

Of the Attributes of God in General and of His Immutability in Particular.

by John Gill

This sermon explores the various attributes of God, emphasizing His immutability as a fundamental aspect of His divine nature.

Scripture: Psalm 102:25, Malachi 3:6, Hebrews 13:8, James 1:17

Topics: "Trust in God's Promises", "Immutability of God"

Description

John Gill emphasizes the attributes of God, particularly His immutability, which signifies that God does not change in His nature, perfections, or purposes. He contrasts God's unchangeable nature with the mutability of creation, illustrating that while everything else is subject to change, God remains constant and faithful. Gill explains that God's immutability is essential to His essence as a spiritual being and is reflected in His love, grace, and covenant with His people. He reassures believers that God's promises and decrees are unalterable, providing a foundation of hope and security in their faith. Ultimately, Gill's sermon encourages the congregation to trust in the steadfastness of God amidst life's uncertainties.

Transcript

A Body of Doctrinal Divinity

Book 1--Chapter 5

OF THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD IN GENERAL,
AND OF HIS IMMUTABILITY IN PARTICULAR.

The attributes of God are variously distinguished by divines; some distinguish them into negative and positive, or affirmative: the negative are such as remove from him whatever is imperfect in creatures; such are infinity, immutability, immortality, &c. which deny him to be finite, mutable, and mortal; and, indeed, it is easier to say what God is not, than what he is: the positive, or affirmative, are such as assert some perfection in God, which is in and of himself; and which in the creatures, in any measure, is from him, as wisdom, goodness, justice, holiness, &c. but the distinction is discarded by others; because in all negative attributes some positive excellency is found.

Some distribute them into a "twofold order", first and second: attributes, or essential properties of the "first order", declare the essence of God as in himself, such as his simplicity and perfection, infinity and immutability; and attributes, or essential properties of the "second order", which though primarily and properly, and naturally, and infinitely, and in a more excellent manner are in God, than in creatures; yet secondarily, and in an analogical sense, are in them, there being some similitude of them in them, of which there is none of the former order in them; these are said to be life and immortality, blessedness and glory.

Again, some are said to be "absolute", and others "relative": absolute ones are such as eternally agree with the essence of God, without respect to his creatures, and are expressed by his names, Jehovah, Jah, &c. relative ones are such as agree with him in time, with some certain respect to his creatures, and are expressed by his being their Creator, Governor, Preserver, Redeemer, &c. some are called "proper", as those before mentioned; and others "figurative", signified by the parts of the human body, and the affections of the mind, as observed in the preceding chapter: but the more commonly received distinction of the attributes of God, is, into the "communicable" and "incommunicable" ones; the incommunicable attributes of God, are such as there is no appearance or shadow of them in creatures; as independence, immutability, immensity, and eternity: communicable ones, are such as are common to God, with men; or, however, of which there is some resemblance in men, as goodness, holiness, justice, and wisdom; yet of these it may be said, that they are incommunicable, as they are in God, in whom they are infinite, and cannot, as such, be communicated to finite creatures: none but God is essentially, originally, underivatively, perfectly, and infinitely good, holy, just, and wise.

But as God is defined a "Spirit" in scripture, as has been observed, I shall endeavour to sort the perfections and attributes of God in agreement with that: and with respect to his nature, as an uncreated Spirit, may be referred, besides his spirituality, and simplicity, already considered, his immutability, and infinity, which includes his immensity, or omnipresence, and eternity: and with respect to it as active, and operative, the life of God, and his omnipotence: and with respect to the faculties, as a rational spirit, particularly the understanding, to which may belong, his omniscience, and manifold wisdom; and the will, under which may be considered the acts of that, and the sovereignty of it; and the affections, to which may be reduced, the love, grace, mercy, hatred, anger, patience, and long suffering of God: and lastly, under the notions of qualities and virtues, may be considered, his goodness, holiness, justice, truth, and faithfulness; and, as the complement of the whole, his perfection or all-sufficiency, glory, and blessedness: and in this order I shall consider them.

And begin with, The Immutability of God; which arises from, and is closely connected with his spirituality and simplicity, or is what agrees with him, and is necessary to him as a spiritual, simple and uncompounded Being[1]. Immutability is an attribute which God claims, and challenges as peculiar to himself; "I am the Lord, I change not" (Mal. 3:6). Mutability belongs to creatures, immutability to God only; creatures change, but he does not: the heavens and the earth, which he has made, are not always the same; but "he is the same for ever": the visible heavens are often changing; they are sometimes serene and clear, at other times covered with clouds and darkness, and filled with meteors, snow, rain, hail, &c. the face of the earth appears different at the various seasons of the year, and is particularly renewed every spring: it has undergone one great change by a flood, and will undergo another by fire; when that, and "the works that are therein, shall be burnt up; and the heavens, being on fire, shall be dissolved; and the elements shall melt with fervent heat"; and "new heavens", and "a new earth", shall succeed (2 Peter 3:10,12,13), to which changeableness in them, the unchangeableness of God is opposed: "All of them

shall wax old like a garment, as a vesture shalt thou change them, and they shall be changed: but thou art the same, and thy years shall have no end" (Ps. 102:25-27).

The sun in the firmament, that great luminary, and fountain of light and heat, in allusion to which, God is called "the Father of lights", has its parallaxes, or various appearances, at morning, noon, and evening; it has its risings and settings; and never rises and sets at the same point in the heavens one day in the year, but always varies a little; it is sometimes under clouds, and in an eclipse; but "with" God "is no variableness", parallax, or a parallax; the sun, at certain seasons of the year, passes from one tropic, and enters into another, as well as casts shades on the earth; but with God there is "no shadow of turning", trophv, of a trope, or tropic; there is no mutation nor turning in him, nor shadow of any (James 1:17; Job 23:13), the inhabitants of heaven and earth are changeable, even the most excellent of them, angels and men: angels in their original nature and state, were subject to change, as the apostasy of many of them have shown; who have changed both state and place; they "kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation", being obliged to the latter, because of the former; for sinning against God, they were hurled out of heaven, and "cast down to hell, and delivered into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment" (Jude 1:6; 2 Peter 2:4), the angels which stood when the rest fell, are now indeed become impeccable, and are firmly settled in their state of integrity; but then this is owing not to their own nature, but to the electing grace of God, in Christ, and to the confirming grace of Christ, their head, who is the "head of all principality and power" (1 Tim. 5:21; Col 2:10).

Man, at his best estate, his estate of innocence, and integrity, was "altogether vanity": for though not sinful, yet being mutable, and left to the mutability of his will, which was his vanity, when tempted fell into sin; and though made upright, lost the rectitude of his nature; though made after the image of God, soon came short of that glory; and though he had dominion over the creatures, being in honour, he abode not long, but became like those he had the power over; and though placed in the most delightful and fruitful spot in all the globe, yet, rebelling against his Maker and Benefactor, was driven out from thence by him; and is now a creature subject to innumerable changes in life; diseases of various sorts seize his body, and change his beauty and his strength, and death at last turns him to corruption and dust; he is like the changeable grass of the field; flourishes a while, is then cut down, and withers away; but God and his "word endure for ever" the same (1 Peter 1:24, 25), good men are very mutable, both in their inward and outward estate: in spiritual affairs; in the frames of their minds, in the affections of their souls, in the exercise of grace, in their devotion and obedience to God, and worship of him: in temporal affairs; what an instance of mutability was Job, in his estate, in his family, and in his health and friends? well might he say, "changes and war are against me" (Job 10:17), and at length came to his great and last change, death; as all men must, even the best of men: indeed, in the future state, good men will be no more subject to change; their spirits will be made perfect, and sin no more, nor sorrow any more; and their bodies, when raised, will remain immortal, incorruptible, spiritual, powerful, and glorious; but this will be owing, not to themselves, but to the unchangeable grace and power of God: God only is in and of himself immutable; and he is unchangeable in his nature, perfections, and purposes, and in his love and affections to his people, and in his covenant, and the blessings and promises of it; and even in his threatenings. 1.

In his nature and essence, being "simple", and devoid of all composition, as has been proved: the more simple and free from mixture and composition anything is, the less subject to change. gold and silver, being the purest and freest of all metals from composition, are not so alterable as others: spirits, being uncompounded, and not consisting of parts, are not so changeable as bodies; and God, being an infinite and uncreated Spirit, and free from composition in every sense, is entirely and perfectly immutable: and

since he is "eternal", there can be no change of time with him; time doth not belong to him, only to a creature, which is the measure of its duration; and began when a creature began to be, and not before; but God is before all creatures; they being made by him, and so before time; he was the same before the day was as now, and now as he was before; "even the same today, yesterday, and for ever": though he is "the ancient of days", he does not become older and older; he is no older now than he was millions of ages ago, nor will be millions of ages to come; his eternity is an everlasting and unchangeable "now"; "He is the same, and his years shall have no end" (Ps. 102:27; Heb. 13:8), and seeing he is "infinite, immense, and omnipresent"; there can be no change of place with him, for he "fills heaven and earth" with his presence; he is everywhere, and cannot change or move from place to place; when therefore he is said to "come down" on earth, or to "depart" from men, it is not to be understood of local motion, or change of place; but of some uncommon exertion of his power, and demonstration of his presence, or of the withdrawalment of some benefit from them: but this will be considered more largely under the attribute of omnipresence, in its proper place.

God is the "most perfect" Being, and therefore can admit of no change in his nature, neither of increase nor decrease, of addition nor diminution; if he changes, it must be either for the better or the worse; if for the better, then he was imperfect before, and so not God: if for the worse, then he becomes imperfect; and the same follows: a like reasoning is used by Plato[2], and by another ancient philosopher[3], who asserts that God is good, impassable and unchangeable; for whatsoever is changed, says he, is either for the better or the worse; if for the worse, it becomes bad; and if for the better, it was bad at first.

Or if he changes from an infinitely perfect state, to another equally so, then there must be more infinities than one, which is a contradiction. Again, if any change is made in him, it must be either from somewhat within him, or from somewhat without him; if from within, he must consist of parts; there must be "another" and "another" in him; he must consist of act and power; there must be not only something active in him, to work upon him, but a passive power to be, wrought upon; which is contrary to his simplicity, already established; for, as a Jew[4] well argues, what necessarily exists of itself, has no other cause by which it can be changed; nor that which changes, and that which is changed, cannot be together; for so there would be in it two, one which changes, and another which is changed, and so would be compound; which is inconsistent with the simplicity of God: if from somewhat without him, then there must be a superior to him, able to move and change him; but he is the most high God; there is none in heaven nor in earth above him; he is "God over all, blessed for ever".

Nor is the immutability of the divine nature to be disproved from the creation of the world, and all things in it; as when it is suggested, God, from a non-agent, became an agent, and acquired a new relation, that of a Creator, from whence mutability is argued: but it should be observed, that God had from all eternity the same creative power, and would have had, if he had never created any thing; and when he put it forth in time, it was according to his unchangeable will in eternity, and produced no change in him; the change was in the creatures made, not in him the Maker; and though a relation results from hence, and which is real in creatures, is only nominal in the Creator, and makes no change in his nature.

Nor is the unchangeableness of the divine nature to be disproved by the incarnation of Christ; for though he, a divine Person, possessed of the divine nature, was "made flesh", or became man; the divine nature in him was not changed into the human nature, nor the human nature into the divine, nor a third nature made out of them both; was this the case, the divine nature would have been changeable; but so it was not; for as it has been commonly said, "Christ remained what he was, and assumed what he was not"; and what he assumed added nothing to his divine person; he was only "manifest in the flesh"; he neither

received any perfection, nor imperfection, from the human nature; though that received dignity and honour by its union to him, and was adorned with the gifts and graces of the Spirit without measure, and is now advanced at the right hand of God.

Nor was any change made in the divine nature by the sufferings of Christ; the divine nature is incapable of suffering, and is one reason why Christ assumed the human nature, that he might be capable of suffering and dying in the room and stead of his people; and though the Lord of life and glory was crucified, and God purchased the church with his own blood, and the blood of Christ is called the blood of the Son of God; yet he was crucified in the human nature only, and his blood was shed in that, to which the divine person gave virtue and efficacy, through its union to it; but received no change by all this. 2.

God is unchangeable in his perfections or attributes; which, though they are the same with himself, his nature and essence, as has been observed; yet, considering them separately, they are helps to our better understanding of it, and serve particularly to illustrate the unchangeableness of it: thus, for instance, he is the same in his power as ever; though that has been displayed in various instances, in creation, providence, &c. it is not exhausted, nor in the least diminished; his hand is not shortened, his strength is everlasting, his power eternal, invariably the same: his "knowledge" is the same; his "understanding is infinite", it can be neither increased nor lessened; the knowledge of angels and men increases gradually; but not so the knowledge of God, he knows no more now than he did from all eternity, he knew as much then as he does now; for he knows and sees all things together, and at once, in his vast eternal mind, and not one thing after another, as they appear in time; things past, present, and to come, are all beheld by him in one view; that is, which are so with respect to creatures, for with him there is no such consideration: his "goodness", grace, and mercy, are immutable; though there has been such a profusion of his goodness to his creatures, and so many good and perfect gifts have been bestowed on them, it is still the same in him, without any abatement; he is abundant in it, and it endures continually the same: and so is his grace, which has been exceedingly abundant; he is as gracious and merciful as ever; "his mercy is from everlasting to everlasting, to them that fear him"; and his faithfulness he never suffers to fail; even though men believe not, he abides faithful; and the unbelief of men cannot make the faith or faithfulness of God without effect.

And as he is "glorious" in "holiness", that perfection never receives any tarnish, can never be sullied, but is always illustriously the same; there is no unrighteousness in God, he cannot change from holiness to unholiness, from righteousness to unrighteousness; he is the just one, that neither can nor will do iniquity; and so he is unchangeably good, and unchangeably happy, and immutable in every perfection. 3. God is unchangeable in his purposes and decrees, there is a purpose for everything, and a time for that purpose; God has determined all that ever was, is, or shall be; all things come to pass according to the counsel of his will, and all his decrees are unchangeable; they are like the laws of the Medes and Persians, and more unalterable than they were; they are the mountains of brass Zechariah saw in a vision, from whence proceed the providences of God, and the executioners of them (Zech. 6:1), called "mountains" because of their immoveableness, and mountains of "brass" to denote their greater firmness and stability: immutability is expressly spoken of the counsel of God (Heb. 6:17), the purposes of God are always carried into execution, they are never frustrated; it is not in the power of men and devils to disannul them; whatever devices and counter workings to them may be framed and formed, they are of no avail; "the counsel of the Lord stands for ever" (Ps. 33:11; Prov. 19:21, 21:30; Isa. 14:24, 27, 46:10), the purposes of God are "within" himself (Eph. 1:9), and what is in himself, is himself, and he can as soon cease to be as to alter his mind, or change his counsels; and they are "eternal" (Eph. 3:11) no new thoughts arise in his mind, no

new resolutions are formed in his breast, no new decrees are made by him; his counsels are "of old"; and his purposes are called "counsels", because designs wisely formed by men, are with consultation, and upon mature deliberation: and such are the decrees of God, they are made with the highest wisdom by him, who is wonderful in counsel, and excellent in working, and so are unchangeable: and besides, being "all-knowing", he sees and declares the end from the beginning, and nothing unforeseen ever can appear to hinder the execution of his intentions and determinations; which is sometimes the case with men: and he is "able" to perform whatever he resolves upon; there is no lack of wisdom, nor of power in him, as often is in men; and he is "faithful" to himself, his purposes and decrees; his "counsels of old are faithfulness and truth"; or are truly and faithfully performed.

Nor is the immutability of the decrees of God to be disproved by his providences, which are many and various, unsearchable and past finding out, and which may seem to differ from, and clash with one another; for all the changes in providence, whether with respect to the world in general, or with respect to individuals, are according to his unchangeable will. Job was a remarkable instance of changes in providence, and yet he was fully persuaded of the unchangeable will of God in them, and which he strongly expresses; "He is in one mind, and who can turn him? and what his soul desireth, even that he doth; for he performeth the thing that is appointed for me; and many such things are with him" (Job 23:13, 14).

Nor is it to be disproved by the different declarations of the will of God, what he would have observed and done, in the different dispensations of law and gospel. God, by Moses, ordered the children of Israel, to observe certain laws, rites, and ceremonies, until the time of reformation, and then there was a disannulling of them; the heavens and earth were shaken, that is, the whole Mosaic economy and dispensation, whereby these were removed and laid aside as useless, and other ordinances were fixed, to remain till Christ's second coming; but then the delivery of the one, and the time of their continuance, and the abolition of them, and the settling of the other gospel ordinances to remain to the end of the world, were all according to the unchangeable will of God.

Nor is prayer any objection to the immutability of the divine will, which is not to be altered by it; for when the mind of God is not towards a people to do them good, it cannot be turned to them by the most fervent and importunate prayers of those who have the greatest interest in him (Jer. 15:1), and when he bestows blessings on a praying people, it is not for the sake of their prayers, as if he was inclined and turned by them: but for his own sake, and of his own sovereign will and pleasure.

Should it be said, to what purpose then is prayer? it is answered, this is the way and means God has appointed, for the communication of the blessings of his goodness to his people; for though he has purposed, provided, and promised them, yet he will be sought unto, to give them to them, and it is their duty and privilege to ask them of him; and when they are blessed with a spirit of prayer, it forebodes well, and looks as if God intended to bestow the good things asked; and which should be asked always with submission to the will of God, saying, "not my will, but thine be done". 4.

God is unchangeable in his love and affections to his people; "his love to them is from everlasting to everlasting", without any variation in his own heart, however different the manifestations of it may be to them; he ever rests in his love, and never alters, nothing can separate from it, he is love itself, and it is as unchangeable as himself, "the same today, yesterday, and for ever": the fall made no difference in it, though the special objects of it fell with Adam, in his transgression, into the depths of sin and misery; this hindered not, but God continued his love, and manifested it in sending his Son to be the propitiation for

their sins, and commended it, and gave a full proof and demonstration of it, in the delivery of Christ to death for them, even while they were yet sinners: nor does the sinful state and condition they were brought into, and continue in from their birth to their conversion, make any alteration in his love; but notwithstanding that, for the great love with which he loves them, he "quickens them when dead in trespasses and sins"; he looks upon them in all the impurity of their natural state, and says to them, "live"; and this time, as it is a time of life, it is a time of open love (see Eph 2:4, 5; Ezek. 16:6-8; Titus 3:3-5).

Nor do the hidings of God's face from them after conversion, prove any change in his love to them; for though he hides his face from them, and forsakes them for a moment, in a little seeming wrath, to show his resentment at their sins, to bring them to a sense of them, to humble them before him, and to cause them to seek his face and favour; yet with great mercies he gathers them again to himself, in the most tender manner, and with lovingkindness, has mercy on them; and, for the strengthening of their faith in his love, swears he will not be wroth with them; and declares his lovingkindness to be more immoveable than hills and mountains (Isa. 54:7-10).

Afflictions are no evidence of a change of affections to them; though he may thoroughly chastise them, and, as they may think, severely, yet he deals with them but as children; and, like Ephraim, they are his dear sons and daughters, and pleasant children, in whom he takes the utmost complacency and delight; chastenings are rather proofs of sonship, than arguments against it. God's rebukes of them are rebukes in love, and not in wrath and hot displeasure; though he visits their transgressions with a rod and stripes, he does not utterly, nor at all, take away his lovingkindness in Christ from them (Jer. 31:18, 20; Heb. 12:6-8; Rev. 3:19; Ps. 89:32, 33).

Nor is the unchangeableness of the love of God to his people to be disproved by his being said to be angry with them, and then to turn away his anger from them (Isa. 12:1), for anger is not opposite to love. Jacob was angry with his beloved Rachel, and a father may be angry with his beloved child, and love him not the less. Wrath and hatred are opposed to love, which are never in the heart of God towards his beloved ones: besides, this is said after the manner of men, and according to our apprehension of things; the Lord doing somewhat similar to men when they are angry, who frown and turn away; and when God frowns in his providence, and deserts his people for a while, they judge he is angry, when it only shows his discipline at their sins, but not at their persons; and then, when he smiles upon them again, and manifests his pardoning grace and mercy, they conclude he has turned himself from the fierceness of his anger (Ps. 85:2, 3). 5.

God is unchangeable in his covenant of grace. This was made with Christ from everlasting, and stands fast with him; it is as immoveable as a rock, and can never be broken; the blessings of it are "sure mercies", flow from the sovereign grace and mercy of God, and are sure and firm, being according to his unchangeable will, and are what he never repents of, nor revokes; and being once bestowed, are irreversible, and never taken away; such as are blessed with them are always blessed, and it is not in the power of men and devils to reverse them (Rom. 11:29, 8:30), the promises of the covenant, which are gone out of his mouth and lips are unalterable; what has been said of purposes may be said of promises, that they were made before the world were, by God, that cannot lie, who is all-wise, all-knowing, and all-powerful, and faithful to perform them; and besides, "all the promises are yea and amen in Christ".

Nay, even God is unchangeable in his threatenings, he watches to bring the evil he has threatened, as well as the good he has promised; and he assuredly performs the one as the other (Dan. 9:14; Isa. 1:20; Jer. 23:20). Nor is the unchangeableness of God in his word, whether in a way of promise or threatening,

to be disproved by repentance being ascribed to him, which is to be taken in a limited sense, for in some sense it is absolutely denied of him (Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29).

When it is spoken of him, it is to be understood improperly and figuratively, after the manner of men, he doing like what men do, when they repent, that is, undo what they have done; as a potter, when he does not like a vessel he has made, breaks it to pieces: so when it repented God that he had made man on earth, and Saul king (Gen. 6:6; 1 Sam. 15:11), he destroyed man from off the earth, whom he had created; and took away the kingdom from Saul and his family, and gave it to another: in doing which he did not change his mind, but his operations and providences, and that according to his unchangeable will.

Nor is the immutability of God, in his promises and threatenings, to be disproved, by observing, that the promised good, and threatened evil, are not always done. For it should be considered, that what is promised or threatened, is either absolutely and unconditionally, or with a condition: now that anything promised or threatened, absolutely and unconditionally, is not performed, must be denied; but if with a condition, and that condition not performed, the change will appear to be not in God, but in men: and in all such cases where God does not what he said he would do, a condition is either expressed or implied (see Jer. 18:8, 9, 10).

Thus God promised that he would dwell in Zion, in Jerusalem, in the temple, and there should be his "rest for ever" (Ps. 132:13, 14), and the people of Israel should dwell in their land, and eat the good of it; but then it was provided they were obedient to God, and abode in his service and worship, and kept his laws and ordinances (Isa. 1:19), but they failing herein, he departed from them, and suffered them to be carried captive: in all which there was a change of his dispensations, but no change of his will.

He threatened the Ninevites with the destruction of their city within forty days, that is, unless they repented: they did repent, and were saved from ruin, God repenting of what he had threatened; which, though a change of his outward conduct towards them, he threatened them with, was no change of his will; for both their repentance, and their deliverance, were according to his unchangeable will (John 3:4, 10). Nor is the case of Hezekiah any objection to the immutability of God; the outward declaration ordered to be made to him, was, that he should "die and not live"; as he must have done quickly, according to the nature of second causes, his disease being mortal; but the secret will of God was, that he should live "fifteen years" longer, as he did; which implies neither contradiction nor change: the outward declaration was made to humble Hezekiah, to set him a praying, and to make use of means; whereby the unchangeable will of God was accomplished. ENDNOTES:

[1] to yeion ametablhton anagkaion einai, Aristot. de Coelo, l. 1. c. 9. pav yeov ametablhtov, Sallust. de Diis, c. 1. 2.

[2] De Republica, l. 2. p. 606.

[3] Sallustius de Diis et Mundo, c. l.

[4] R. Joseph Albo in Sepher Ikkarim, l. 2. c. 5.

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