

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine God's attribute of immutability, which means that he cannot change. Dr. Spencer, last time we laid out a biblical case for this incommunicable attribute, but you said that you wanted to discuss some implications of it and objections to it. So, how would you like to begin today?

Dr. Spencer: I first want to deal with a common misunderstanding of what it means for God to be unchangeable. I think Louis Berkhof says it very well, so let me quote from his *Systematic Theology*. But before I do that, let me define a word that he uses. He mentions an anthropopathic way of speaking and we need to know that an anthropopathism ascribes human emotions to a non-human subject, in this case to God. With that definition in hand let me read what Berkhof wrote about God; "There is change round about Him, change in the relations of men to Him, but there is no change in His Being, His attributes, His purpose, His motives of action, or His promises. ... [when] Scripture speaks of His repenting, changing His intention, and altering His relation to sinners when they repent, we should remember that this is only an anthropopathic way of speaking. In reality the change is not in God, but in man and in man's relations to God."¹

Marc Roby: I think it would be good to point out that when Berkhof says that Scripture speaks of God repenting, he is referring to the King James translation, where the word is used in the sense of changing your mind. There is never any suggestion that God has done something morally wrong.

Dr. Spencer: Of course not, that is unthinkable. Let me give a couple of examples of the passages he is referring to. In Exodus 32:9-10 God tells Moses, "I have seen these people, and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation."² But in Verses 11-13 we read that Moses sought the Lord's favor on behalf of the Israelites and then, in Verse 14, we read that "the LORD relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened."

Marc Roby: And where the translation you just read said "the LORD relented", that's one of the places where the King James Version says he "repented".

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is. But we need to think about this exchange for a minute. Did God really change his mind? To say that would be an unwarranted conclusion and would violate the first rule of hermeneutics, which we covered in Session 39. Remember that that rule, which is also called the analogy of faith or the analogy of Scripture, says that we must use Scripture to interpret Scripture. Meaning that we should never pit one part of the Word of God against

¹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1938, pg. 59 (I changed "if" to "when" to be consistent with a modern way of phrasing his statement). Note: This book can be purchased as a combination of his *Systematic Theology* and *Introductory Volume to Systematic Theology* in one text from Eerdmans, 1996

² All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® (1984 version). Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com The "NIV" and "New International Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™.

another. Since the whole Word of God is the infallible truth, we must understand every passage in a way that is consistent with the rest of Scripture. The Word of God cannot contradict itself.

Marc Roby: And therefore, to understand this passage as teaching that God truly changed his mind would contradict what we are told, for example, in Numbers 23:19 as we saw last time.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it would contradict that passage and others as well. But it isn't that hard to see how to interpret this exchange between God and Moses. God was angry with his people and had determined beforehand, in fact from all eternity, how he was going to deal with it. He told Moses that he was angry enough to destroy them, but that he would still make Moses into a great nation. He did this knowing that Moses would plead for the people in prayer and also knowing that he would respond to Moses' prayer by showing mercy to his people. The whole passage redounds to the glory of God's great mercy. It is not at all necessary to say that God actually changed in any way and so the first rule of hermeneutics prohibits us from doing so.

Marc Roby: And of course, as you pointed out when we were discussing the first rule, we should even read things by human authors with the assumption that they have not contradicted themselves.

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. That is the only fair way to read anything. Of course, with human authors it is all too often the case that they *have* contradicted themselves, but that cannot happen with God, who is perfect in every way.

Marc Roby: And with regard to this specific example, the interpretation you gave is perfectly reasonable and even agrees with how human beings deal with each other on some occasions.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. Think about a father dealing with a child. When he does something wrong, the father gets angry and disciplines him. But, if he then sincerely acknowledges that he did wrong and seeks his father's forgiveness, the father forgives and he is restored to a place of favor. The father doesn't change in any meaningful way during this whole process, he is being perfectly consistent in how he deals with the child. What changes is the child's *status* with the father. He goes from being in his father's favor, to being out of favor, and then back into favor again. But these changes are predicated on the actions of the child, not on some change taking place in the father. In fact, quite the opposite is true, the father's behavior is *entirely* consistent and unchanging, but his attitude toward the child changes with the child's behavior. That is exactly what Berkhof was referring to when he said that "In reality the change is not in God, but in man and in man's relations to God."

Marc Roby: Of course there is an even larger issue here as well; namely, how God's unchangeable sovereignty and the efficacy of Moses' prayer for his people can both be true at the same time.

Dr. Spencer: That is the same issue. And we must admit that there is mystery involved in trying to comprehend how God's sovereignty and man's free agency can both be true. I hope to get into that at a later date, but for now I think it is sufficient to point out that God ordains the means as well as the end.

Marc Roby: OK, can you explain what you mean by that?

Dr. Spencer: I mean that God not only ordains what happens, he ordains the means by which it happens. So, for example, let's say that God has ordained to heal someone of a particular disease, let's call this person Joe. It may well be that one of the means he has also ordained is that you and I should pray for Joe to be healed. God is not changing in any way when he then answers our prayers by healing Joe, but it is still reasonable to say that our prayers were efficacious in helping to bring about Joe's healing.

Marc Roby: That makes me think of 2 Chronicles 7:14, where God makes a great promise to his people. He says, "if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land."

Dr. Spencer: That is a great promise and it clearly states God's unchanging intention to change his external behavior based on our behavior. The Bible has many wonderful promises in it, along with some terrifying threats. And all of them are true. God does not change. If we do what he has threatened to punish, we *will* be punished. But, if we sincerely repent and cry out for mercy, we *will* receive mercy. God does not change, but our status before God can change, just like the child's status with his father changed.

But, by the way, saying that we will receive mercy when we repent doesn't necessarily mean that we will not suffer the consequences for our sins in this life. God does not promise to remove all temporal consequences, in fact, he warns us that our sins will have consequences. In Leviticus 26:40-42 God says, "But if they will confess their sins and the sins of their fathers—their treachery against me and their hostility toward me, which made me hostile toward them so that I sent them into the land of their enemies—then when their uncircumcised hearts are humbled and they pay for their sin, I will remember my covenant with Jacob and my covenant with Isaac and my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land."

Marc Roby: That passage is frightening and should cause us to be very careful to not sin, but it is also comforting because it contains the same basic promise as 2 Chronicles 7:14; namely, that God will remember his covenant and will remember the land, which means he will deal with them favorably.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. And we must be careful to state clearly that when it says we will pay for our sin, it is not talking about atonement. Jesus Christ is the only one who can atone for our sin. This is speaking strictly about our circumstances in this life. In the ultimate sense, we can't pay for our sin, but our sins will be covered by the blood of Christ on the Day of Judgment.

Marc Roby: We should certainly praise God for that unchangeable promise. Before we leave the topic of God's immutability, let me ask you about the modern view that is usually called Process Theology. This view states that God is constantly changing. According to this view he is, for example, learning all the time because he doesn't know what I'm going to do until I actually do it.

Dr. Spencer: That view is completely unbiblical. Wayne Grudem deals with it briefly in his *Systematic Theology* and points out that it is based on two false assumptions.³ First, they assume that for our lives to be meaningful in any way it must be true that what we do can somehow change God. But that assumption has no biblical basis and any real Christian, for whom the Scriptures must be the ultimate authority, will reject it.

Marc Roby: I would also add that the assumption doesn't really make sense anyway. If you take away the God of the Bible, who says that human life actually *does* have any significance?

Dr. Spencer: I agree with you completely. The second error that process theologians make is that they assume God must be changeable because change is somehow seen as an essential part of real existence. But, as Grudem points out, the Bible emphatically denies this view. We read Psalm 102 Verses 25-27 last time and they bear repeating. They say, "In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. Like clothing you will change them and they will be discarded. But you remain the same, and your years will never end."

Marc Roby: That does put the kibosh on the idea that God changes.

Dr. Spencer: It does. We have to remember the point we made way back in Session 4 and have referred to a number of times since. Namely, that everyone has an ultimate standard for truth, either human reason, which is fallen, or God's propositional revelation, which is infallible and found in the Bible. The assumptions of process theology come from human reason, not the Bible, and they must be rejected because they contradict God's truth given to us in the Bible.

Marc Roby: I think that is enough said about process theology. There is another question raised about God's immutability, at least implicitly, by the modern idea that the God of the New Testament is somehow kinder and gentler than the God of the Old Testament.

Dr. Spencer: That is a common view now. In fact, many self-professed Christians seem to think that the Old Testament has almost no applicability to us at all, other than being a source of ancient history. The reality is however, that a careful reading of the Bible shows that God has not changed at all.

There are, I think, three main things that *have* changed and which affect the life of a believer significantly. The first is that we have much greater revelation now, we've talked about the progressive nature of revelation before. The second is that Jesus Christ has come. Old Testament believers looked forward to the promised Messiah, and we look back on his historical appearance. The biggest significance of that change for believers, besides the increased revelation involved with it, is that the Old Testament ceremonial system was completely done away with. For example, we no longer perform animal sacrifices because Christ was the final, efficacious, once-for-all sacrifice that obtained eternal redemption as we are told in Hebrews

³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pp 166-167

Chapter 9. In addition, we no longer have just one temple, there is no longer a separate priesthood, we are all a royal priesthood as we are told in 1 Peter 2:9.

Marc Roby: Alright, you said that there were three main changes, what is the third?

Dr. Spencer: The third thing that has changed is that we no longer live under the same civil government. God had given the Israelites a number of civil laws when they lived in a theocracy and, while those laws certainly reflect God's nature and how he wants us to live, we are no longer bound by them and the punishments prescribed by them. In fact, as Paul clearly tells us in Romans 13:1-2, we are bound to keep the laws of the civil government in the place where we live so long as those laws do not tell us to sin⁴. And we would have to violate our civil laws to do some of the things commanded under the civil laws of the Jews in the Old Testament.

Marc Roby: That is certainly true. Can you explain what these three significant changes in the lives of believers have to do with the question of whether or not the God of the New Testament is the same as the God of the Old Testament?

Dr. Spencer: At one level they have nothing to do with it, since God is who he is. But, the point I was preparing to make is that because of these three changes, some people have jettisoned the Old Testament, thinking that it is no longer relevant. The truth is that God has not changed at all and so the Old Testament is absolutely relevant today.

We do consciously reject the ceremonial laws, which served the purpose of pointing forward to Christ and were abrogated when he came, but the principles they elucidated are still important. In a similar manner, we are not bound by the civil laws that were in place at that time, although they also inform us about what is important in God's sight. But the moral law, which the Old Testament summarizes by the Ten Commandments, is still every bit as applicable to Christians today as it was to believers in the Old Testament. And God is every bit as angry with sin and wrathful toward it today as he was during Old Testament times, and he was every bit as gracious in the Old Testament times as he is today. Those things have not changed.

Marc Roby: In fact, you pointed out at the end of Session 54 that in Revelation 6:16 the wrath of God is actually called the "wrath of the Lamb". It is Jesus Christ himself who has prepared hell for the devil, his demons, and all who follow him.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. If you think that Jesus was always smiling and nice to everyone, you should read the New Testament all the way through and it will disabuse you of that false idea. Just look at Matthew Chapter 23 where Jesus calls the teachers of the law and Pharisees hypocrites, blind guides, blind fools, snakes and vipers. He pronounces woes on them and asks, in Verse 33, "How will you escape being condemned to hell?" In Matthew 7:23 he says how he will deal with false Christians, he says "I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" The Greek word translated here as "evildoers" is ἀνομία, which literally means lawlessness, in other words, a person who does not keep the law. And the Old Testament moral law is referred to over and over again in the New Testament as being the law, there isn't

⁴ See Acts 5:29 for the principle that we must respectfully disobey if commanded so sin.

some entirely new law presented in the New Testament. Although Jesus Christ did expansively interpret the moral law in his Sermon on the Mount. But, never once did Jesus even hint, nor did any other New Testament author, that the moral law has been abrogated.

So, the conclusion is that God has not changed at all. That should be a great comfort to us as believers, and a great warning to all who have not yet surrendered to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Marc Roby: I think this is a good place to stop for today. Let me remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org and we look forward to hearing from you.