

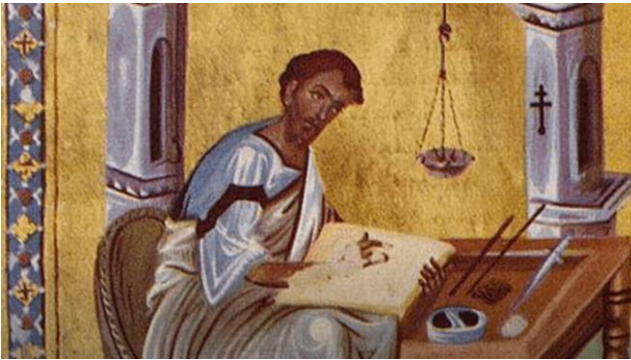
**“Knowing God by J.I. Packer**  
**Session 5: Chapters 12-14 (July 11, 2022)**  
**Father Jonathan Bailes**



**Lesson Summary:**

*From the early days of the church up until the present day, there has been a consistent temptation for Christians to divorce their understanding of the grace and love of God from the reality of God’s judgment against sin. J.I. Packer thinks that this is a grave mistake. As he writes in chapter thirteen of Knowing God, “unless one knows the truth of this fact, that wrongdoers have no natural hope of anything from God but retributive judgment, one can never share the biblical faith in divine grace.” In this session, we explore the intertwined themes of the love, grace, and judgment of God, and why Packer thinks it is so essential to hold them together.*

One of the earliest heretics of the Christian church was a man named Marcion of Sinope. He was born into a Christian family in the first century, around the year 85 A.D. He became a successful sea merchant. In the early second century, he traveled to Rome, where he made a large donation to the Christian church there and began teaching.



Once the church found out what Marcion was teaching, they ended up returning his donation to him and excommunicating him. Yet, despite how quickly and how definitively the church condemned what he had to say, it seems that in every generation there are those who gravitate back toward his ideas. Or maybe I should say, his idea.

You see, while Marcion taught many things, there was one central idea behind all of it. That idea was, well, it was pretty simple. Marcion believed that God, the God of Jesus Christ, is a perfectly good and gracious being. In fact, he believed that God is not only good, but is good and nothing but good.

Because God is gracious and good, he is not and cannot be the divine judge that we read about in the

Old Testament. Either God can be a God of judgment and wrath, or he can be a God of goodness and grace. He cannot be both. That was Marcion's big idea. Like I said, it's an idea that seems to crop up in every generation.

In fact, I think if we're honest with ourselves, most of us would have to admit that it's an idea that frequently seems to crop up in our own minds. We all love to talk and sing about God's grace and His love, but we rarely talk about his justice. As the famous American theologian Richard Niebuhr observed, the way that we talk makes it sound like we believe that:

“  
 A God without wrath brought men without  
 sin into a Kingdom without judgment through  
 the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross.



H. RICHARD NIEBUHR

But not J.I. Packer. Packer doesn't fall prey to the seductive ideas of Marcion. In fact, as you read chapters 12,13, and 14, you'll notice an interesting pattern. Not only does Packer think you shouldn't separate the love and grace of God from the justice of God. He thinks you can't.

Or at least he thinks you can't understand the grace and love of God until you properly understand God's judgment of sin. As he puts it in chapter 13:



*God is not true to himself unless he punishes sin. And unless one knows and feels the truth of this fact, that wrongdoers have no natural hope of anything from God but retributive judgment, one can never share the biblical faith in divine grace.*

KNOWING GOD (P. 131)

That's a very bold statement. Certainly not one that Marcion would agree with. Nor, I imagine, is it one that makes much sense to many contemporary Christians who celebrate the grace of God - but dislike talk of his judgment.

So why does Packer say that? Why does he think that you can't share the biblical faith and divine grace until you feel the truth of God's just punishment of sin? Why do we often see things differently?

To answer that question, it's helpful to pay attention to what Packer says about our common understandings of love and grace. When we hear words like love or goodness or grace, we often equate it with attitudes of kindness and tolerance - with being non-judgmental and easygoing and sympathetic. And when we think of God as loving or gracious, we often transfer those same ideas, those same connotations, onto him.

But that's a mistake, according to Packer. Because, as he notes in chapter 12, while God is love (as I John says), I John also tells us that God is also light, which means that he is holy and pure and is adamantly opposed to moral darkness. And that must inform how we understand God's love.



*The God who is love is first and foremost light, and sentimental ideas of his love as an indulgent, benevolent softness, divorced from moral standards and concerns, must therefore be ruled out from the start. God's love is holy love.*

KNOWING GOD (PP. 121-122)

The same thing is true when it comes to God's grace, because we modern people tend to misunderstand grace. And the reason that we do is because we tend to misunderstand ourselves by not taking our sin very seriously. Modern men and women, Packer says, are naturally inclined to a high opinion of themselves.



*They view material wealth as in any case more important than moral character, and in the moral realm they are resolutely kind to themselves, treating small virtues as compensating for great vices and refusing to take seriously the idea that, morally speaking, there is anything much wrong with them.*

KNOWING GOD (P. 129-130)

I don't know about you, but I think Packer hits the nail on the head with that observation. It's true. We do tend to be, as he puts it, "resolutely kind to ourselves." We think lightly of sin. We try not to dwell too much on our guilt. And when we do begin to feel at all the weight of our wrongdoing, we can count on our friends to tell us not to be so hard on ourselves - to lighten up, to forgive ourselves. Or if friends aren't around, we can just get rid of those negative feelings by checking our email, watching a video on YouTube, or turning on a movie or a sports game.

Either way - be it by way of distraction or through some kind of therapeutic self-help strategy - we find ways not to think too poorly of ourselves; not to feel too badly about our sin. In so doing, according to Packer, ***we make it impossible for ourselves to experience the wonder and joy of God's grace.***

The only way to genuinely know and feel God's grace, the only way to really experience the wonder and joy of it, is to allow yourself to be surprised by it.

God does not owe grace to sinners. We can't demand it from him, nor presume upon it. God's decision to be gracious toward us, to pardon us of our sin, to adopt us as his children, to grant us eternal life - is just that. A decision. A free choice. Things didn't have to be that way.

So we should not presume on grace. We shouldn't take it for granted. Instead, we should allow ourselves to be astonished, surprised, overwhelmed once again that God does not treat us as we deserve.

Instead, for no other reason than his own free decision, he grants us the gift of his Son - who bears our sin in his body on the cross. He also grants us the gift of his Spirit, who brings us from death into life and guarantees our future redemption.

If you aren't astonished by that, if you're not at least a little surprised, if there's nothing in that which causes you to wonder, then, as Packer might say, chances are you're not really understanding the grace of God. Those who do know God's grace, those who have truly experienced it will, as Packer says at the end of chapter 13, live lives marked by a profound sense of gratitude.

When I read that section at the end of chapter 13, I was reminded of the words of one of my favorite poems by the poet Wendell Berry. The theme of the poem is "aging." He wrote it when he was around 70. He wrote it to his wife of many years. At the end of the poem, he addresses her and he says:

... And you, who are as old  
almost as I am, I love as I loved you  
young, except that, old, I am astonished  
at such a possibility, and am duly grateful.

"VII." FROM SABBATH POEMS  
WENDELL BERRY

I love that final line where he says "except that, old, I am astonished at such a possibility, and am duly grateful." He's grown old. He no longer takes his or his wife's life for granted. And so now he feels astonished at the opportunity that he has been given to love her. Now he no longer takes it for granted.

He is duly grateful. If we are to know the love and the grace of God, I think something very similar must take place in our own lives.

- Until we recognize just how little we deserve God's kindness
- until we take seriously the full weight of our sin
- until we stop presuming on God's grace,

we won't feel the astonishment that we should. And until we do, we won't be duly grateful.

### Group Discussion Questions

1. What is one thing from this week's assigned chapters that stood out to you?
2. Packer says that modern Christians frequently separate the love and grace of God from judgment against sin. And yet, as the video mentioned, this is not a modern phenomenon. Since the earliest days of the church, it has been common to pit the grace of God against divine judgment and the justice of God in the Old Testament against the love of God in the New. Why do you think that is? Why do we tend to privilege God's grace and love at the expense of, and through the avoidance of, his just punishment of sin? How have you seen this tendency in your own life?
3. Discuss the following quote from chapter 12: "The God who is love is first and foremost light, and sentimental ideas of his love as an indulgent, benevolent softness, divorced from moral standards and concerns, must therefore be ruled out from the start. God's love is holy love."
4. Why does Packer think that, before we can truly know and appreciate the grace of God, we must first come to terms with the depth of our own sin?
5. Packer says that a true knowledge of God's grace will lead to a life of constant gratitude. But in order to be grateful, we must first be surprised and astonished by what God has done for us. When is the last time you felt surprise or astonishment at the grace of God? How can we keep ourselves from taking this grace for granted?
6. 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?