

- Teacher's note- In writing this lesson. I also read the corresponding chapters of Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*, J.I. Packer's *Knowing God*, and John Frame's *The Doctrine of God*. A very helpful resource was Michael Reeve's book, *Delighting in the Trinity*.
- “Exactly how important is the Trinity, though? Is it the sticky toffee pudding of faith- a nice way to round things off, but incidental- or is it the main course? Steel yourself for the thunders of the Athanasian Creed, a statement of faith from the fifth or sixth century, which begins- 'Whoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic [that is, the church's orthodox] faith. Which faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly. And the catholic faith is this- that we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity.’” - Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity*
- I want to start the class today with a disclaimer.
 - ➔ There are two statements that best describe the modern Christians understanding of the Trinity- “I don't know” and “I am so confused.” That's because in the Trinity we really do see what we talked about last week- God is not like us. He is different, and the Trinity highlights this. We can't even fully wrap our heads around how God could be one, and yet three individuals, and yet those three individuals are all equally and fully God. I'm far from an expert here, and my head hurt a number of times this week as I wrestled with this lesson! But here's the disclaimer- you may very possible leave this class this morning feeling pretty confused. You may be shaking your head, and thinking how you could ever understand this. I want you to know that's okay. We're looking into something that is infinite, eternal, and far too wonderful for us to fully grasp. Feeling overwhelmed is normal. But don't give up. What I hope to do is show us by the time we're done that we can know a lot about God as Trinity, even if we can't fully understand the hows of it all. The Bible does shed a lot of light on this. So let's dig in!
- First, I want to point something out about the Trinity. We've will be looking at the attributes of God- the things that make up his character, his nature, and his personality. We need to see that the Trinity is like that, but different. As the creed says, God is Trinity, and Trinity in unity. This is the fundamental reality about God- He is, and has always been, three in one. So, his attributes that we've been studying- they are attributes of the Trinity because the Trinity is God. Holiness is an attribute of God, and so it must be an attribute of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. You see?
 - ➔ We see this right from the beginning of Scripture. In creation, when God comes to make Adam, what does He say? “Let US make man in OUR image, after our likeness.” The Scripture uses the plural to when God is speaking to Himself. This is odd. Someone might jump up and say, “Well, its the royal use of the plural.” If you remember, the monarchs of Europe were very fond of referring to themselves as more than one person. However, that was not a Hebrew custom at all. No, this is something different. God is referring to Himself as a plural because, as later Scripture points out, there were three individual persons involved in the Creation of the Universe.
 - ◆ We also see other references to God speaking to Himself in the plural
 - Genesis 3.22, Gen. 11. 7 (the tower of Babel), Is. 6.8
 - ◆ We see the psalmist, in psalm 45.6-7 referring to two different persons of the Godhead. And in Hebrews 1.8, the author of Hebrews uses this passage to speak about Jesus Christ.
 - ➔ But then, in Deuteronomy 6, we read that famous line- “Hear oh Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” And so some, particularly another monotheistic religion like Islam points out that we're in trouble here. There is only one God. And so we see the problem that comes up- how do you explain the Trinity as one God and three persons? I've got no problem with saying that this

passage in Deuteronomy isn't talking about the mathematical quantity of God. If God is Trinity, and that Trinity is the one God, then we're okay in my book. After all, one doesn't necessarily refer to simple physical quantity in the early books of Scripture. What happens when a man leaves his father and mother, and cleaves to his wife? The two become one. In fact, the marriage is one illustration of the union between the three members of the Trinity- a covenantal relationship, an absolutely perfect covenantal relationship. But we come back to Deuteronomy 6, and we've got this problem of how do we explain the Trinity?

- So this is what we're going to do in the class today. I want you to leave here today ready to talk about the Trinity as we meet it in the Scriptures, so I want to point out the danger of using modern day illustrations to depict the Trinity. I imagine that at least some people in here have heard of one, two, or three of these illustrations. You might have heard of different ones- "The trinity is like an egg." "It's like water." "It's like a three leaf clover." People often teach the trinity using these illustrations because we're visual learners. We need to see something we can understand, and hopefully that will help shed light on what we don't understand. but I want us to see that it can actually be dangerous to do this. Many people in the history of the church have taught what we as Orthodox Christians would call heresy on the nature of the Trinity. And so here is the problem with these illustrations. Knowing that we are visual people, and visual illustrations help us understand, let me draw this out on the board.
- First, you've got your teacher here. He has studied the word, and studied the teaching on the Trinity. As he prepares to teach this, he wants to use an illustration that his people can understand. We're visual people! So he decides to use the illustration of water. One substance, but it can take three very different forms- water, ice, and steam. Now, the teacher hopefully understands that water doesn't fully explain the trinity. That's the point with most illustrations- they're not exactly like the thing they are illustrating, but it can be helpful.
- So, in order to help his people, he uses the illustration to explain the trinity. One substance- H₂O- that takes three separate forms. Like God- it is God but He takes three different forms- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Now the nature of teaching is that you forget 95% of what you hear within five minutes of walking out the classroom door. I made that stat up by the way, but it's got to be close. And that 95% just disappears into the vapors of your brain and may pop up at random times in the future. What do you typically remember? The illustrations of course. So, our class leaves and goes home. Tomorrow when they wake up, what do they remember about the Trinity? That it's like water. So in the future, when they think about the Trinity they will always think of the trinity in terms of water. God can be either the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit. And when someone asks them about the Trinity, they don't even have everything the teacher taught- they just have the water illustration. And so they explain- God can be either the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit.
- Does that make sense? Here's the problem- the illustration for water fails at an incredibly important point. In fact, the illustration for water is a better illustration for one of the oldest heresies in the church than it is for the orthodox view of the trinity. It is a heresy that is still present today. It's old title was called Modalism. It's new form is called One-ness Pentecostalism. It was the belief that there is only one God, and he takes three different forms as He has needed to. At one time, he was the Father figure. Then he sent himself to earth and took on the son figure. After that, he took on the spirit figure. One god, just like Deuteronomy teaches. Three different persons though. See, we can understand that idea. That makes more sense than One God who is Three Persons all the time who are all equally God. Modalism goes

against Scripture, and if it were true, we're going to see how that completely undercuts the whole Gospel. If there is only one God who takes on three different modes then he can't both pour out His holy wrath and at the same time bear His holy wrath, can he? And that's really what the water illustration teaches- that water can't be water, ice, and steam all at the same time. What's the point- there is nothing in nature like our God. There is nothing that is Trinity and unity. So even while the water illustration points out something like Trinity, it isn't really the best illustration

- Another illustration is the egg- you've got the shell, the white, and the yolk. Each is distinct, serving its own role, and yet together they make up the egg. Again, in a way this could be helpful but if you understand the Trinity only in terms of the egg, then you can lead down another unbalanced view of the Trinity. In the egg illustration, the major problem is that each one of those things is actually something distinct and different. They don't have the same nature, or share the same essence. God is three distinct persons, but He is also of the exact same nature and essence. Again, the Trinity is like nothing else! If you were to carry the egg illustration too far, then you start running into the idea that we actually have three gods instead of one. Or maybe even three gods birthing one new god, I don't know.
- One more illustration- the three leaf clover. Each leaf represents one of the members of the Trinity. Yet all together they make up the Trinity. Well, the problem here is either that the Trinity becomes God the Father is 1/3 God, God the Son is 1/3 God, and the God the Holy Spirit is 1/3 God. Well, that's not true. The Bible clearly teaches that each member of the Trinity is fully God. So God the Father is 100% God. God the Son is 100% God, and God the Holy Spirit is 100% God. He is like nothing else in created universe. He's not created so it should be no surprise. Another problem with the clover idea is that you've got this stem and the leafs flow out of this stem, right? If you start thinking of the Trinity only in terms of this illustration, you might start thinking about God as three entities all flowing from one essence, or "godness."
- Here's the takeaway. I had a reason for spending this time going through these. It wasn't just to ride my pet hobbyhorse against illustrations for the Trinity. Here's the concern. If we replace actual Biblical teaching on the Trinity with one of these illustrations, and this illustration becomes our go-to explanation of the Trinity, we can actually represent an unbiblical view of what the trinity is, and what God does, and why it matters. I think it is not a mistake that the Bible doesn't have an image for the Trinity. Think about it. There are a whole host of images for each member of the Godhead. Jesus is the lamb, and the shepherd. He is the king, and the servant. He is the lion, and he is the priest. We could on and on, but even with these we see that none of them fully explain Jesus Christ. We can't say he the lion, without saying He is the lamb. We can't say He is the King without saying He is the servant. Imagery doesn't work that way. And, as I said, there isn't any imagery for the trinity. I wanted us to see that there isn't imagery because there is simply nothing like it in the world. The trinity highlights that God is not like us.
- What we want to do is to see what the Bible actually teaches on the Trinity. There is a lot we can know, and there are many things we can find helpful. In fact, one thing that I want to highlight over the next three weeks is that the Trinity isn't just helpful and interesting. We couldn't have the Gospel without God as Trinity. We couldn't understand God's love without the Trinity. That makes sense when you think about it. We started off by saying that God is Trinity. That is the very nature of God. Three in one.

- I also hope that you see why it is better to talk about Trinity in biblical terms. Its okay that we run up against this truth and are overwhelmed. Our brains start hurting. But its not okay to distort Biblical teaching.
 - One side note here. The obvious question that could arise is- “How do we teach kids the trinity?” I've got three answers here
 - ◆ First, we simply teach the truth. Our family uses a catechism for kids that we go over every weekday. We have a good time throwing questions around. So I ask, “Is there more than one God?” and Sophie may answer, “No, there is only one God.” Then I might say, “In how many persons does this one God exist?” And she'll say ,”God exists in three persons.” And then I say, “Who are they?” and the answers? “God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.” Kids have the capacity to understand and believe truths that adults make more complex and difficult. Adults have a hard time simply believing that the Bible tells us something true when it is difficult to understand. With most kids, especially younger ones, this would probably be fine.
 - ◆ Second though, the trinity is an opportunity to teach the children something bigger too. This is an opportunity to teach them that the Bible is true, and it tells us what God is like. Sometimes that can be hard to understand, but if God tells us this is what He is like, who are we to argue with him?
 - ◆ Lastly, the trinity is a great oppportunity to teach a child something they need to learn early and often. God is not like they are. He is God. He is Trinity.
- So, over the next three weeks we will look at what it means that God is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Three seperate persons working in absolute perfect harmony together.
- Application-
 - One of the oldest creeds of Orthodox Christianity starts off with the statement, “I believe in God the Father, maker of the heavens and earth.” Why do you think the first description of God was father? Why not God the Almighty? What does it say about God the Father that he is first and foremost “a father?”
 - Have you thought much about the Trinity? Why do you think that Christians have believed for millenia that you can't have the Gospel of Jesus Christ without the Trinity?