

“Knowing God by J.I. Packer
Session 2: Chapters 4-6 (June 20, 2022)
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Lesson Summary:

The main challenge to knowing God in the Bible isn't disbelief; it's idolatry. Thus, it comes as no surprise that when J.I. Packer turns his attention to the nature and character of God in chapter 4, he begins with our tendency to commit idolatry by worshiping false and misleading images of God instead of God as He really is. How do we keep ourselves from falling prey to such idols? We do what Packer encourages us to do in chapter 5: study and contemplate on how God is made known in the person of Jesus Christ..

In 2005, the great American novelist David Foster Wallace was invited to give a commencement address at Kenyon College, and that speech was later published in the form of a small book. Time magazine ranked it as



one of the best commencement speeches ever delivered. What's interesting about that talk is that, although David Foster Wallace wasn't himself a religious man, he did talk about God during his speech. Or perhaps I should say he talked about different sorts of gods and different kinds of things that people worship as God. Here's what he said:

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*In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is **what** to worship.*



DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

Like I said, Wallace wasn't himself a religious man. His father was actually an atheistic philosopher who'd been very intentional in keeping his children away from religion. As an adult, Wallace became interested in religion, but he always struggled to believe and never

committed himself to any kind of faith. And yet, despite his lack of personal belief, what he says in his speech is very insightful and, I might add, very biblical.

Just like David Foster Wallace, the Bible assumes that everybody worships something. That's why it never really talks much about atheism, because the Bible recognizes that the real issue isn't whether you worship a God, it's which God you worship.

To put it in biblical language, the real challenge isn't atheism, it's idolatry. I think it's fair to say that this is something that David Foster Wallace, the Bible, and J.I. Packer all agree on. That's why after his first three chapters - where he discusses the purpose and nature of knowing God - when he turns his attention in the fourth chapter to actually discussing the nature of God, the first thing that Packer talks about is idolatry and the prohibition of idolatry in the Ten Commandments.

But idolatry, according to Packer, consists of more than just worshipping the wrong God. Idolatry, he says, also takes place when we worship the right God in the wrong way. One of the ways that we commit this kind of idolatry is, according to Packer, when we rely on images to help guide our thoughts of God as we worship.

His criticism of the use of religious imagery is very thoughtful, but not all Christians would agree with him. In fact, not all his fellow Anglicans would agree with him, especially in his criticisms of the use of specific images of Christ. Packer knows that - in fact, when his book was re-released in 1993, he wrote a small addendum to this chapter where he responded to some of the arguments that he'd received from his readers who had taken issue with this part of the book.

But whether or not you agree with him on all points, his decision to begin his discussion of God with a discussion of idolatry is a very wise one. And he's

undoubtedly correct to say that we commit idolatry when we worship false images of God, whether those images are statues or works of art, or whether, as he goes on to say later in the chapter, they consist of the misleading ways that we think about God. What he calls mental images - the false ways that we imagine God to be because it's appealing to us.



*How often do we hear this sort of thing: 'I **like to think** of God as the great Architect (or Mathematician or Artist).' 'I don't think of God as a Judge; I **like to think** of him simply as a Father.'*

KNOWING GOD (P. 47)

Of course, these are just a couple of examples of images that people have of God. You could list lots of others. Some people think of God as a distant and angry deity. Some imagine him as a kind of jolly, heavenly Santa Claus, who lives for nothing more than to give us gifts that make us happy. Sometimes we imagine God not in a way that's completely untrue, but in a way that's very imbalanced.

We might latch on to one or two characteristics of God that that we find most appealing or most striking; and that's all that we really think about when we think about God. But all of this, Packer says, is idolatry. And we cannot know God until we get over those false, misleading mental images we have.



*It needs to be said with the greatest possible emphasis that those who hold themselves to be free to think of God **as they like** are breaking the second commandment ... To think of God in such terms is to be ignorant of him, not to know him.*

KNOWING GOD (P. 47)

So then how, you might ask, can we know God as he really is and not simply as we imagine Him to be?

According to Packer, the only way to do that is by focusing our attention closely on where God has revealed Himself to us in Scripture and in the person of Jesus Christ.

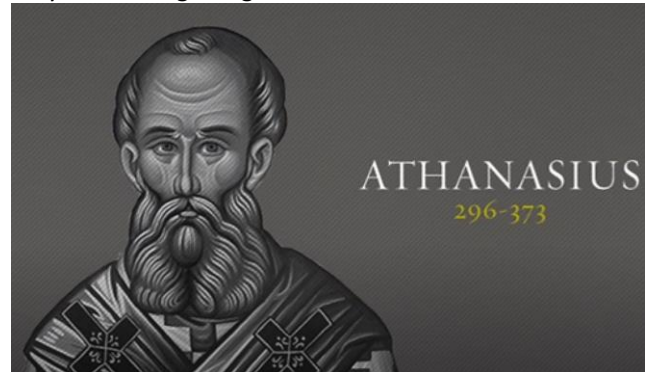


You may say, how can I tell? Well, the test is this. The God of the Bible has spoken in his Son. The light of the knowledge of his glory is given to us in the face of Jesus Christ. Do I look habitually to the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ as showing me the final truth about the nature and the grace of God?

KNOWING GOD (P. 50)

That is the test for whether we are idolaters, and that's also how we avoid idolatry - by looking not just once, not just occasionally, but by looking habitually (as he puts it) to what God has shown us about himself in the person and work of His Son, Jesus Christ.

That's also why Packer dedicates his next chapter in the book (chapter five) to an explicit discussion of Jesus himself. Or, as Packer puts it, "God incarnate." When I was reading this chapter, I was reminded of the 4th century bishop, Athanasius of Alexandria, who was responsible almost more than anyone else in maintaining the church's confession of Jesus as truly God during a time when many began to doubt it or say very misleading things about it.



As you might imagine, Athanasius, wrote a great deal about Jesus as God incarnate in his writings. And when he wrote, he often noted that if we're going to understand Jesus rightly, then we need to recognize that the Bible has (what Athanasius called) a "two-fold proclamation" of the Savior.

On the one hand, he said, Scripture tells us something about who the Son is eternally as God. He is the Word and the power and the radiance and the glory of God. On the other hand, Scripture also tells us about who the Son became and what he did for us and for our salvation (as the creed puts it.)

I say all of that about Athanasius, because when I was reading this chapter, I realized that Packer's doing something very similar. He wants us to know God truthfully, in the face of Jesus Christ.

But in order to know Jesus Christ truthfully, we have to understand both who He is and what He has done. Packer answers the former question (who he is) first in a section under the heading "Who is this Child?" And his answer is very similar to the one that Athanasius gave. Jesus is the eternal word of God, the one through whom all things were made.

Yet, for our salvation, He is also the one who voluntarily took human nature upon himself and was born as a small, defenseless child in a backwater Palestinian town called Nazareth. This is a mystery, Packer says. It's not something we can understand. Only something that we can gaze in wonder at. At the same time, the fact that the Son was born as a small child on our behalf, that has monumental consequences on what we think of God - and also how we live in response. Because if we truly know this God, the one who became poor for us at Christmas, then it should affect the way we live our lives. If we truly know God then we ought to have, as Packer says, the Christmas spirit.



It is our shame and disgrace today that so many Christians— I will be more specific: so many of the soundest and most orthodox Christians go through this world in the spirit of the priest and the Levite in our Lord's parable, seeing human needs all around them, but (after a pious wish, and perhaps a prayer, that God might meet those needs), averting their eyes and passing by on the other side ...

KNOWING GOD (P. 64)



That is not the Christmas spirit ... For the Christmas spirit is the spirit of those who, like their Master, live their whole lives on the principle of making themselves poor—spending and being spent—to enrich their fellow humans ... to do good to others ... in whatever way there seems need.

KNOWING GOD (P. 64)

David Foster Wallace said that everybody worships a god of some kind. The only real question is which God you worship and what you imagine that God to be like. In his chapters, J.I. Packer agrees ... and he goes further.

When we entertain false ideas of God, we are committing idolatry. And if we truly want to know God, then we have to look habitually to where He has revealed himself; in the face of his Son, the one who became poor for our sake, so that he might make us rich.

Group Discussion Questions

1. What is one thing from this week's assigned chapters that stood out to you?
2. Discuss the following quote by novelist David Foster Wallace: "In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship." Do you agree? What are some examples of things other than God that we worship in the "day-to-day trenches" of life?
3. Packer says that one of the ways we commit idolatry is by thinking of God not as He is, but as we "like to think" of Him. What are some examples of popular images that people have of God? What is true in those ideas of God? How are those ideas misleading? How can we avoid entertaining such misleading ideas?
4. In chapter five, in a section titled "He Became Poor," Packer contrasts the "Christmas spirit" with the "spirit" of the priest and Levite in the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). How would you describe the attitude of the priest and Levite in that parable? What makes their attitude so different from the spirit exemplified in the story of the Son becoming poor and being born as a child? Why does Packer think that it is a "shame and disgrace" for Christians to believe in God Incarnate and yet neglect the needs of their neighbors?
5. What do you think is the greatest challenge that the assigned chapters of this week pose to you? What is one practical step that you can take this week to apply and act on the lesson from this week?