

“Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.” —James 1:17 (NASB)

Here is a word to add to your vocabulary: *metathesiophobia*. It might be difficult to pronounce, but we’re all familiar with its meaning. The term describes *an extreme fear of the unknown*. Some of the signs of this phobia include: extreme anxiety over what might happen in your future; refusal to stray from your everyday routine out of fear of what you will encounter; feelings of nausea, indigestion, or chest pains whenever you think of change; habitual rejection of invitations to special events and celebrations; refusal to do anything about circumstances in your life which cause discomfort and pain; the list goes on. Ultimately, it is the fear of *the unpredictable*, and it is a major factor in the sin of worry (cf. Matt 6:25–33).

We’ve all experienced expressions of this phobia. On the one hand, it arises from our intimate awareness of creation’s susceptibility to change. Changeable things were never meant to be the objects of our trust, yet despite our awareness of their fleetingness, we keep putting faith in them, and as we do, we’re disappointed. We think it will turn out better the next time, but we still have a hunch it won’t—and so we fear. On the other hand, *metathesiophobia* manifests itself because of our inadequate understanding of our Creator’s character. Specifically, we fear the unpredictable because we do know so poorly the One who is changeless. We fail to connect the dots—to realize that our anxiety arises from a lack of faith specifically in God’s *immutability*.

Consequently, the doctrine of God’s immutability is far from abstract. It has immense implications for how we live.

I. Definition of “Divine Immutability”

What immutability means.

The immutability of God refers to His unchanging existence.

To be “mutable” means “to be capable of change”—to be susceptible to internal or external influences that can bring change in character or nature—for better or for worse. By definition, anything that is *created* is *mutable*. Created things obviously have a beginning and can also be dissolved. This is the ultimate illustration of change.

But God’s wholly-other existence is *impervious* to any forces of change. For one, He has no beginning nor end. Moreover, in Himself, He is *perfect* in existence, and therefore can never become better or worse. If He could become better, then He was never originally perfect because He would lack something that He needed. If He could become worse, then He obviously was not perfect to begin with, for who that is perfect would be tempted to discard perfection for something less?

Outside of Himself, nothing *affects* God in any that would bring about a change in His existence. Although God is the agent of change in His creation, and while He acts differently in different situations outside of Himself, He nonetheless remains changeless within. He is what He has always been and forever will be. **Ultimately, God is perfect *being*; everything else is always *becoming*.**

**IMMUTABILITY:
God’s unchanging
existence**

This is utterly different from our experience as creatures. Even we as God’s image-bearers are constantly in process. In the physical realm, our bodies are never the same from one day to the next. We experience growth, plateau, and then decline. Even in that decline we are not brought back to what we were at our beginning. Change is true of us also spiritually. We once were “dead in our transgressions,” but God “made us alive” (Eph 2:5). Having experienced *regeneration*, then the life-long path of *progressive sanctification* begins, summarized so well by Paul in 2 Corinthians 3:18, “we all, with unveiled face,

beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory.” We know that we will one day experience the end of sin in *final glorification* (Rom 8:29–30; 1 Cor 15:51–52), but even then we will continue to grow in our experience of glory.

This reality highlights the great Creator-creature divide. It is *good* for us to change. God would *cease to be* if He changed. Herman Bavinck (*Reformed Dogmatics*, 2.156) summarizes it well:

The doctrine of God’s immutability is highly significant for religion. The difference between the Creator and the creature hinges on the contrast between being and becoming. All that is creaturely is in process of becoming. It is changeable, constantly striving, in search of rest and satisfaction, and finds this rest only in him who is pure being without becoming.

God’s immutability is an expression of His *eternality*. Since God is independent from time, having neither a beginning nor an end, and since He does not experience the succession of time in His being, He cannot experience change.

God’s immutability is an expression of His *aseity*. God is not reliant upon anything outside of Himself for existence, but rather supplies life to all. Nothing brought Him into existence and nothing can end His existence. Nothing external to Himself can influence His being.

God’s immutability is an expression of His *faithfulness*. God does not waver in His commitment to His decrees and promises. As Robert Reymond states, there is “a precise equivalency between *what he says he will do and what he actually does*” (*A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 201). He is reliable not only because of His determination to fulfill His promises, but because His immutability allows no change.

A. What God’s immutability does not mean.

To affirm God’s immutability does not mean that God is impersonal, detached, or motionless—that He is *stoic*. Stoicism—an ancient Greek philosophy promoted by Zeno of Athens in the 3rd-century BC—taught that a divine force (call it reason, fate, or providence) ruled the universe and was indifferent to the pleasures and pains of men. For followers of this philosophy (the Stoics), man’s lot in life was to live in harmony with this divine force and endure the pleasures and pains of life through apathetic detachment—that is, through suppressing any and all emotion.

Some have mistakenly assumed God’s *immutability* to be akin to this Stoic idea of an *impersonal, detached, motionless* divine essence. But the unchangeable God of Scripture is not at all the god of Zeno. As Louis Berkhof (*Systematic Theology*, 59) states,

The divine immutability should not be understood as implying *immobility*, as if there is no movement in God. . . . The Bible teaches us that God enters into manifold relations with man and, as it were, lives their life with them. 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 actions, or His promises.

Or as Reymond asserts, “**whenever divine impassibility is interpreted to mean that God is impervious to human pain or incapable of empathizing with human grief it must be roundly denounced and rejected**” (*A New Systematic Theology*, 179).

Consequently, to affirm God’s *immutability* is not to deny that He is a God of compassion (e.g., Exod 33:19), mercy (e.g., Eph 2:4), love (e.g., John 3:16), and care (e.g., 1 Pet 5:7) . . . or to deny that He is a God of jealousy (e.g., Deut 4:23–24) and wrath (e.g., Rev 9:15). At the same time, we must be ever so careful **never to project our emotions onto God** as if He “experiences” the same things we experience when we talk about these expressions (compassion, mercy, love, jealousy, etc.). As creatures, we are *affected beings*—meaning that we are always being impacted, influenced, and changed by forces outside of ourselves. Our emotional responses are the very evidences of these changes. In fact, not only do our emotions show our response to the changes, but they themselves—from within—lead to subsequent changes in our thinking, behavior, and perception.

None of this is true of God. God is never improved, informed, or inflicted; He never succumbs, switches, or submits. Scripture testifies that He expresses compassion, mercy, love, and care, as well as perfect jealousy and wrath. He does so not as an affected being, but as immutable God. His expressions are in a category of their own.

II. Biblical Testimony to God's Immutability

The biblical witness to God's unchangeableness can be arranged into four categories. God is immutable in:

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| (1) His existence; | } | God's <i>ontological</i> immutability (unchangeableness in nature) |
| (2) His perfections; | | |
| (3) His purposes; and | } | God's <i>ethical</i> immutability (unchangeableness in commitments) |
| (4) His promises. | | |

A. God is immutable in His existence. God has never experienced change with respect to a *beginning*, He never experiences change with respect to *growing* or *decreasing*, and He will never experience change with respect to an *ending*. As supremely perfect, He can neither get better nor change for the worse.

- Psalm 90:2; 93:2; 102:23–27 (cited in Hebrews 1:11–12); Romans 1:22–23; Hebrews 13:8

"He cannot change for the better, for He is already perfect; and being perfect, He cannot change for the worse. Altogether unaffected by anything outside Himself, improvement or deterioration is impossible. . . . He is altogether uninfluenced by the flight of time. There is no wrinkle upon the brow of eternity. Therefore, His power can never diminish nor His glory ever fade." —A. W. Pink, *The Attributes of God*, 47

B. God is immutable in His perfections. God never experiences change in His *attributes*. He never adds nor removes qualities to His nature, nor does He become *more* of one thing and *less* of another. Consequently, those who view God as "more loving" in the New Testament than in the Old Testament radically misunderstand God. God is not only *not* made up of "parts" that can increase or decrease, but His perfections are eternal for the very reason that they are perfect.

- Psalm 100:55; 119:90; Jeremiah 31:3; Malachi 3:5–6; James 1:17

"Whatever the attributes of God were before the universe was called into existence, they are precisely the same now, and will remain so forever. Necessarily so; for they are the very perfections, the essential qualities of His being. *Semper idem* (always the same) is written across every one of them. His power is unabated, His wisdom undiminished, His holiness unsullied. The attributes of God can no more change than Deity can cease to be."
—Pink, *Attributes of God*, 47

C. God is immutable in His purposes. God always acts in His creation according to His predetermined purposes. Certainly, God was never *forced* to have such plans (to create the world; to make man in His image; to display saving grace to unworthy individuals; etc.). But that *He* decided such plans automatically makes *them* unbreakable. His purposes flow out of His immutable character, and therefore are immutable themselves. To put it in simple terms, God does not change His mind.

- Job 42:2; Psalm 33:11; Proverbs 19:21; Isaiah 14:24; 43:13; 46:9–10; Romans 9:11; Ephesians 1:4, 11; 3:9–11; 2 Timothy 2:19; Hebrews 6:17–18; 1 Peter 1:20; Revelation 13:8

D. God is unchanging in His promises. God's revelation of Himself is consistent with His character. Thus, what He says about Himself and His will is unchanging in its meaning. God cannot lie or deceive. He cannot reveal something about Himself that later is to be understood as inaccurate or outdated. The meaning of His promises—whether to individuals or to nations—does not change from age to age.

- Numbers 23:19; 1 Samuel 15:29; Psalm 110:4; 119:89; 151–152; Luke 21:33

III. What God's Immutability Demands from Us

The implications of God's immutability are many. Here are four crucial ones:

- A. Remember how different God is from you.** Immutability is an incommunicable attribute; it is a quality which no created being can share. God cannot change; we always change.

This is one of the most striking differences between God and us. As Pink states, "Immutability is one of the divine perfections which is not sufficiently pondered. It is one of the excellencies of the Creator which distinguishes Him from all His creatures" (*Attributes of God*, 46). Let this sink in. As it does, it should foster in us ever-growing humility—a fearful reverence that we live and change before Him—One who is changeless.

- B. Refuse to trust in mutable things.** Idolatry can be defined as *faith in a mutable object*. Such idolatry is evidenced in the affection men devote to money, personal health, human beauty, a career, social standing, fame, a legacy, children, and so on. But one thing is certain about all these things: *they change*. As such, it is utter folly to give to such things one's best energies and affections. Those who do are like the foolish idol makers described in Isaiah 44:9–20.

Instead, this truth must rule: *trust only in that which does not change*. And in the quest for such a thing you will find only one that will fit this requirement—the one true God, the God of Scripture.

- C. Rely upon the promises of God.** If God could change, what would then happen to His promises? If God could change, what confidence would we have to approach Him in prayer? As Charnock asks, "What comfort would it be to pray to a god that, like the chameleon, changed color every moment? Who would put up a petition to an earthly prince that was so mutable as to grant a petition one day, and deny it another?" (*Existence and Attributes of God*, 1.348). But the God of the Bible is not a god who changes. He remains the same for all eternity, and He attaches His promises to this immutable character (cf. Isa 54:10).

This truth about divine immutability thus becomes one of the greatest comforts to the one who believes in His promises. Although we cannot rely on the word of men, we can rest in the truth that the word of God is as unalterable as His own character. As Martin Luther stated, "The greatest and only consolation of Christians in their adversities, is knowing that God lies not, but does all things immutably, and that His will cannot be resisted, changed, or hindered."

- D. Reverence God that He changes not.** Ultimately, God is immutable because He is perfect. Because He is perfect, He is worthy of all adoration. His immutability should be a regular object of our worship.

For Further Study

Memorize: Malachi 3:6; James 1:17

Sing: "O God, Our Help in Ages Past" (*Hymns of Grace* #55)

Discuss:

- 1) In your own words, define God's "immutability."
- 2) Scripture gives testimony to God's immutability in at least four ways. What are those ways?
- 3) As you reflect on your own circumstances, how does God's perfection of immutability comfort you?
- 4) Why is it erroneous to think that God has emotions like us?
- 5) We rightly think that it is virtuous for someone to undergo change. Stubborn and incorrigible behavior is a vice. But why is it that God is glorious for the very reason that He *does not* change? Why the difference?

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

Next meeting: 7pm, May 3, "Wrath" (livestreaming begins at 8pm)