

Counseling with the Attributes of God

By Wendy Wood



During the first counseling session, as I am gathering data from my counselee, I ask all sorts of questions. I am not just listening for the exact answer to my questions, though I do care about those answers. I am also listening to how they are processing their past and present circumstances and who or what is the focal point of their perspective. Usually, a counselee is coming for counseling because self has become too big and God has become too small. Whether the counselee is experiencing anxiety, wrestling with bitterness or unforgiveness, or wanting to break free from overeating, the focus on self prevents them from viewing God over their circumstances. For this reason, I often begin homework the very first session, with studying God's attributes.

Most counselees will agree with a list of God's attributes. While they can't necessarily list off fifteen of God's attributes, they will confirm that they believe the truths that are stated in each attribute. The issue is not head knowledge but whether or not the counselee is living like each attribute is true. I like to have my counselees study one attribute at a time and focus in on specific scriptures that define and explain that attribute. This reminds them who God is and how "other" or "holy" He is. People often shrink God down into a more human level of understanding and much anxiety and turmoil results when we forget the truths about God that make Him God. As Dane Ortlund said in Gentle and Lowly, "He's not like you." As counselees focus on how huge, powerful, loving, just, and righteous God is, I want them to be amazed and grow in their understanding and trust in who He is. I want their affection for this awesome God to grow. I want them to answer the question, "How does this attribute of God grow my love and affection for who God is?" I have them choose a favorite scripture or two from each attribute to put on notecards to meditate and pray through throughout the week. They then have these scriptures to go back to over and over as they need to constantly remind themselves of the awesomeness of God.

I also want to get my counselee thinking about whether or not they are living like they truly believe and trust each attribute. Our sin and struggles arise from forgetting or disregarding the truth about God. It's easy to agree that God is sovereign and good, but when we complain and grumble about our circumstances, we demonstrate that we don't really trust God is both good and powerful in our situation. I want them to answer questions like "How have you not been living like this is true?" or "What would change in the way you are thinking and responding if you really trusted this attribute of God?" I want to challenge them to be thinking through if their response to a difficult teenager demonstrates trust in God's wisdom or if their response to an angry boss shows trust in God's faithfulness. This change will take weeks and months to really start to take hold in a counselee's heart, but starting the process early gives a strong foundation to keep referring back to as counseling progresses.

There are many good books that cover the attributes in detail. I really like A.W. Tozer's The Attributes of God volume 1 and 2, or Tozer's The Knowledge of the Holy, and A.W. Pink's The Attributes of God. These books are great introductions to the attributes in a systematic way. I have also written about the attributes for homework in a short, easy to read fashion. I geared this homework assignment to high school students so it would be a quick and understandable way to study God for everyone. You can find that here.

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Another reason to study God's attributes early on in counseling is for repentance as sin is uncovered and heart idols are addressed. Jerry Bridges calls sin "cosmic treason" because every sin is against God. As our counselees start to identify their sin or idols, it is helpful for them to contemplate which attributes of God they are doubting or neglecting in pursuing their sin. For example, a woman who is not submitting to her husband is doubting God's goodness in His design for marriage. She is doubting God's wisdom in creating gender roles within marriage. This wife may not be trusting in God's omnipresence in her situation and she is doubting if God is seeing and hearing her difficulties. Another example might be a man who is dealing with sinful anger. As he lashes out at his family, he is challenging God's sovereignty in his circumstances. He is doubting God's power and purpose in putting him in situations where his preference is not being met. This man may be rebelling against God's wisdom in the types of people he encounters throughout his day. Our counselees need to agree with David in Psalm 51: 4 "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment." The attributes of God help our counselees see specifically how they are sinning directly against God. As your counselee contemplates their specific sin with each attribute of God, a growing hatred of sin, hopefully, is produced as well as a growing love for God's mercy and forgiveness.

Here is a list of attributes with just a short explanation of each. I encourage you as a counselor to study these in depth and begin to use them in your counseling.

Attributes of God – The Characteristics

Wisdom: “Wisdom is the ability to devise perfect ends and to achieve these ends by the most perfect means.” In other words, God makes no mistakes. He is the Father who truly knows best, as Paul explains in **Romans 11:33**: “Oh, how great are God’s riches and wisdom and knowledge! How impossible it is for us to understand His decisions and His ways!”

Infinitude: God knows no boundaries. He is without measure. This attribute by definition impacts all of the others. Since God is infinite, everything else about Him must also be infinite.

Sovereignty: This is “the attribute by which He rules His entire creation.” It is the application of His other attributes of being all-knowing and all-powerful. It makes Him absolutely free to do what He knows to be best. God is in control of everything that happens. Man still has a free will, and is responsible for his choices in life.

Holiness: This is the attribute that sets God apart from all created beings. It refers to His majesty and His perfect moral purity. There is absolutely no sin or evil thought in God at all. His holiness is the definition of that which is pure and righteous in all the universe. Wherever God has appeared, such as to Moses at the burning bush, that place becomes holy just for God having been there.

Trinity: Though the actual word is not used in the Bible, the truth of God revealing Himself in three persons is included. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all called God, given worship as God, exist eternally, and are involved in doing things only God could do. Although God reveals Himself in three persons, God is One and cannot be divided. All are involved completely whenever One of the Three is active.

Omniscience: “God possesses perfect knowledge and therefore has no need to learn. God has never learned and cannot learn.” Omniscience means all-knowing. God knows everything, and His knowledge is infinite. It is impossible to hide anything from God.

Faithfulness: Everything that God has promised will come to pass. His faithfulness guarantees this fact. He does not lie. What He has said in the Bible about Himself is true. Jesus even said that He is the Truth. This is extremely important for the followers of Jesus because it is on His faithfulness that our hope of eternal life rests. He will honor His promise that our sins will be forgiven and that we will live forever with Him.

Love: Love is such an important part of God’s character that the apostle John wrote, “God is love.” This means that God holds the well-being of others as His primary concern. For a full definition of love, read **1 Corinthians 13**. To see love in action, study the life of Jesus. His sacrifice on the cross for the sins of others is the ultimate act of love. God’s love is not a love of emotion but of action. His love gives freely to the object of its affection, those who choose to follow His son Jesus.

Omnipotence: Literally this word means all-powerful. Since God is infinite and since He possesses power, He possesses infinite power. He does allow His creatures to have some power, but this in no way diminishes His own. “He expends no energy that must be replenished.” When the Bible says God rested on the seventh day, it was to set an example for us and our need for rest, not because He was tired.

Self-existence: When Moses asked who he was talking to in the burning bush, God said, “I AM THE ONE WHO ALWAYS IS.” God has no beginning or end. He just exists. Nothing else in all the universe is self-caused. Only God. In fact, if anything else had created Him, that thing would be God. This is a difficult concept for our minds since everything else we will ever encounter comes from something other than itself. The Bible says, “In the beginning, God.” He was already there.

Self-sufficiency: The Bible says that God has life in Himself (see **John 5:26**). All other life in the universe is a gift from God. He has no needs and there is no way He can improve. To God, nothing else is necessary. He does not need our help with anything, but because of His grace and love, He allows us to be a part of advancing His plan on earth and being a blessing to others. We are the ones who change, but never God. He is self-sufficient.

Justice: The Bible says that God is just, but it is His character that defines what being just really is. He does not conform to some outside criteria. Being just brings moral equity to everyone. When there are evil acts, justice demands there be a penalty. Since God is perfect and has never done evil, no penalty would ever be necessary; however, because of His love, God paid the penalty for our evil deeds by going to the cross Himself. His justice needed to be satisfied, but He took care of it for all who will believe in Jesus.

Immutability: This simply means that God never changes. It is why the Bible says, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.”

Mercy: “Mercy is the attribute of God which disposes Him to be actively compassionate.” Since God’s justice is satisfied in Jesus, He is free to show mercy to all those who have chosen to follow Him. It will never end since it is a part of God’s nature. Mercy is the way He desires to relate to mankind, and He does so unless the person chooses to despise or ignore God at which time His justice becomes the prominent attribute.

Eternal: In some ways, this fact about God is similar to His self-existence. God always has been and will forever be, because God dwells in eternity. Time is His creation. It is why God can see the end from the beginning, and why He is never surprised by anything. If He were not eternal, God's promise of eternal life for those who follow Jesus would have little value.

Goodness: "The goodness of God is that which disposes Him to be kind, cordial, benevolent, and full of good will toward men." This attribute of God is why He bestows all the blessing He does on His followers. God's actions define what goodness is, and we can easily see it in the way Jesus related to the people around Him.

Gracious: God enjoys giving great gifts to those who love Him, even when they do not deserve it. Grace is the way we describe that inclination. Jesus Christ is the channel through which His grace moves. The Bible says, "The law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ."

Omnipresence: This theological term means "always present." Since God is infinite, His being knows no boundaries. So, clearly He is everywhere. This truth is taught throughout the Bible as the phrase "I am with you always" is repeated 22 times in both the Old and New Testaments. These were even Jesus' words of assurance just after giving the challenge to His disciples to take His message to the entire world. This is certainly a comforting truth for all who follow Jesus.