How to Talk About the Trinity

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[0:00] Great to see all of you tonight. I'll pray and then we can dive back into our study.! Lord, we thank you for the time that you gather us this evening in the middle of the week. We ask, Lord, that you would renew us. We, in the middle of the week, especially now that it's really cold today and getting darker and darker, we need the joy of your light and your presence with us even more in these winter months. So we ask for that. We ask, Lord, for your abiding presence. We thank you that you are our God who has revealed himself and that the God who is real is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And so we pray to you, God our Father, through the power and in the name of the Son and because of the abiding presence of the Spirit.

And we ask, Lord, that you would hear us as we pray, as we sing to you, and even be with us as we think, Lord, about you, about how to speak well of you and how to know more of how to approach you through our words. And we thank you that you've given us the gift of words by which we can make an approach. So teach us more of how to do that tonight, we ask, and we pray this in Jesus' name.
Amen. All right, so we're working our way through a course on the doctrine of the Trinity called Delighting in the Trinity. And tonight we're going to think about how we talk about the Trinity for a few minutes together, and then we'll get to pray like always. So last time we were together, we talked about the idea of heresy. And heresy is named heresy because it comes from a Greek word that means to choose. And so in heresies, the things that have always taken place is people have chosen something to latch onto and left everything else behind. So maybe they picked one verse of the Bible and made everything about that one verse and didn't read the Bible in its whole context and therefore overemphasized something and neglected other parts of the doctrines that created a problem. And so when do you have heresy? You have heresy whenever you compromise the doctrine of the Trinity in some way, shape, or form, or you compromise the gospel in some way, shape, or form. So almost all the heresies we have are some issue with how people talk about the Trinity or some issue with how people talk about
Jesus that ultimately compromises the gospel. And so that's what we looked at last time. And we talked about how the Nicene Creed and the Constantinople Creed that came later and after that the Chalcedonian Creed and these different creeds really were there to address these heresies. And even the very precise words that the church fathers picked were in direct contradiction of the heresies that were floating about at the time. And so tonight we effectively carry on the logic and that's in the light of those controversies in the light of the creeds that have been written. How should we talk about the Trinity?
How should we talk about God? And by that I literally mean the very words we choose to say in our speech with each other, in our speech in the church, in our speech in prayer. So what kind of words should we be using? And so this is a subject that is sort of the culmination point of our very, very short course on the Trinity. We only have five sessions together. This is the fourth.
[3:02] But it pulls together sort of all the things we've said so far and then gives a few rules about thinking about how to speak well of the Trinity. Now for 2,000 years we've been thinking about this.

And so that means we're not going to, you know, lay it all out tonight by any stretch of the imagination. And it also, I just want to say that your salvation does not depend on you getting the right grammar about how to talk about God in your prayers. Not at all. We're not suggesting that for a half second tonight. The thief on the cross, the thief on the cross never learned to talk in the right language about the Trinity. And yet the thief on the cross went to paradise to see God face to face. And so that's a very important caveat for us as we think about this.
Even the sharpest theologians in the world that have ever existed, like Augustine or somebody like that, Calvin, you know, even their best words, their best prayers, their best ways of teaching were

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still before God. Sort of like the way a parent relates to a two-year-old or a toddler.
So we have a two-year-old and sometimes when our two-year-old is at church and she tries to talk to some of you, Heather, more Heather than me, but both of us maybe, have to actually translate. So Isabel will say something and then we'll say, this is what she was saying. But if you're not around her all the time, you can't quite understand the sounds she's making to correspond to the object she knows and we know she's talking about. And the same way God is like that with us, even our sharpest speech, God listens to us like a loving parent knowing, I know what you're trying to say.
[4:47] I know what you intend to be saying. Right? So even when we pray, we know that the Son of God improves our prayers. The Spirit improves our prayers for us. And so that's why these are incredibly important caveats. At the same time, on the flip side, the doctrine of the Trinity is the most important doctrine in all of Christianity. It is everything. What we say about God is really the whole sum of what we say about our faith. And because of that, talking well about the Trinity is a big deal and it really does matter. And for example, if we say the wrong things about our God, there comes a point eventually where we're not talking about our God anymore, where we've ventured past the Christian God. And no longer are we speaking and worshiping the triune God as he is the real God, but we may get it so wrong that we venture down into a pathway that leads towards polytheism or the type of monotheism that's celebrated in Islam, for example. And so while talking well about the Trinity is not the basis of your salvation, at the same time, the doctrine of the Trinity is not something we want to be sloppy about in the way that we talk, because we want to say true things about the true God. So let me give you tonight five rules, five principles, helps for talking about the triune God as we want to do together as part of the body of Christ. Okay, so a couple of them are just reviewed from previous times, and so these will be familiar if you've been around. Number one, we can never become masters when talking about God. We never master this subject, like you might meet somebody that's mastered,

I don't know, astrophysics or geology or dentistry. You cannot master the subject of theology, our talk about God. So we talk about master theologians, but really that's a bit of a misnomer.
So all of our talk about God is us responding to God's speech to us. And so the way we've been saying this is that the language that we've adopted in Christian history has been this.
The word to comprehend comes from a word that means to get your arms all the way around. And so just a reminder, you can never comprehend God. You can never get your arms all the way around God. And so the language that's been chosen typically in theology classrooms and books has been, you can only apprehend God, which is really just a way of saying you can't comprehend him. So we pick a different word and we say you can only apprehend God. And yet at the same time, God has spoken.
So you can absolutely say true things about God because you are responding to his speech. He was the first to dialogue to you. And so when you pray, when you say things about God, you're actually responding to God who has talked to you first in Revelation, in the Bible, through the work of the Holy Spirit in your life. And so here's a helpful text. Actually, I don't have it on the slide. I'll read it. 1 Corinthians 2.11, one of the primary texts where we think about this. For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person? In other words, how could anybody know what you're thinking? Only you know what you're thinking, unless you reveal it. Who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit or the mind of that person?
[8:15] And then in the same way, Paul writes, so also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the spirit of God. And what's being said there is Deuteronomy 29, 29, effectively. The secret things belong to the Lord. You'll see it written there. And to us, only the things that are revealed. And so we can only say about God the things that he's told us to say about him and the things that then we can learn by good and necessary consequence, using Christian reason or Christian logic, which is reason and logic that's been helped by the Holy Spirit, to then say, if I read the whole Bible, what does the whole Bible with a Christian mindset allow me to say about God? And so that's all we can do. You can see there in the second verse, how unsearchable are his judgments, how inscrutable his ways. There is a massive gap between the way God knows God and the way we know God. And so that's the first rule. And we have mentioned that really from week one. So here's Calvin talking about that rule here.

This is a very old, old translation. God is want in a measure to lisp in speaking to us. Or in other words, God is willing, he's happy when he speaks to us to lisp. So what Calvin means there is that

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even in the Bible, God is talking to us like we talk to two-year-olds. As he puts it in another place, we comprehend the essence of God at the same way a slug comprehends the human that steps over him.
We can't cross that gap of knowing God the way God knows God. The gap is so massive. He's absolute. We're relative. And so that's the very important first rule. Okay, an application point on that.
We've got to approach all of our speech, all of our prayers, all of our chat about God from small groups to preaching with humility and at the same time with confidence. So because God has spoken, you can have confidence that you can talk about God, pray to God, say true things about God, and yet you at the same time take that on in humility because you know that only the Spirit of God knows God like God knows God, that we don't, that there's a big gap there. So mystery, that mystery is not a wall that kind of we run into and fall down over. Mystery is something that invites us in to pray more and to be more surprised and in wonder and in awe and in the fear of the Lord for how great he is beyond our capacity to understand him. All right, so that's principle number one. Principle number two.
Then again, the second review is we talk about, to talk about the Christian God, you're speaking of one what and three who's. One what and three who's. All right, so what do we mean by that? One what and three who's. We say, when you say, well, what is God? What is the Christian God? God is a Spirit and that God is one God. So one what? God. Not polytheism, not many, Deuteronomy 6, but one God.
[11:29] But then you say, well, three who's. So who is God? And then you would say, God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Right now, this cannot be said about anyone else, anything else. Only God can be spoken of like this. You can never, ever say one what, multiple who's in any other situation except the mystery of the Godhead, the mystery of the triune God. So Augustine says, whatever is said of God in himself, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, apart from space and time, is said of each person and of all three at the very same time. The Father is Almighty, the Son is Almighty, the Holy Ghost is Almighty, and yet they are not three Almighty's, but one Almighty. And so let me say that again.

The Father is Almighty, the Son is Almighty, the Spirit is Almighty, but there are not three Almighty's. There is one Almighty. One what? God. Three who's. The Father, Son, and Spirit. So again, just to go back to week one, if we were to ask, I was to ask you, the illustration I used, what am I? What are you? We would all say human, a human being. That's the what. That's the what we are. But then if I were to ask, who are you? Who am I? You would say Corey, or Addison, or Flynn, or you would say somebody's name. And so that's very different than what we say about God. When we say, who, what is God? God. Absolute God. Who is God? The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And that, of course, is beyond our comprehension, beyond our understanding. So a couple other ways to say it.
You never meet a part of God. If you were to walk up to Jesus Christ in the middle of history, in Israel, in Jerusalem, and you meet Jesus, you never meet a part of God. You just meet God.
And at the same time, God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And so you have met the Son. Another way to say it. There is no junior partner in the Godhead. There is no rank. There is no hierarchy. The Son is not subordinate to the Father in any way, shape, or form. Okay. So that's rule number two. So important.
And it can only be said of God. It could never be said of anything else, anyone else but God. Okay. So before we move on, this really just sets us up for principle three, four, and five. But here's the basic grammar that the church has decided on for the last 2,000 years. So when we say what God is, we say one, and here's the word essence. Essence just means what something is. It's essentialness. Gavin was talking about that a little bit on Sunday night, wasn't he? Essence. God is one in essence. The other word for that is substance. You can use either one of those words as synonyms.
[14:22] When it comes to who God is, we use the word person. But we know we don't mean by that anything like persons in this room. It's totally other. You cannot take the word person, human person, and apply that to God. We don't mean that. We use the word person because in some sense we don't know what else to say because of the mystery of God. And then here's another way of saying that. Because the word essence or substance is the same thing. If you open up the Nicene Creed again that we looked at last time, the word that shows up originally in Greek and then

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in Latin and then in English is this word consubstantial. So the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are consubstantial with one another, meaning con with substance, essence, with one substance, one essence, consubstantial. So that's literally the word that shows up in the Nicene Creed that you'll see if you read any of the creeds. And then lastly, how they relate to one another. I'll move on and we'll look at begotten and proceeds next.

Okay, so rule three, principle three. We distinguish the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit how? Okay, just think with me for a moment. We distinguish them by how they relate to one another.
Right? So if you were to meet me out on the street, none of you would call me Father.
Naturally, that would be so strange. Right? Because we don't have that relation. And yet you will always call God the Father, Father. And you will always call God the Son, Son. And you will always call God the Spirit, the Spirit, the one who is breathed out.
Because you actually name the persons of the Trinity by their relations. Right? So what makes a son? Having a father. What makes a father? Having a son. What makes the breath of God, the Spirit?
[16:21] The fact that the Spirit is breathed out by the Father and the Son. And so we actually, you see that we actually name the persons of the Trinity by their relations. So they are one God with one name.

Right? What is the one name of God that's been revealed to us most magisterially? Exodus 3. It's Yahweh. I am who I am. That's the one name. And then we distinguish God, the Father, Son, and Spirit, by their relations. So we call God the Father, Father, because He is Father of the Son. The Son, because He is the Son of the Father. And the Spirit, because He proceeds from the Father and the sons. And so we name them, by the way, of their illustration. So Athanasius puts it like this. God the Father never became a father. And God the Son never became a son. Unlike earthly fathers and earthly sons. But God the Father is eternally Father and God the Son is eternally Son. So there's never a becoming. So we say the Son is begotten of the Father. But remember, that doesn't in any way relate to the way we beget people. Not at all. It's a word in human language that we use to describe God. And we add an adjective before it eternally to say, not at all like human begottenness. So in no way is it related. But the Son is the begotten Son. But eternally. Right? The Father is the Father who begets.
But eternally. And so I just wanted to show you real quick, before we run out of our time, just a few pictures of how this has been. You have to be careful, of course, with illustrating the Trinity. But this is not really that. It's more of a diagram. I know none of us can read this, but this is a very old example from 1230 from a guy, Robert Grossetest, a medieval shield of the Trinity.
And so the shield of the Trinity has been used quite often in church history to not diagram or draw a picture of God. So we don't want to worship any pictures of the Godhead. But this is just a way.
[18:22] And so this is what this looks like in English in more simple form. And so you can see the inner line is the essence of God. The blue is the essence. So the Father is God. The Son is God. The Spirit is God.

See, that's the essence. The red lines are the persons. So it's the distinction. But the Father is not the Son. And the Son is not the Spirit. And the Spirit is not the Father. But they are God.
Right? So you could never say that about a creature. So that's the simple shield in English. Here's a more complex shield that adds on the relations in green. So you can see that the inner is the blue. That's the essence of God. The red is the distinction of the persons. But the green is the relations. Right? So just to note a couple. The Father, if you look at the far right quadrant there, the Father, spiration just means breathes out. So the Holy Ghost is spirated or breathed out by the Father. The Holy Ghost is processing from the Father. See that? So it's a vice versa there.
And the same thing with the Son and the Holy Ghost. But then over here, the Father begets the Son. That's filiation. Filiation just means Son, sonship. And the Father has paternity over the Son there.
[19:43] Fatherhood, paternity. Right? So you can get that. This is on Wikipedia, by the way, the shield. There's a whole great Wikipedia page of all the different versions of the shield of eternity, which is where I got this one that you can look up. So this is how we talk about God, actually, in the creeds. This is how the creeds speak about God. And we don't need to go around saying words like filiation or spiration all the time or anything like that. But what those words mean is something more like the Son is begotten of the Father. The Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. And the Father begets the Son and the Spirit. Okay, so just a couple examples from the Bible.

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No one has ever seen God, the only God, who is at the Father's side. But the Son has made Him known. You can think of begottenness in John 1, John 3, famously John 3, 16.
For God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son, right? That whosoever believes in Him would not perish, would have eternal life. John 15, 26. The Spirit of truth proceeds from the Father.
And then Galatians 4, for example, the Spirit proceeds from the Son. And so we have this language directly in the Bible of the relations. Okay, so we've made this point, so I'll keep moving. All right, number four or five. Number four is God always works as one God. God always works as one God. So we could talk about our salvation. Let's take our salvation. Our salvation comes from the Father through the work of the Son. And then it's given to us by the Holy Spirit. Redemption accomplished in the Son of God. Redemption applied by the Spirit of God, right? And at the same time, while you can distinguish the different ways the Father, the Son, or the Spirit acts in certain ways in redemptive history, for example, does the Father become incarnate in the flesh? No, only the Son. Does the Father die at the cross? No, no, only the Son. Does the Spirit come to abide in your life, giving you union with Christ and the fruit of the Spirit? No. Sorry, does the Spirit? Yes. Sorry. You know what I mean.
[22:10] Talking about the Trinity can be dizzying. You know, you can... No, does the Son? No, the Spirit does. The Spirit comes and applies justification to your life, right? But at the same time, the church has always confessed that because God is God, how many gods are there? Just one. And how many minds and wills and consciousnesses and does God have one? The Father, Son, and Spirit are the one God, one mind, one will, one agency. All the work of God is the work of the one God. So there's never this sort of sense of God, the Father, Son, and Spirit sitting around a table as if we imagine they are like human persons and saying, well, I'll do this part, you do that part, you do that part. It doesn't work like that because God is one God. And so all that God does, we say God does. So let me give you an example to flesh this out. I know this can be a confusing thought. Who raised Jesus... Don't look at that for a second. I shouldn't have gone to that. Who raised Jesus from the dead? Who raised Jesus from the dead?

And maybe if I asked you and you didn't look at the slide, you might say different things. We say, well, of course, the Father raised the Son from the dead. Or you might say, well, of course, the Spirit raised the Son from the dead. But in the Bible, look at what we have. The Father, God the Father, who raised Christ from the dead? Galatians 1.1. But then we have the Son saying, I lay down my life and I will take it up again. Wow. And then the Spirit says, the Spirit is called, in Romans 8, the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead. And there's just a little sample of a multiplicity of texts like this. Who raised Jesus Christ from the dead? God did. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. When Jesus Christ, who is the Son of God, made human, is dead as a human being in the tomb. Who raised Jesus from the dead? The Son of God did. Because God is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In other words, the Trinity is never broken. The Trinity is unchanging for all of eternity. And that means that God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit does all that God does. And at the same time, in the divine mystery, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are yet distinct. And that is beyond our comprehension. We can't get our arms around that fact. Okay. So we can see something similar in your salvation. Your salvation is one work. God saves you. And the Father chooses you. The Son redeems you. The Spirit seals you. And it is the one God who saves you. So multiple ways we could talk about that. Okay. Lastly, rule number five, principle number five. What God does, you could have kind of a little ellipsis there to make better sense of this phrase. What God does, Paul's, shows who God is.
What God does in the world shows us who God is. So the sendings, for example, in history are a true window into the eternal life of God. So here's a way to put this. Have you ever seen the triune God?
Have you ever seen the God who stands above all time and space because He made time and space? And the answer is no. You've never seen with your eyes. You've never gone and found God in the same way you would go perform an experiment on the age of Corbett or Monroe in Scotland. You can't go study God like that because God is above all space and time. He made space and time, in fact. He's not captured within space-time. That's creatureliness. And so how do we even talk about God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the God who is eternal? And the answer is we have to look at what God has shown us in history and understand that what He's showing us in history are real windows into who He is eternally.

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So meaning there is more to God than we can ever imagine, to even put it like that. We read the Bible and we get such an amazing and true pronouncement of who God is, and yet the God who is is beyond all-knowing at the same time. But you can talk about God, the eternal God, who is outside of space and time. We can't even comprehend what that could mean.
[26:53] We can't even begin to think about what it means for something to not exist within space-time. But that's who God is. And so that means He is beyond all-knowing, and in His revelation to us, He has made Himself known. And so we can truly speak about the eternal God beyond space and time by looking at the way He's talked about Himself in space and time.

And then saying, well, if that's true in space and time, it must be true of Him above space and time. And that's how theology actually works. That's how Bible reading actually works.
You've never encountered the God in the Bible as if you were standing in eternity. No. No. But instead, you stand inside time and look at what God says about Himself, and then say things about the God of eternity. Why? Because He tells you to. He gives you permission.
He says, I am God who never changes. And you say, well, I don't know what that means beyond space and time, but I know you are the God who never changes. And that means you're not bound by space and time.
So that's how theology actually works. That's how our speech about God actually works, as we look at what God has revealed in history. And then we say that's a true window to who God is above history and beyond all history. Now that matters for us so much.
[28:15] And I just want to invite you to lastly finish on this. This course really is an invitation to you to realize how much it matters to think about and know your God is triune. That is the God you worship, the triune God. And so again, like every week, I just want to invite you to reenter that and say, the God I worship is triune, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He is the real God.

And I love this quote from Gregory of Nazianzus, one of the church fathers. And he's talking there about thinking about the Trinity in his prayer life and in his day-to-day life. And this is what he famously says, No sooner do I conceive of the one than I am illumined by the splendor of the three. No sooner do I distinguish them than I am carried back to the one. So you say, how do I think about God well? And Gregory just said, look, sometimes I start thinking about the unity of God, the oneness of God, and immediately I start thinking about the beauty, splendor of the threeness of God. And then when I'm only thinking about the threeness of God, I'm drawn back to think about the unbelievable unity that is God. And he talked to me, he said, that's really the only thing I can say, the only way I can contemplate and think about the God who is. All right, so we're going to pray and finish. And I'll just close with some prayer.
And in that, invite you to pray with me in your hearts as we ponder the mystery of our God. And then we'll have a time of prayer together. Let's pray. Father, we thank you for revealing yourself. We thank you that you've given us an ability to speak about you.
We thank you for your revelation. And we thank you, Lord, that you, the God who is beyond all knowing, beyond space and time, the God who can't be known unless, unless he revealed himself, has chosen to reveal yourself to us. So we ponder the mystery that, that you are, Lord, the mystery of your being. And help us, I ask that you help us in our hearts tonight to be amazed in your presence, amazed, standing in the presence of the eternal, that we would be shocked even, awed, that fear would strike us again if that's gone away in our hearts, that we would be bent over, bowled over in prayer. Lord, maybe tomorrow morning we would be on our faces in prayer because the God of eternity has condescended to speak to us. And so we ask, Lord, that you would remake our hearts in this way and give us appropriate fear of your holiness. And by fear, Lord, we not only mean dread of what we deserve, but far better, the weightiness of your glory and the mystery that is your grace to us. And so I ask for these hearts in Christ's name. Amen.
[30:53] Amen.

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