

“Our fathers worshiped in this mountain, and you *people* say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” —John 4:20–24 (NASB)

Since God’s thoughts are not our thoughts nor His ways our ways (Isa 55:8), and since His greatness is unsearchable (Ps 145:3) and His understanding infinite (Ps 147:5), any attempt to describe God in human terms will fall short of exact correspondence. We can never replicate what God knows about Himself in our own minds—much less in our language.

But we are not without hope. Although we cannot ascend to Him, He has descended to us. He has graciously stooped to our level to describe Himself in such a way that we as humans can truly know Him. He has done this by choosing descriptions *from our experience* to explain *who He is*. This language is not *univocal*—it does not express *exact correspondence* to His essence (for human language is incapable of that). Rather, it is *analogical*—it reveals God according to our limitations, yet still according to how He wants to be known.

A prime example of such accommodation is found in how God describes His essence. **He is “spirit” (John 4:24).** For us who are so bound to the material world, this quality is particularly difficult to understand. God therefore connects with it many other descriptions and illustrations to help us understand Him truly.

I. Definition of “Divine Spirituality”

A. What *spirituality* means.

The spirituality of God refers to His unique essence, that He does not consist of created substances like matter but is immaterial and therefore imperceptible to human senses.

To affirm that God is spirit is to affirm His **immaterial** existence. In other words, there is no material property that comprises or defines Him. He does not have molecular structure and none of the elements of the material world—whether known or unknown—comprise His essence. He is not light or energy, for they were made by Him on the first day of creation (Gen 1:3). His spirit is also not air or vapor, for they are chemical components as well, created by Him on second day of creation (Gen 1:6).

To affirm that God is spirit is to affirm that He is **incorporeal**. To be “corporeal” means to have a body; but God is bodiless, and thus, “incorporeal.” As such, God’s essence is not marked by limitations or boundaries, nor does He have characteristics of size or dimension. As Gerald Bray states, “Incorporeality means that God is infinite; he has no body and therefore no boundaries to his being” (*The Attributes of God*, 30). This spiritual essence is what explains His *omnipresence*—that He is everywhere present.

To affirm that God is spirit is to affirm that He is **invisible**. His essence cannot be subjected to empirical analysis. Although some consider this to be a weakness, it is actually a proof of His perfection.

To affirm that God is spirit is to affirm that He is **incorruptible**. He cannot grow or shrink; He cannot decay or deteriorate. He never experiences the change that is inherently possible with matter, space, light, or energy. God is utterly distinct from these things, having brought them into existence by the power of His word (Heb 11:3). This spiritual essence is what explains His *immutability*—that He is unable to change.

To affirm that God is spirit is to affirm that He is **simple**. He is not a “composite” being made up of components or parts. In fact, it is important to affirm that God is not just *a* spirit (as if one among others of a similar kind), but *spirit* (as one in a class of His own). His essence is incomparable to anything else. He is

the most perfect form of existence. All other forms of spiritual existence (angels and men) are derivative and analogous in nature.

But how do angels and humans differ from God in their spiritual states? There is a lot of mystery here and we must be careful about speculation. Nonetheless, some distinctions can be drawn from Scripture. First, angelic beings are indeed “spirits” (Heb 1:14). As such, they “do not have flesh and bone” (Luke 24:39). But unlike God, these spirit beings are *creatures* and therefore *depend upon God* for their spiritual existence. They are always described as *limited* in essence, and although they can move between the spiritual and material realms, they are not omnipresent (e.g., Rev 12:7–9). They also contain in their existence *the capacity for change*—as the fall of Lucifer and his host of angels demonstrates (e.g., Isa 14:12). They are *subject to external influences*, such as the administration of torment—as the future punishment of Lucifer and his host also demonstrates (e.g., Matt 25:41). Ultimately, **the spiritual existence of angels is analogous to God’s essence, but not identical.** It is derived, limited, and changeable.

Second, it is important to note that human beings are *composite* beings comprised of both body and spirit. They are created to be both material and spiritual for the fullness of their existence. For humans, these components are interdependent; man is not complete without both (Gen 2:7). Like angels, **the spiritual component of human beings is analogous to God’s essence, but not identical.** Like angels, man’s spirit is limited and affected by external factors. Man’s spirit can be changed, such as what happens in regeneration (John 3:3; 2 Cor 5:17). But unlike angels, man’s body is a necessary component of who he is. It is not just a necessary evil. He needs it to be complete, which is why the future resurrection of the body is such an important doctrine (Job 19:25–26; 1 Cor 15:16–19).

B. What *spirituality* does not mean.

It is important to understand that God’s spiritual **essence does not imply that anything material is evil by default.** Throughout history, various forms of a worldview called *dualism* have arisen (e.g., Gnosticism), contending that anything material must be anti-God because God is immaterial. Such views even look upon man’s body as a prison that holds his spirit captive. Consequently, “salvation” is defined as emancipation of the soul from the material world. But this worldview directly contradicts Scripture’s teaching that God Himself directly created time, space, and matter, and that He Himself pronounced it “very good” (Gen 1:31). God even sent His Son to identify with human flesh through the incarnation (John 1:14). Yes, the material world we experience is evil, but that is due to the corruption of sin, not the presence of matter.

IMPLICATIONS OF GOD’S SPIRITUALITY:
 He is *immaterial, incorporeal, unlimited, invisible, incorruptible, and simple.*

It is also important to understand that the affirmation of God’s spiritual essence—and more specifically, the denial of His essence as material, corporeal, or composite—**does not preclude Him from entering into, revealing Himself within, and interacting with the material world He created.** As John 1:14 states, “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.” The God who is spirit is also *Immanuel*—“God with us.”

“QUESTION: What is God? ANSWER: God is spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth.” —*Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Question 4

II. Biblical Testimony to God’s Spirituality

There are many biblical texts that testify to implications of God’s spirituality—His omnipresence, His immutability, His simplicity, etc. But the texts that most directly witness to God’s spirituality are those that speak of His *incorporeality* and His *invisibility*.

A. **God’s incorporeality**—He does not have a material existence and is not limited by material boundaries:

- Psalm 139:7

- Isaiah 31:1, 3a
- John 4:24

B. **God’s invisibility**—He cannot be beheld by man’s senses or identified by material means:

- John 1:18a; 5:37; 6:46
- Colossians 1:15
- 1 Timothy 1:17; 6:15b–16
- Hebrews 11:27
- 1 John 4:12

Charles Hodge (*Systematic Theology*, 1.183) summarizes this evidence well:

Everywhere in the Old and in the New Testament, God is represented as a spiritual Being, without form, invisible, whom no man hath seen or can see; dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto, and full of glory; as not only the creator and preserver, but as the governor of all things; as everywhere present and everywhere imparting life and securing order.

Excursus 1: But what about the language in Scripture describing God as physical?

What are we to make of the many instances in Scripture where God is depicted as possessing physical human attributes? How can we harmonize these descriptions with the truth that “God is spirit” (John 4:24)?

These instances where God describes Himself *according to human form* are powerful examples of His gracious condescension—of His effort to communicate to us something about Himself using ideas and words we can understand. These instances are called **“anthropomorphisms”** (from the Greek words ἄνθρωπος, *anthrōpos*, meaning “man” + μορφή, *morphē*, meaning “form”). Anthropomorphisms occur when **human characteristics are used to describe what is not human in reality.**

Examples of Anthropomorphisms in Scripture			
“hands”	Exodus 3:20; 7:5; Deuteronomy 33:3; Psalm 139:10; Isaiah 59:1; 65:2; Jeremiah 18:6	“mouth”	Deuteronomy 8:3; 2 Chronicles 6:4; Isaiah 40:5
“arms”	Exodus 6:6; Deuteronomy 4:34; Job 40:9; Psalm 89:10; Isaiah 53:1	“eyes”	1 Kings 8:29; 2 Chronicles 16:9; Psalm 34:15; Proverbs 15:3
“ears”	2 Samuel 22:7; Nehemiah 1:6; Psalm 34:15; 130:2; Isaiah 37:17; 59:1	“face”	Exodus 33:11, 20; Numbers 6:25; Psalm 11:7; 17:15.
“shoulders”	Deuteronomy 33:12	“feet”	Exodus 24:10; Psalm 18:9; Ezekiel 43:7
“nostrils”	Exodus 15:8; 2 Samuel 22:9, 16; Psalm 18:8	“heart”	Hosea 11:8
“hair”	Daniel 7:9	“back”	Exodus 33:23
“finger”	Deuteronomy 9:10; Luke 11:20	“mind”	Romans 11:34
“lips”	Psalm 17:4; 89:34; Isaiah 11:4		

In fact, God’s condescension to describe Himself in material form is not limited to *anthropomorphisms*. God also uses *zoomorphisms*—that is, He describes Himself to us according to *the form of animals* (e.g., as having “wings” in Psalm 57:1; as a “lion,” “leopard,” and “bear” in Hosea 13:7–8; as a “dove” in Luke 3:22). God even describes Himself according to the form of *inanimate objects* (e.g., a “rock” in 2 Samuel 22:32; a “shield” in Psalm 115:9), and even according to *weather phenomena* (e.g., “pillar of cloud” and “pillar of fire” in Exodus 13:21–22; “thunder, lightening, and thick cloud” in Exodus 19:16ff; the “whirlwind” in Job 38:1). None of this is intended to lead us to believe God is material in His essence. Rather, as Steven Lawson (*Show Me Your Glory*, 58), states, by this figurative language, “we as finite creatures can understand what He is like. This infinite God

must condescend to our level through such analogies to reveal Himself in ways in which we can comprehend Him.”

Excursus 2: But haven't people actually seen God?

We can immediately dismiss the claims made by many today who glibly state that they saw and talked with God. The superficiality of such testimonies betrays the absurdity of their claims (see Exodus 33:20; John 1:18; 1 Timothy 6:16). Nonetheless certain accounts in Scripture do suggest that people have indeed seen God. How?

The Bible gives witness to such “sightings” of the invisible God—but with an important caveat. These special “appearances” by God in the physical world are unique “manifestations,” and they fall into three general categories:

- 1) Occasionally in the history of redemption, God manifested Himself in ***dreams, visions, manifestations of glory, and theophanies*** (e.g., Genesis 28:12–13; Exodus 3:2–6; 24:9–11; 1 Kings 8:10–11; Isaiah 6:1; Daniel 3:25).
- 2) Ultimately, God manifested Himself permanently in ***the incarnation of His Son***, who took on real “flesh and bone” (e.g., John 1:14, 18; 14:8–9; Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3).
- 3) Uniquely, God will manifest Himself to ***the saints in glory*** (e.g., Job 19:25–27; Psalm 17:15; 1 John 3:2; Revelation 21:3–4; 22:3–5). Yet even in glory the saints will continue to behold God through an accommodated manifestation—particularly through the incarnate Son of God, but never in the fullness of His infinite glory.

III. What Spirituality Demands from Us

- A. **God's invisibility is a grace to us mortals.** Those who speak casually of “seeing” or “hearing” God are deceived and deceivers (see Judges 13:22; Isaiah 6:5; Revelation 1:17a).
- B. **Creating any image to represent God is idolatry.** That God is spirit forms the basis for His absolute prohibition of using material images to worship of Him (Exodus 20:4–6; Deuteronomy 4:12–18). Ultimately, God has the exclusive right to use word pictures to describe Himself; we can go no further: “His spiritual nature forbids our imagining anything earthly or carnal of him” (Calvin *Institutes*, 1.13.1).
- C. **Worship must be offered in spirit and truth.** The immaterial existence of God has direct implications for our worship (John 4:23–24; Acts 17:24). Worship cannot be limited to a physical *location* or a particular *posture*; it cannot be associated with *physical images*; it cannot be based on man's *material preferences*.
- D. **You do not see Him, but He sees you.** God's invisibility easily leads to the assumption that He does not see us, but His incorporeality teaches that He is both invisible and boundless (Hebrews 4:13; Genesis 16:13). We always live *coram Deo*—in the sight of God. So, what does He see?
- E. **Marvel at the incarnation of the Son of God.** The incarnation of the Son of God is the supreme manifestation (John 1:14, 18)! Such unmerited grace! This profound mystery should inspire the greatest of adoration for who God is—and what He has done for us.

For Further Study

Memorize: John 4:24; 1 Timothy 1:17

Sing: “Immortal, Invisible” (*Hymns of Grace* #36)

Discuss:

- 1) In your own words, define God's “spirituality.” Also define “anthropomorphism.”
- 2) How can a right understanding of God's spirituality help you mortify materialism in your life?
- 3) How does the attribute of God's spirituality affect your worship of Him on a practical level? Do you only associate certain locations with communion with God?
- 4) How does the fact of God's invisibility bring you conviction? How does it bring comfort?

Audio, video, and handouts for this session: gracechurch.org/motw

Next meeting: November 2 – Evening of Prayer