinned against them. They know the debt they owed God is far greater than any debt any human could ever owe them.

Christ's statement, "he who is forgiven little loves little,"<sup>14</sup> conveys the same significant truth. The person who rightly perceives the holiness of God, and the depravity of their own nature, but has tasted the deep joy of God's costly forgiveness will count any trespasses against them to be a negligible "debt owed them" when it is compared with the debt God has forgiven them. *Thus the person who refuses to forgive their neighbor a "trespass" is really a person who does not value any forgiveness they theretofore thought they had received from God.* Real forgiveness is remembered, cherished, and reciprocated. Only those who have apprehended true forgiveness are empowered by the love of Christ to truly forgive others from their heart.<sup>15</sup> This is the teaching of the "whole counsel" of Scripture.

The questions posed earlier that relate to the immutability of God are frequently answered in ways that distort the truth about God's authentic character and personality. Christians must learn to deal with such questions in the light of God's "whole counsel," like the forgiveness issue just sketched out. We will now do three things in the light of this need. First, the questions raised in the third paragraph, at the beginning of the chapter, will be discussed in the light of God's "whole counsel." Next, we will review some reasons to *revere* God's absolute immutability. We typically fail to realize just how consequential His immutability is. Finally, we will look at some applications for human beliefs and personal conduct that emerges spontaneously from a biblically guided world/life-view of God's immutability.

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<sup>11</sup> John 17:22-26

<sup>12</sup> Ephesians 1:18

<sup>13</sup> Ephesians 1:4-14

<sup>14</sup> Luke 7:47 [To be "forgiven little" shows an **attitude** of ingratitude. A "small sin" infinitely offends a holy God.]

<sup>15</sup> Matthew 18:35

## Immutability In The Light Of Substantive Questions

Has God ever learned anything? Has God ever forgotten anything? Has God ever changed His mind about anything? The third question – “Has God ever changed His mind about anything?” – is the one that causes the greatest theological controversy. *Partial* biblical evidence can be gathered and *arranged* to answer this particular question in a way that could lead a person to arrive at one of two possible misperceptions. They might erroneously conclude that the Bible itself presents conflicting and irreconcilable information to the reader. Or they might conclude that the Bible does not communicate clearly and is therefore terribly difficult to interpret. Christians hear beliefs of this type being communicated all too often.

The first question raised to test God’s immutable nature – “Has God ever learned anything?” – is the easiest of the three questions to answer, but as noted in Chapter 4, the answer to this question also has its detractors. The following quote appeared in Chapter 4 in the section entitled, *God’s Omniscient Nature*:

God is all-knowing.<sup>16</sup> God’s knowledge is infinite. There is nothing beyond God’s knowing. God’s knowledge is eternal. He has known everything – past, present future, and suppositional – throughout eternity. Knowledge is *inherent* to God’s independent, eternal and infinite nature. God did not obtain knowledge. God is knowledge. God is the wellspring of all knowledge. Humans grow in knowledge. God is the source of all knowledge. God knows all things distinctly – absolutely and fully.<sup>17</sup> We know nothing fully. God knows all things infallibly.<sup>18</sup> We know sufficiently, but never perfectly or exhaustively. God knows all things immutably.<sup>19</sup> Our knowledge is ever changing. God knows all things perpetually. He is always in the act of knowing all things that are present eternally in His consciousness. Nothing is ever out of His focused consciousness. And God did not come upon His knowledge sequentially. All knowledge has been, for eternity, a part of God. His omniscient nature is an attribute of His personality.

It must be acknowledged that humans are incapable of comprehending how the infinite and eternal God could be, in His very “being” (**I AM WHO I AM**), the absolute sum total of all past, present, future, and suppositional knowledge. This is especially true when we consider the fact that God permits His image bearers to freely exercise their will in keeping with their nature. We do not know how God can have prior knowledge of a persons future thoughts, intentions, motives, and ac-

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<sup>16</sup> Psalm 147:5; Isaiah 40:28; 11:2. The word *understanding* used in both of these referenced passages connotes that God’s knowledge is always related to His “meaning” and “purpose” for something’s existence. God’s knowledge is not disconnected or knowledge of irrelevant trivia. There is no irrelevant trivia before God. All is relevant to Him.

<sup>17</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:12.

<sup>18</sup> Isaiah 14:24; 46:10.

<sup>19</sup> Psalm 139:1-6, 16; Isaiah 46:9-10.

tions. We are simply told that such knowledge is *inscrutable*,<sup>20</sup> and that God has possessed the sum total of all knowledge eternally. No, God has never learned anything in all eternity. No evidence is offered biblically and no evidence can be offered from the accounts of human history to contradict or refute the biblical assertion that God is *omniscient* – all knowing throughout eternity.

The learning process that is such an integral part of human experience, and an irrefutable testimony to human mutability, is totally absent in God’s own personal experience. God is not a learner. The truth of God’s *immutability* is reinforced in human reasoning by this fact.

The second question raised to challenge God’s immutable character is, “Has God ever forgotten anything?” This inquiry has been raised up in some people’s minds because they discern specific biblical evidence that seems to imply, at least from their perspective, that God may have intentionally elected to *forget* the past sins and lawless deeds of His children. Isaiah, for example, quotes God, “I, even I, am the One who wipes out your transgressions for my own sake; *and I will not remember your sins.*”<sup>21</sup> Jeremiah likewise reports God’s declaration, “...I will forgive their iniquity, *and their sin I will remember no more.*”<sup>22</sup> In the same manner, the book of Hebrews records the same thought, “For I will be merciful to their iniquities, *and I will remember their sins no more,*”<sup>23</sup> and follows this with “*Their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.*”<sup>24</sup> What is a believer to think regarding these renunciations of memory? Has God indeed forgotten our sins?

To take literally the idea that God could really expunge or obliterate from his memory an historic act or thought of one of His image bearers would attack the veracity of Scripture by declaring null and void two of His revealed attributes. The biblical declaration that God is the same yesterday, today, and forever (immutable) would be a lie. He would be different today than He was at some time in the past when He presumably still remembered certain sins. Furthermore, the loss of memory, intentional or otherwise, would thoroughly undermine the revelation that God is all knowing (omniscient). He would presumably not know some things today that had taken place in the past. Neither of these conditions can stand the test of the “whole message” of God.

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<sup>20</sup> Isaiah 40:28. This entire chapter of Isaiah speaks of God’s incomprehensible greatness.

<sup>21</sup> Isaiah 43:25 (emphasis added). [Also consider the same idea in Psalm 103:12; Isaiah 38:17 and Micah 7:19.]

<sup>22</sup> Jeremiah 31:34 (emphasis added).

<sup>23</sup> Hebrews 8:12 (emphasis added).

<sup>24</sup> Hebrews 10:17 (emphasis added).

It is God’s “not remembering sins” that presses the question regarding the extent of His memory, which in turn contests His immutability.<sup>25</sup> Scripture is plain, however. After God has looked upon “the anguish of His [Christ’s] soul, He [the Father] will see it and be satisfied...He [Christ] will bear their iniquities.”<sup>26</sup> The “debt” that the sinner owes God is *forgotten* – the debt has been paid; God has no reason to demand restitution. God has no reason to “remember” the debt: call for its reimbursement. It is not that God does not remember what the sins were, or that a debt *was* due. It is that He will no longer bring the sins up for payment, for *a debt is no longer due*. Christ has paid off the debt for the “elect.”<sup>27</sup> God has no loss of memory, or diminished ability to remember, when He says, “I will remember no more.” It is the nature of the sinner that has been changed by God – he or she has been regenerated by the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>28</sup> The sinner is a “new person” who by *faith* has received Christ’s full payment for their debt. It is the sinner who has changed and it is God who has applied another’s payment (Christ’s) to the sinner’s “account payable.” God has not changed. God’s immutability is not in fact called into question.

The third and final question to be addressed – “Has God ever changed His mind about anything?” – is a troublesome inquiry for many Christians. It is troublesome because there are a number of *apparent* contradictions in the Scripture that bear on the inquiry.<sup>29</sup> Reflect for a moment, however, on the conclusion just drawn in the preceding paragraph – the sinner has undergone a change; God did not change. The *principle* embodied in this just arrived at conclusion will be widely employed now in addressing the third question now before us. What is the principle? *God never changes, but He does change (or allows change to occur in) the disposition of affairs*<sup>30</sup> *for things and people outside Himself.*

Another fundamental *principle* that will shape the work in the coming analysis of the “apparent contradictions” is the *revealed* fact that God has ordained – established by His authority – that His children will be incorporated in significant

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<sup>25</sup> Some people may contend that what is needed is a “qualified” (new) definition of “immutable.” To qualify the classical and historical definition is to become a “theological taxidermist” – one who stuffs a substitute meaning into an authentic doctrine by ignoring, and thus subverting, the “whole counsel” of God.

<sup>26</sup> Isaiah 53:11

<sup>27</sup> Matthew 24:22; Mark 13:20; Romans 9:11; 11:5,7,28; 1 Thessalonians 1:4; 2 Timothy 2:10; 2 Peter 1:10.

<sup>28</sup> John 3:3-8; 2 Corinthians 5:17; 1 Peter 1:3, 23.

<sup>29</sup> A personal note: the author does not believe that any true contradictions are to be found anywhere in the Bible. The “whole counsel” of the Scripture is required in this case to meaningfully resolve such *apparent* contradictions without either superficially “sweeping them under the rug” or doing violence to the rest of Scripture or to one’s logic and common sense.

<sup>30</sup> By “disposition of affairs” is meant the *administration, arrangement, and settlement* of the affairs in question.

ways in the process of accomplishing a number of aspects of His immutable will. To illustrate:

Whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved. How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? *And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent?*<sup>31</sup>

God has ordained that He will deeply and intricately involve His children in His work of evangelization and discipleship. This is what biblical preaching and teaching are designed to bring about. God’s children share in the work of God, not because God needs anybody, He needs no one, but because that is the way He has chosen to accomplish His “ends” amongst the peoples of the earth. This God ordained human involvement in the working out of His eternal purposes brings a great depth of meaning to the lives of all His adopted children who are called to labor in the company of their Creator God. This important truth also plays a central role in reconciling what appears on the surface to be contradictory revelations.

It should be remembered, however, that the human side of the equation – humans laboring in the company of God – is not a “do it yourself” proposition. It is Christ living *in* His redeemed “bride” that makes the work effective. It is the Holy Spirit’s motivating, encouraging, disciplining, comforting, and leading His people that results in the desired “ends.” “For it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”<sup>32</sup> His children are absolutely dependent upon His *superintending* and *enabling power* to accomplish anything that is well pleasing to Him. With the above two principles in mind, we will examine the third question, “Has God ever changed His mind about anything?”

The first illustration of an *apparent* biblical contradiction that *seems to challenge* the immutability of God is:

**Challenge:** So the Lord *changed His mind* [**repented**] about the harm which He said He would do to His people. (Exodus 32:14, emphasis and alternative translation added)

**Affirmation:** And also the Glory of Israel *will not* lie or *change His mind*, for *He is not a man that He should change His mind*. (1 Samuel 15:29, emphasis added)

In order to interpret the *apparent* contradiction to God’s immutability – “So the Lord changed His mind” – one needs to see the context in which the verse appears. Then the question of the *first principle* needs to be asked, “Did God change (or allow change to occur in) the disposition of affairs for things and people outside Himself?” The context is Aaron’s creation of a golden calf for the people to wor-

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<sup>31</sup> Romans 10:13-15

<sup>32</sup> Philippians 2:13

ship when Moses delayed coming down from the mountain where he had gone to be with God. Upon observing the peoples' worship of the calf, God said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold they are an obstinate people. Now then let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them; and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you a great nation." (Context: Exodus 32:1-10; quote: verses 9-10).

The *second principle* outlined above must also be simultaneously applied to the case in question – God has ordained the involvement of His children in much of His work of salvation and discipleship. Moses is, in this context, a "type of Christ." "Moses entreated the Lord his God..." (v. 11). He prayed for the people. He reminded God of His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Israel – as if God needed reminding. No it is the readers of the accounts of God's dealings with His people who need to be reminded of God's promises, for He breaks none of His promises. He did not break His promises here. God had no intention of breaking his promises, even when he spoke of destroying the people.

Before times eternal God had His perfect intercessor, His Son, Jesus Christ, scheduled to appear incarnate at a later date to take away the sins of His people. *Moses in this case is introducing or previewing the intercessory work of the Christ to come.* Following the making and worshiping of the golden calf, God *changed the disposition of affairs for the people outside Himself* by raising up an intercessor, Moses, a type of Christ to "stand in the gap" between God and sinful humanity. Moses was foreshadowing the work of Christ<sup>33</sup> and the Holy Spirit<sup>34</sup> that continues to this day. God had ordained that without intercessory work being extended on behalf of those in rebellion He would utterly destroy them. But *He has raised up* an intercessor at every point in history when He has desired to reveal his long-suffering, merciful, faithful, and kind intentions toward those who really deserve His full wrath.

Remember the *second principle* – God has ordained to use His children in doing His work of salvation and discipleship. This is what God did with Moses. He did not need Moses; He does not need us. He could have ordained other methods. But He did not ordain other methods. He ordained the use of His children. We are to pray for and intercede for those God places in our lives that need such help. Moses was the one ordained to fulfill this function at that time in history. Without Moses' intercession, God would have destroyed the people of Israel at that time. But He knew before times eternal that He would not destroy them because He had both ordained and prepared Moses to be an intercessor. Intercessors are an impor-

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<sup>33</sup> Romans 8: 34

<sup>34</sup> Romans 8:26-27

tant, ordained “link” between our holy God and sinful humanity. *God did not change. God changed the disposition of affairs external to Himself. God provided, prepared, and involved Moses, His ordained servant, to participate in the “means” and “ends” that God established and ordained before times eternal to prevent the destruction of His people.* What changed were the circumstances that were external to God. Moses assumed the role of an intercessor and God employed Moses’ intercessory work in revealing to subsequent generations both God’s decree regarding intercessory prayer and the impact of intercessory prayer on the disposition of the administration, arrangement, and settlement of the sinful affairs of Aaron and the people. The affairs between God and His people were materially altered, from God’s perspective, by Moses’ intercession. God did not change. The affairs external to God changed.

Other challenging illustrations of this same type are:

**Challenge:** And the Lord was sorry [repented] that He had made man on the earth and He was grieved in His heart. (Genesis 6:6, alternative translation added)

**Affirmation:** For I, the Lord, do not change; therefore you, O son of Jacob, are not consumed. (Malachi 3:6)

OR

**Challenge:** If it [a nation] does evil in My sight by not obeying My voice then I will think better of the good with which I had promised to bless it. (Jeremiah 18:10, addition by author)

**Affirmation:** God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man that He should repent; has He said and will He not do it? Or has He spoken and will he not make it good? (Numbers 23:19)

The same two principles used with the first illustration need to be applied to the two “Challenges / Affirmations” outlined above. The conflict will be dispelled when that is done correctly. The reader would probably benefit from the exercise of: (a) placing the biblical passages quoted above in their larger context. (b) Observing how the situation external to God changes over time. And (c) watching how God involves His chosen people in His ordained purposes and accomplishments.

Some readers may be wondering at this juncture, is God rigid, “wooden,” and unfeeling in His character? If He is unchanging, then in what state is He “frozen?” Such thinking emanates from a misunderstanding of God’s immutability. God is eternally and infinitely filled with joy. He is simultaneously eternally and infinitely filled with wrath. He is infinitely and eternally all that He has always been. He is infinitely and eternally “complete” and “whole.” This reality is clearly beyond our capacity to either experience or fully comprehend. To His *finite* and *mutable* image bearers He discloses only tiny aspects of any of His attributes to

them at any moment in time. And He does this in accordance with His infinite wisdom and perfect understanding of what is best for His children at that particular time in their life. But no, God is not “wooden,” “frozen,” and “unfeeling.” He is simply unchanging in His *infinite* and *eternal* “completeness” and “wholeness.”

The last example of “apparent contradiction” to be cross-examined in this chapter will be the three passages below. They will be subjected to a “whole counsel” biblical analysis to discern what God is *consistently* communicating.<sup>35</sup>

**Challenge:** “...the prayers offered in faith will restore the one who is sick,...The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.” (James 5:15-16)

and

“And whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it. (John 14:13-14)

**Affirmation:** “And this is the confidence which we have before Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. (1 John 5:14)

Both of the “challenging” Scriptures are related to prayer. Does prayer change the mind of God? Many people think it does. But if it does, can God still be thought of as being “immutable?” The James passage tells us that prayer will “accomplish much.” The John passage seems to be telling people they can ask for “anything” they want. The “affirming” passage (1 John 5:14), however, seems to place an important limitation – “*ask anything according to His will*” – on what should be expected regarding prayer. What does the “whole counsel” and “whole purpose” of God’s Word reveal regarding this important matter? If prayer does not change God, or at least move Him to act, then why should His children pray?

The James passage quoted above literally speaks of a “prayer of faith” – a prayer wrought in or offered from the wellspring of faith. And from where does such genuine faith arise? It is a gift from God.<sup>36</sup> Faith is not an attribute of the *heart* that can be turned on and off by one’s will, desires, or intellect. The disciples recognized this fact when they asked Christ to increase their faith.<sup>37</sup> And God builds (increases) the faith in His children only as they exercise the faith already given them,<sup>38</sup> or as He graciously provides it for the particular occasion at hand.

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<sup>35</sup> This entire treatise is grounded on the presupposition that God’s truth is not, and indeed cannot be, contradictory in character. Therefore, the Bible does not contain irreconcilable, contradictory revelation. If this is so, then God has provided, in the Bible, sufficient revelation of His mind for His children to discern the *consistent* and larger truth contained in the “whole counsel” of His Word. It is certainly reasonable to believe that any single passage or verse contained in the Bible may well be unable to either fully or clearly communicate the fully disclosed truth on a particular matter.

<sup>36</sup> Romans 12:3; 1 Corinthians 12:9; 2 Corinthians 4:13; Ephesians 2:8

<sup>37</sup> Luke 17:5-10

<sup>38</sup> Luke 17:5-10

James speaks next of the “effective prayer” – one born of genuine faith – of a “righteous man.” And who is righteous? Christ alone, amongst all people who have ever lived, is proclaimed to be righteous in His own “works.” The people to whom His righteousness is imputed – put to their account – are those who trusts (exercises faith) in the fact that Christ died for their sins. So people of faith are offering their prayers to God in and through the efficacy (the power to produce an effect) of Christ. Indeed, it is the Holy Spirit himself who dwells in Christ’s children and Who both teaches them how to pray according to God’s will, and Who prays for them when they are without the insight to know how to pray.<sup>39</sup> From this perspective, God’s mind is not being changed. Instead, God’s children are being taught and brought into fellowship with Him in a way that slowly brings them into conformity with His will and purposes.

The John 14:13-14 passage also has a context that surrounds it. And that context is one of *doing the will of God* in the midst of both loving Him and obeying His expressed will – read John 13:14-16; 34-35; 14:15, 21, 23; 15:10. If we love Christ, we will seek to do his will. It is in loving and obeying Christ that we are invited to ask for anything we want that is in keeping with His character, purposes, and will. In fact, elsewhere in Scripture we are told that when we ask amiss – with wrong motives or for wrong “ends” – we will not have our requests answered.<sup>40</sup> And we ought to be very grateful for this limitation on our prayers. For who amongst God’s adopted children would want God to answer their “bad” prayer or a prayer that would hinder or diminish God’s infinite and perfect wisdom? A developing child of God wants more and more to see the perfect will of God done in everything. “Yet not my will, but Thine be done” becomes, over time, an “identifying stamp” of the growing Christian.

The “affirmation” passage above (1 John 5:14) sums up nicely the “whole purpose” of God: “And this is the confidence which we have before Him, that if we ask anything according to His will He hears us.” God is training us to be like Christ and Christ’s “meat” was to do the will of the Father.<sup>41</sup> He never wanted His own will to prevail at the expense of the will of the Father.<sup>42</sup>

So what are we to conclude? First of all we may conclude that prayer does not change God. He stands forever immutable, with an everlasting, loving commitment to His people. We may also conclude that God is at work in His people, teaching and training them to pray for the things the Holy Spirit teaches them to

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<sup>39</sup> Ephesians 6:18; Jude 20; Romans 8:26-27

<sup>40</sup> James 4:3

<sup>41</sup> John 4:34

<sup>42</sup> Matthew 26:39, 42; Mark 14:36; Luke 22:42

discern are in keeping with His will. Furthermore, we are to understand and delight in the realization that God invites us, yea, has ordained for us to be participants in His work by praying for the very things God desires. It is God's will that his children petition Him. Through prayer they join in the mission of God, with God.

### **Reasons To Revere God's Absolute Immutability**

We generally take God's personality for granted. We seldom pause to ponder and meditate on the awesomeness of His revealed character. The *glory* of God is unmistakably evident in every one of His characteristics. His glory is further magnified in the *indivisible unity* of His divine attributes. God would cease to be God if any of His attributes were alterable even in the slightest way. His immutability is an essential property of His divinity. Without His immutability He would cease to be God. He would suddenly become "made in the image of mankind," with all of the implications associated with such a terrifying notion. "Human nature" would suddenly become the standard for assessing life's eternal verities. Thank God such a ghoulish thought has no place in reality.

Think for a moment about God's holiness: His purity, moral perfection, and separation from all that is unholy. God's holiness is the crown of His glory. It is His singularly most defining and important attribute. Now try to imagine the altered possibilities if God were mutable rather than immutable. He could become unholy in His thoughts and deeds. God could "fall" from holiness. His decrees could become contemporary preferences, subject to unholy possibilities. Unholy justice might be forthcoming. God, for instance, might become an arbitrary "respector of persons"—for example, only the extremely poor and extremely rich might be saved. Or all those with red hair could have a "providential hedge" placed around them so they would never experience a financial bankruptcy. A changing, unholy God could begin to "play games" with His creatures as it suited His every whim. The perverted possibilities would be endless in the absence of His having an immutable character, and in the examples just cited, an immutable holy character.

If God were mutable rather than immutable there could be no guarantee that He would remain omnipotent (infinitely powerful), omniscient (all knowing), omnipresent (present everywhere), or even infinite and eternal. His power, if mutable, could diminish to the point of ineffectiveness where His sovereign rule was not maintainable. That could mean God might cease to be either sovereign or omnipotent. Satan might even emerge as a threat to God's rule as God's power fluctuated — He could get tired and need a time to recuperate.

God’s memory could fail Him if He were mutable— there goes God’s omniscience. He might forget the grand and perfect design He had planned for the future so that adlibbing the future would become necessary. He might suddenly desire to “make up a new future” as time marched on. The really sad aspect of this “make believe” scenario, however, is the fact that there are people who have this kind of world/life-view concerning God. They make Him in their own fallen image.

Scripture frequently uses the metaphor of God being like a *rock*, signifying His unchangeableness – His immutability.<sup>43</sup> (There is no other natural, physical, created element as hard, stable, and unchanging as a rock.) Scripture uses this metaphor for several reasons. First, and foremost, it describes a reality of God – He is unchanging. Second, God’s immutability signifies His absolute dependability to His image bearers. There is nothing else in the created order that is changeless and absolutely stable. Only the eternal God is an exception to change. And finally, God being the only authentic and unchanging Reference Point makes Him a true haven of security and rest for the regenerate image bearer who recognizes his or her desperate *need to be changed into the likeness of Christ* by God.

### **Personal Beliefs and Conduct Derived from God’s Immutability**

God’s immutability screams out at His image bearers to be people whose word is their bond. Trust is an essential component of integrity. When God says He will do something we trust Him to do it because He cannot lie. He is immutable and cannot change His mind. The account of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac is extremely informative at this point. The narrative proceeds as follows:

God tested Abraham...and He said, ‘Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you.’ So Abraham rose early...and took two of his young men with him and Isaac his son...and went to the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham...saw the place from a distance. And Abraham said to his young men, ‘Stay here...and I and the lad [Isaac] will go yonder; *and we will worship and return to you.*’<sup>44</sup>

The account continues and reveals to us: (a) Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son, and (b) God’s intervention in stopping the sacrifice at the last moment. A question, however, begs to be asked, “How could Abraham have *trusted* (had faith) in God to such a degree as to be willing to sacrifice his son whom he loved so much?” God most graciously provides the answer to this question:

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<sup>43</sup> Deuteronomy 32:15, 18, 30, 31; 2 Samuel 23:3; Psalm 18:31, 46; 28:1; 42:9; 78:35; 89:26; 92:15; 94:22; 1 Corinthians 10:4.

<sup>44</sup> Genesis 22:1-5 , explanation added; emphasis added.

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac; and *he* who *had received the promises* was offering up his only begotten son; it was he to whom it was said, '*In Isaac your descendants shall be called.*' He considered that *God is able to raise men even from the dead.*<sup>45</sup>

Abraham knew God would do what He had said He would do. God had already revealed the immutable character of his promises when Sarah bore Isaac in her extreme old age. Note that Abraham told the two young men who accompanied him and Isaac on the trip to wait, and that He and Isaac would return later. The second passage informs us that Abraham knew God would bring descendants forth from Isaac – He had promised it – and that in order for that to be done, God would have to raise Isaac from the dead. And hence, Abraham told the young men to wait and that he and Isaac *would return to them* – Abraham thought they would return after Isaac's resurrection. The immutability of God's word had been demonstrated to Abraham in and through the birth of Isaac, and it was on the strength of this conviction that Abraham was willing to sacrifice Isaac at God's request.

All trust in the human relationships of life is grounded in the keeping of one's word. God's word is His bond, His guarantee. Our word ought to be our bond, our guarantee. Scripture gives us a number of illustrations to reinforce the importance of keeping our word. This is pungently illustrated in the Old Testament account of Joshua and the elders of Israel entering into a covenant agreement with the people of Gibeon to let the Gibeonites live, unharmed, in the land of Israel.<sup>46</sup> Hundreds of years later King Saul sought to exterminate the Gibeonites in his misplaced zeal. During the reign of King David the Lord sent a three-year famine upon the Israelites as a pronouncement of His total disapproval of Saul's ungodly behavior.<sup>47</sup> The Israelites were known to be God's people. They had made the covenant with the Gibeonites in the name of the Lord. When they broke the covenant, the act contradicted the character of God, whose name they bore. *They had taken the name of God in vain*, a violation of the Third Commandment.<sup>48</sup> Those of us who identify with the name of Christ are to never break our word. To do so is to drag Christ's name through the mud. Such behavior contradicts the name of Christ. It is a rejection of Christ – probably unintended, but nevertheless the reality.

Psalms 15 asks, "O Lord, who may abide in Thy tent? Who may dwell on Thy holy hill? He who walks with integrity...*He [who] swears to his own hurt, and*

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<sup>45</sup> Hebrews 11:17-19

<sup>46</sup> Joshua 9: 1-27

<sup>47</sup> 2 Samuel 21: 1-9

<sup>48</sup> Exodus 20: 7

*does not change.*<sup>49</sup> At the very core of integrity is the unfailing routine of keeping one's word even when doing so works to one's disadvantage – financial loss, personal inconvenience, or disappointment. “Swearing to one's own hurt and not changing” was lived out before many of us, in a dramatic way, in the 1930's and 1940's. A number of families who had lost their farms in bankruptcy foreclosures continued to pay the banks for decades. They did this although the courts had removed all legal requirements for repayment. Why would they do this? It was their sense of Christian duty – their word was tied to their profession of faith in Christ.

There is no biblical justification ever set forth for breaking one's word. There is, however, a biblical remedy given whereby one may seek to be released from a foolish or damaging commitment. It is found in the “wisdom literature:”

My son...if you have been snared with the words of your mouth, have been caught with the words of your mouth, do this then, my son, and deliver yourself; since you have come into the hand of your neighbor, **go, humble yourself, and importune your neighbor.** Do not give sleep to your eyes, nor slumber to your eyelids; deliver yourself like a gazelle from the hunter's hand, and like a bird from the hand of the fowler.<sup>50</sup>

The admonition is clear – “go, humble yourself, and importune your neighbor.” God's children may ask, beg, or plead for a release from an obligation with the person to whom they made the verbal or written commitment. But the “right of release” resides with the person to whom the commitment was made. It is in the response to the request for release, however, that the *merciful* or *demanding* providence of our Sovereign Lord is revealed.

It is precisely at this point, the point of considering the possibility of encountering “demanding providence,” that most people decide to take matters into their own hands to avoid the risk of having an “unwelcomed outcome.” This typically begins with a rationalization process. “I made a verbal commitment. It is not in writing. I will deny it.” Or, “I will see if my lawyer can find a loophole or flaw in the contract, and avoid the consequences that way.” Perhaps the most popular avoidance procedure in business today, however, is to seek protection under the bankruptcy laws – we will let our creditors suffer our financial hardships.

“Demanding providence” may take more subtle forms, though. People may say something as “inconsequential” as, “Great, I will meet you at the library this afternoon at 4:30,” and then *conveniently* forget the commitment when a more attractive opportunity comes along. We may even cover the first sin of failure by telling our “friend” a lie – we simply got distracted and forgot. The real problem, however, is that we often take what we say so lightly that we do not even consider

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<sup>49</sup> Psalm 15: 1, 2, 4 (addition and emphasis added).

<sup>50</sup> Proverbs 6: 1-5 (emphasis added).

our commitments to be an obligation. God, however, sees it differently. We forget or ignore the truth that we are accountable to Christ for everything that proceeds from our mouth – all we say shall be revealed and shouted from the housetop.<sup>51</sup>

### Conclusion

But what if God were not immutable, as some individuals' hermeneutic allows? Then God could change His mind. He could make a promise and then decide not to keep it. If that were possible, people might be justified in breaking their promises under certain conditions. All that would be needed to change would be a good justification based on – our feelings, circumstances, likes, dislikes, situations, or whims! The entire outlook on keeping one's word would become "situational" in character. So called "situational ethics" is antithetical to biblical ethics. It can create "evil" that can become "good," and "good" that can become "evil," a gross perversion of moral thinking that fails to root itself in the character of God. It does this by varying the situation while placing the human participant in the role of a "god." It ignores the "fallen nature" of humanity, assumes perfect foreknowledge for its participants (in many of the contrived situations), and ignores the absolute principles and standards set forth in God's Word.

The biblical conclusion that flows from the hermeneutic subscribing to the "**whole counsel of God**", however, is obvious. God is immutable and consequently absolutely trustworthy. His promises and testimonies are unalterable. We who bear His name should plead with Him to enable us to always be faithful to our word. By keeping our word in small matters, and large ones, we bear witness to the reality that we are Christ's disciples. O Lord, help us to always keep our word, and by doing so glorify You.

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(Please read the next page also.)

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<sup>51</sup> Luke 12: 2-3.

[ This paper is Chapter 8 in a book currently being written. The working title of the book is:

**The shaping influence of  
GOD’S  
PERSONALITY AND GRACE  
on the  
HUMAN  
HEART AND BEHAVIOR**

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