

Speaking About God

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[0:00] This evening, for a wee while, I'd like us to turn back to Psalm 40, and I'm going to read! You have multiplied, O Lord my God, your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us. None can compare! I will proclaim and tell of them, yet they are more than can be told. We're doing just a very short series this week and next Sunday morning called Knowing, Speaking and Thinking About God. And these, in many ways, are very simple terms. It's stuff that we're trying to do every week. We want to know more about God when we come to church. We want to speak about God to one another, and we want to think about God. And yet, these are actually very, very profound topics to think about. And this morning, we saw that knowing about God actually leads us into a fascinating world where we recognize that God, as the infinite, eternal, unchangeable God, He has knowledge of Himself and of everything else that's at a different level altogether. God has what theologians call archetypal knowledge.

It's knowledge that's the source from which every other knowledge comes. And so, our knowledge is not at that level. It's at a lower level. Theologians call that ectipal knowledge. So, this morning, we were looking at the archetypal-ectipal distinction, which probably sounds like a very obscure set of theological terms, but it's actually hugely important because it helps us to recognize that there's always going to be mystery when it comes to knowing God. So, God's archetypal knowledge is His perfect, complete, and true knowledge. And then, our ectipal knowledge is imperfect. It's incomplete, but it's still true because He's revealing Himself to us, and we can learn about Him. And so, that means we embrace mystery in terms of our theology. We recognize that we can't. Our minds are just, as I said this morning, like a wee thimble, and the truth about God is an endless ocean. We can't fit that ocean into the wee thimble of our minds. But we can learn a little about Him, and most importantly of all, there's one thing that God has revealed very, very clearly. So, as we said this morning, God doesn't fully explain how the Trinity works, how the Incarnation works, how the interface between time and eternity works. We don't have these things explained to us, but one thing that God has revealed to us is how sinners can be reconciled to a holy God.

And that's through the gospel, the fact that Jesus has come to be our Savior. So, knowing about God kind of blows our minds in terms of the vastness of God, and yet at the same time, it drives us back to the beauty of the cross, that Jesus has come to be our Savior. Tonight, we're going to think about speaking about God. And again, that seems pretty simple and straightforward, or certainly at first, first impression. It's what we do all the time. Every sermon, that's what I'm trying to do, speak about God. Every Thursday, when we meet at the prayer meeting and talk together, that's what we're trying to do. We're trying to speak about God. And everyone at Sunday Club and in other contexts, anything that you're doing, in so many ways, we want to just speak as clearly as we can about God.

But speaking about God is actually a big challenge. It's a challenge because sometimes we're nervous to do it, and we're shy about it, and it can be hard to sometimes have that conversation. That's one way in which speaking about God can be a big challenge. But there's another way that speaking about God can be a big challenge, and that's what I want us to think about tonight.

[3:45] The big challenge is that if God is way above us, and if He is way bigger than us, and if He is infinite, which He is, and if we are finite, which we are, how can we actually speak about Him? How can we take these astonishing, mind-blowing truths about God and put them into words?

It's actually much, much more complicated than we might first think. So, for example, if we say God is good, which we say all the time, all the time we will say that God is good, and rightly so, what exactly do we mean when we say that? When the Bible tells us that God is good, what exactly does that mean? Now, sometimes, you know, we can use the word good in lots of ways, you know, so we have a meal, it's good. You know, you have somebody who behaves well in class, they're a good

child. You go and experience something that's enjoyable, you say you have a good time. Is that what we mean when we talk about God and say that He's good? Maybe. Maybe. But maybe, when the Bible says that God is good, it actually means something way more. And that's what I'm wanting us to think about that, that speaking about God is taking us, it's taking us really to the very limits of what we can say. Because God is God, infinite, eternal, unchangeable, majestic, holy, and glorious. So we're going to think a little bit tonight about speaking with God. Today, I'm afraid, is the day for introducing weird theological words to you. I did it this morning, and I'm going to do it again tonight. We're going to think about equivocal speech, univocal speech, and analogical speech. Now, these are three categories that theologians use to describe how we can talk about God. And don't worry if you've never heard about them, and don't worry if you forget them before you reach the car. The actual terms themselves aren't really the important thing, it's what they're meaning that is crucial. And basically, what we're going to say, the first two, equivocal and univocal, they're bad, we don't like them.

The third one, analogical, is the good one that we like. Let me explain what I mean by each of these. And again, as we said this morning, these are kind of obscure-sounding theological terms, but again, they actually resonate very powerfully with day-to-day experiences and challenges for us as Christians and the challenges that people around us take. So let me explain each of these to you as best I can. First of all, equivocal speech. Now, equivocal basically means equal voices, and the idea behind that is that words can have multiple different meanings. And that's something that we actually know day-to-day is quite true. You can have the same word, but different meanings. So, to give you an example of this, I'm going to put a phrase on the screen. Peter's date was sweet. What's that talking about? What does that mean? So, there's a couple of things that we need to think about, first of all. The word date, what might that be talking about? Is it talking about a girl? [7:21] Is it talking about an event, like a dinner or a movie? Or is it talking about a fruit? And sweet, depending on the context, could mean attractive, if it's a girl. It could be enjoyable, if it was a movie. Or it could be not bitter, if it was the fruit. And it's a bit of a silly example, but the whole point is that you can look at words and you recognize that actually words can have multiple meanings and they can send us in very different directions. So, to give you more examples, I'm going to say two or three words and I want you to think of what you first think of. So, when I say the word bat, what do you think of? Who thought of a thing with wings? And who thought of a thing that you're... There you go. See, you look already different. Ruler. Who thought of a king?

Or a prime minister? There you go. Who thought of a thing that you draw a straight line with in school? Teachers. There we go. So, last one. Glasses. Who thought of the things on your face? Who thought of the things in the dishwasher? Again, it's just different words and we see this all the time. We encounter it all the time. Where this applies to theology is that some people have wanted to say that the difference between us and God is so great that language about God is actually equivocal.

So, what that means is that it's actually in totally different categories. And so, if you say Solomon is wise and if you say God is wise, the two words wise, same word but actually referring to completely different things. And I said that the first two were bad. They are bad but they're not all bad because it's trying to do something good there. When they say, well, look, when you say Solomon's wise and you say God is wise, it's totally different. It's equivocal. The idea behind that or the intention behind that is to recognize, well, God is just so much higher than we are. We can't use language about God in the same way that we can use it about us. And so, that can appear very reverent.

But actually, it can actually be very unhelpful because it can just leave us thinking, well, actually, we don't know anything about God. And it can move us towards a kind of mysticism where we're like, well, we believe in God but we can't really know anything about him. We can't really say anything about him. He's just in a different category all together. Now, normal people don't use the phrase equivocal. So, you don't go up to normal people and say to them, you know, what do you think about God? And he says, well, I'm afraid language about God is equivocal. Nobody's going to say that to you in the street. But you'll see the same thing, though, if you walk up to people in the street and say, well, what do you think about God? And they'll say, I don't know. And that's the issue that this kind of language is referring to, that many people take that approach to God. They're like, well, we just can't know. We can't know. We can't be sure. And it's just out of reach. And it's so important to recognize that, that that shrug of the shoulders is actually such an easy thing to do when it comes to thinking and speaking about God. Because we realize, you know, with a little bit of thought, we

think, well, this is, this is, this is huge, a huge topic to think about. This is, this is a complicated topic to think about. This is a heavy topic to think about. And often we just don't want to face that kind of solemnity. And so we just kind of shrug our shoulders and think, I just don't know.

And people are shrug their shoulders into hell.

[11:38] They're just shrugging their shoulders and turning their back on Jesus. Please don't make that mistake. Please don't do that. And please don't think that God is, is out of your reach. Please do not think that. It's not true. We mustn't push the gap between us and God so far that we can't speak anything about him. So we don't like equivocal speech in that sense. Univocal speech, you can go back one slide, go back one slide, sorry, the other way. That's it, there we go. I should have put another one in. Univocal speech is basically the opposite. So equivocal is when you're saying, you know, it's same word but totally different meanings. God's in a totally different category. Univocal is the opposite where you're basically saying, well, the word means exactly the same thing. So if I talk about red chairs and red apple, red car, red means exactly the same thing in all those contexts. And so if you are saying,

Solomon is wise, God is wise, univocal speech is saying, well, wise means exactly the same thing in those different contexts. And that's much less mystical. It's much less out of reach. But there's another danger with this kind of language. It means that we are at risk of pulling God down to our level. And so at one level, yes, we want language about God to be accessible and usable and understandable. But we have to be very, very careful that we don't pull God down to our level. And there's a big danger that we can project our own understandings and our own experience of certain words onto God. So the Bible might say that God is powerful. And our experience of someone powerful might mean that they were a bit manipulative. So we start to think, well, okay, if God's powerful, that means he's manipulative. And sometimes we have this idea of God that he's just sort of this controller who's sort of determining everything. And our freedom is just an illusion. Sometimes we might think of the word holy and associate it with all sorts of slightly, you know, restrictive or obscure or unpleasant religious requirements. And we think, well, that's when God is holy, then we're just basically saying that he's sort of full of this list of do's and don'ts and all the stuff that you must do and you must not do. And we kind of look at God as though he's going to be this great restrictor of our freedom and this great inhibitor of joy.

Or when we might look at the word gentle, and we kind of maybe associate that with being nice, but being a pushover. And again, so we might risk that when we apply words like powerful or holy or gentle to God, we pull him down to our level and our thinking about him is shaped by our own understanding and experience of words. And that's a danger that we have to be very careful about, because we always have to remember that although we don't want God to be completely out of reach, that we can't ever say anything through of him, at the same time, he is still way above us.

[14:56] And so if you skip forward two slides now to that quote that I had, I quoted this chap this morning, John Fesco, he's very helpful with all this stuff. And he says that univocal language is the futile effort to scoop the ocean of God's being into a thimble, even though even this illustration ultimately falls short because the earth's oceans are finite and God is not. So he's using the same illustration that I've used. I'd love to say he stole it from me, he didn't. But it's an illustration that we've often used that you compare a thimble to an ocean. The truth about God is just massive compared to what we can hold and what we can express. And of course, even that illustration is so poor because God is infinite. He's not just a massive, he's not just really, really big, he's infinite. He's in an entirely different category. Now both of these terms and concepts, equivocal speech, univocal speech, although they're trying to do positive things, they're both dangerous.

And both of these connect with experiences that we have and that we see in people around us. For so many people today, God is one of two things. He's either so distant we can't know him, that would be what equivocal language is saying, or he's kind of domesticated to our level, that would be univocal language. We speak of God just in the same terms that we speak of ourselves.

So for many, many people today, God's distant, so we don't know him, we shrug our shoulders, or he's domesticated in the sense that it's like, well, yeah, I know God, I believe God, but it's kind of on my terms. And that's why for so many people today, there are not that many hardened atheists today, but there are loads of people today for whom God is kind of just left behind, as though he's in the distance, or he gets carried in your pocket, as though he's like, well, he's a helper and a positive thing that we can pick up and use and enjoy at appropriate moments, just like all the other good things that we have in our lives. He's either kind of left behind in the distance, he's either left behind,

or he's left in our pocket. But both of these are mistakes, because a distant God is unknowable. We can have no relationship with a God who's just in a category that we can't even speak of. And a domesticated God is unworshipable. If God can go in your pocket, he's not God. And so there's danger in both directions. And so that means that these two categories of language point us to extremes. You've got equivocal speech there that makes God kind of unknowable, out of reach. It's impossible to really say anything about him. Univocal speech, we speak of him just like we do. And again, that kind of pulls God down too much. Both of these are dangerous. And what we want to do is try and find the appropriate middle ground, which theologians call analogical speech. Okay? And again, I know I'm giving you lots of terms. I want you to hold on and hang in for five more minutes, because I hope that in five minutes, you will see that this is just such an incredibly helpful thing for us to recognize. But first of all, I want to explain what this means.

Analogical language is basically saying that we're not talking about something that's completely different, so that there's no correspondence. And we're not talking about something that is identical. Instead, we're talking about something that's similar, and that there's a point of connection between the language that we use and what that expresses to us about God.

[18:49] And to give you an example of that, it's to sort of say that there's language that we can use that apply very differently to people, but which still correspond. So take, for example, the phrase, my house. Okay? If a seven-year-old boy says, that's my house, that's true, isn't it? It is his house.

It's where he lives. It's where he goes to sleep at night, where he gets up. That's my house. But if his father says, that's my house, it's also true, and it's even more true, because he bought it. He owns it. He's responsible for it. He's the head of it. So both the father, who says my house, and the little boy, who says my house, are both speaking the truth. They both correspond.

They're analogical, but they mean different things, because it means way more for the father than it does for the boy. And that's an example of the kind of thing that we're looking at talking about here. And what this means is that when we speak about God, we're using language that applies to us. So when we say, you know, when we use the word good, we know what that means at one level.

[20:17] But when we say God is good, that corresponds to our understanding of good. But the truth is, it's far greater, and far deeper, and far richer.

And so the language that we use about God, the language that the Bible uses about God, is connecting with us in a way that we can understand.

But it's also pointing us to a level that goes beyond what we can express. And you see lots of examples of this in the Bible, when human characteristics are applied to God.

So Psalm 89 verse 13, one of my favorite sections of the Psalms to sing, it says, You have a mighty arm, strong is your hand, high your right hand.

So that's describing God, you have a mighty arm. And so we know what it is to have an arm, and we know, we can imagine what it is to have a strong arm. But of course, God doesn't have arms the way that we have arms.

[21:28] Instead, it's using that imagery to point us to the inexhaustible strength of God. And another example is of human behavior applied to God.

A very famous example of that is in Genesis 6, verse 6, where it says, The Lord regretted that he'd made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. And we can connect with that language, and yet at the same time, language like regretted and grieved, it's pointing us to a truth about God, but only in an analogical sense.

It's not exactly the same way that we might regret, as though we've made a mistake, or that we didn't know what we were doing, or that things were out of our hands, or that we were taken by surprise. None of that is applied to God.

And so the key point in all of this is that when we speak about God, when the Bible speaks to us about God, when we try to speak to one another about God, the language that we're using is making a connection.

It's making a connection with God that's teaching us about Him. But there's always more. It's always deeper, greater, and richer than our words can express.

[22:58] Why am I telling you all of this? Why is all of this important? Well, what I want us to see is that it's telling us that all of us, that in theology, there's two things that we're not doing, and there's one thing that we are doing.

So the two things that we're not doing in theology is this. We're not guessing, and we're not grabbing. So theology is not guesswork.

We're not thinking, well, you know, we've got no idea what God is like. We've got no idea what we can say about Him. We'll just guess. We'll just go with our feelings. We'll go with our instinct.

We'll see what we think. Theology is not guesswork. Theology is based on truth revealed to us in Scripture. And so we're seeking to learn that, and we're using the language that God speaks in, in Scripture, in order for our understanding of God to be shaped by what He's saying.

So often we can fall in the trap of just kind of guessing about God. We must not do that. Instead, we follow what the Lord is teaching. But at the same time, we don't grab our language of God as though we dictate what everything means.

[24 : 19] And all of that's just an example of coming to God on our terms, where we think, well, you know, this is what God means by this, and this is what the Bible means by this, and this is why I think that that should apply, and this is what I think that that involves.

All of that is to kind of grab the language about God and to try and control it ourselves. In theology, we're not guessing. We're not grabbing. So what are we doing?

We're gazing. In our theology, in our speech about God, we're gazing.

And we're gazing, if you want to use the illustration, at a mountain where the pinnacle of it is out of sight. But even though the pinnacle is out of sight, we are still standing at the foot, and we're still looking, and there's still something that we can see and learn.

And that's what's captured so beautifully in the verse that we started with and that we're going to finish with. You've multiplied, O Lord my God, your wondrous deeds and your thoughts towards us.

[25 : 40] None can compare with you. I will proclaim and tell of them, yet they are more than can be told.

And it's that last phrase there just captures so powerfully what our speech about God actually involves. We will proclaim and tell of them, but they are actually more than can be told.

Why is this so important to recognize? It's telling us that the truths that the Bible reveals about God, they are at a different level to what we can fully express and comprehend ourselves.

So when the Bible talks about things like God's power and God's goodness and God's wisdom, that is at a different level. And it's so important that we recognize that. But the fact that they're at a different level doesn't mean that these things are meaningless to us.

What it means is that they're unspeakable. So when the Bible talks about God's power, that is unspeakable power.

[27 : 13] So we can grasp some of it and we can express something about it. But God's power, creating the universe, upholding the whole universe at every moment, working everything together to fulfill His purposes, being able to speak and light and life and existence and energy all comes into being, that is unspeakable power.

When we speak about God's wisdom, we can say something about that, but the fullness of it is unspeakable. As God unfolds His plan across the ages of history, as the great decrees of eternity are outworked in time, as the purposes of God that He has known from everlasting to everlasting are accomplished in the unfolding of our lives, and as God weaves together all the highs and lows and challenges and joys and struggles and fears of my life and the life of His church to accomplish His purposes, He is constantly exercising His wisdom and that wisdom is unspeakable.

And most importantly of all, when the Bible speaks of God's love, we know something of what that means because we know what love feels like and what it involves.

We know that and yet the truth about God's love for you is actually unspeakable.

It's beyond the limits of our words. And that's why sometimes, sometimes our only response to God is an open, silent mouth.

[29 : 28] And that is where the gospel leads us. It leads us to the point where we see the cross of Jesus Christ and at the cross you actually see unspeakable power.

And at the cross you see unspeakable wisdom as perfect atonement is accomplished. And at the cross you see unspeakable love.

as God the Son lays down his life for you. And that's where, you know, I inflict a lot of words on you every week and you're very patient in listening.

And every word that I give you about the gospel and about the goodness and wisdom and power and love of God every word is actually reaching the same conclusion that ultimately we have no

There's one final thing that we need to say about speaking about God. all of this is reminding us that our words about God and speaking about God is maybe a lot more complicated than we thought it was.

It's more complicated than I thought it was. It's amazing. Us speaking about God is probably a lot more complicated than we realize. But do you know God speaking to you is a lot more simple than you realize.

And I hope that every one of us leaves here tonight looking to him. Amen. Let's pray. Lord our God we recognize that that thinking of all of this we recognize that that that we want to to tell and proclaim of your wondrous works and yet at the same time they are more than can be told.

[32 : 38] And we know that even then Lord our words fall so far short of how just of just how utterly amazing you are.

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