

“Knowing God by J.I. Packer
Session 6: Chapters 15-17 (July 18, 2022)
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Lesson Summary:

These chapters in “Knowing God” deal with what, for many modern people, are hard topics when it comes to thinking about God: His wrath, goodness and severity, and jealousy. Following the lead of our own imaginations, we often fall prey to caricatured portraits of God influenced more by pagan myth than Holy Scripture. As a result, we assume God’s wrath is like our often temperamental and irrational anger, his goodness as something more like indulgence, and his jealousy as a kind of petty possessiveness. This session will help us see that learning about God’s self-sufficiency can help us understand not only how these attributes of God differ from our common misunderstandings of them, but also why we must grasp these attributes if we are to truly know God.

Welcome to session 6 of our "Knowing God" study. This week we'll be looking at chapters dealing with God's wrath, his goodness and severity, and his jealousy. None of these topics sit very well with our modern sensibilities, influenced as they are by what the sociologist Christian Smith has called "moralistic therapeutic deism."



CHRISTIAN SMITH

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

This is a set of assumptions about life where God is more like a divine butler. He's distant, he's unintrusive in our lives, until we need help and we call on him. Our goal is not so much to conform our lives to his revealed will, but to seek happiness as we understand it - as long as we're nice to other people.

We need help to wrap our minds around ideas like God's wrath, his severity, and even what his goodness can mean, and his jealousy. These chapters in "Knowing God" help us make room for a fuller picture of who God is according to the whole scope of Holy Scripture. These chapters call us to have imaginations that are renewed by the way God is revealed in the entire scope of Scripture. It's a way that challenges and corrects our often thin understanding of who God is. In order to see how J.I. Packer does this in these chapters, I think it's first helpful for us to reflect on an attribute of God, a

truth about Him, that will help give us a framework for understanding his wrath, his jealousy, and his goodness. And that truth (that attribute) is God's self-sufficiency.

SELF-SUFFICIENCY

In his classic book, "The Knowledge of the Holy," A.W. Tozer (writing about God's self-sufficiency) says something that I think will help us frame our discussion of these seemingly more challenging and difficult aspects of God's character.

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[God] did not bring the worlds into being to meet some unfulfilled need in Himself, as a man might build a house to shelter him against the winter cold or plant a field of corn to provide him with necessary food. The word necessary is wholly foreign to God.



A.W. TOZER

From the beginning, we need to rid ourselves of this notion that God created the world because He needs it. If we're to grapple with his wrath, grapple with his jealousy, these more challenging aspects of his character, we need to rid ourselves of that idea. Or the idea that we exist because he needs us, that he needs our devotion, he needs our attention and our affection.

You see, left to ourselves, without the illumination of the Holy Spirit and Holy Scripture, we often imagine God to be much like the pagan gods of the ancient times, subject to human whims and feelings, petty and vengeful, emotionally needy and dependent on

their creatures. But if the word "necessary" is wholly foreign to God, then God did not create out of need. He created out of love. And imagining God as something more like a human being, just on a grander scale, won't do. So what I would like to suggest then is that these chapters in "Knowing God" expand our imagination's capacity for seeing God as He truly is represented in all of Holy Scripture - for who He truly is.

So that our common misconceptions about things like his wrath, his goodness, and his jealousy are revealed to be rooted in this fundamental misunderstanding of his nature - the misunderstanding that God created out of need.

With that in mind, let's think about his anger. His anger is not rooted in need. It's not rooted in not getting something from us. His goodness is something more splendid and robust than just mere kindness. And his jealousy has nothing to do with what we imagine to be a petty and needy possessiveness. For all these ways of construing what we often think of are these difficult aspects of God's character, they're rooted in that sub-biblical and human centered way of imagining these attributes.

Packer helps us see this, for example, when introducing what God's wrath is like. He writes this:



To some ... wrath suggests a loss of self-control, an outburst of 'seeing red' which is partly if not wholly irrational. To others it suggests the rage of conscious impotence, or wounded pride or plain bad temper.

Surely, it is said, it would be wrong to ascribe to God such attributes as these? The reply is: indeed, it would, but the Bible does not ask us to do this.

KNOWING GOD (P. 150)

The Bible does not ask us to view God's anger in the same way our anger often shows up in our daily lives. Our anger often shows up as a result of not being able, conscious impotence, or from wounded pride when we feel like we don't get the accolades we need. Or from just plain old impatience.

Again, what Packer is accomplishing here in these chapters is a reorientation of our imagination to the

witness of all of Holy Scripture so that we can come to see God as He truly is. In a similar way, Packer helps us to see God as he is truly revealed in Scripture - when it comes to God's goodness and severity.

In chapter 16, Packer writes about a "Santa Clause theology" where we come to view God more like a forbearing, tolerant, mild, and accommodating deity. And this conception has caused us to:



... reject all ideas of divine wrath and judgment, and to assume that God's character ... is really one of indulgent benevolence without any severity ...

KNOWING GOD (P. 159)

Here, Packer highlights again a common misunderstanding, but in this case about God's goodness and his love. Something that we often see, as he says, as an "indulgent benevolence with no severity attached to it."

C.S. Lewis once wrote about God's goodness and love in a similar way. In "The Problem of Pain," Lewis seeks to clarify what we mean when we talk about God's goodness and how it differs from the way Scripture and the church have always talked about it.

I want to read a quotation from "Problem of Pain" in length, because I believe it not only echoes what Packer is talking about here in "Knowing God," but it will also help us flesh out what He means by God's goodness and severity. It will also provide us a smooth transition into talking about God's jealousy.

This is what Lewis writes:



By the goodness of God we mean nowadays ... kindness—the desire to see others than the self happy; not happy in this way or in that, but just happy ... We want, in fact, not so much a Father in Heaven as a grandfather in heaven—a senile benevolence ... whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day, 'a good time was had by all' ...

When Christianity says that God loves man, it means that God loves man: not that He has some 'disinterested', because really indifferent, concern for our welfare, but that, in awful and surprising truth, we are the objects of His love ...

The great spirit you so lightly invoked ... is present: not a senile benevolence that drowsily wishes you to be happy in your own way ... but the consuming fire Himself, the Love that made the worlds ... provident and venerable as a father's love for a child, jealous, inexorable, exacting as love between the sexes.

In other words, what God offers us is something better than mere kindness. God does not have a disinterested concern for our welfare. As Lewis says elsewhere, he's not like a judge who just has a cold philanthropy for someone else. But God's goodness and love is a consuming fire. It's the same love, as Lewis says, that spoke the worlds into being.

And it cares how you turn out, so to speak, just as a good parent cares how their child turns out, or just as a husband cares who his wife spends time alone with, and vice versa.

This leads me finally to Packer's treatment of God's jealousy. Packer helps us see in chapter 17 that God's jealousy is not some petty possessiveness or, in Packer's words:



an infantile resentment springing from an unmortified covetousness which expresses itself in envy, malice, and meanness of action

KNOWING GOD (P. 170)

But instead, God's jealousy is the product of His committed, zealous love for his beloved, like the committed love of a spouse for his beloved; that we understand instinctively from the context of marriage. Where the intrusion of an extramarital lover should stoke a zealous response to protect that bond of marriage from anything that could possibly destroy it.

The ferocity of God's love isn't born out of neediness, but out of an overflowing desire for the beloved. What the late Rich Mullins, the Christian singer, once referred to as "the reckless, raging fury that they call the love of God."

ANTHROPOMORPHISMS

I want us to see one last thing. Packer helps us to see this word "necessary" as wholly foreign to God, in particular in this chapter on God's jealousy through His treatment of Holy Scriptures use of anthropomorphisms. Now anthropomorphisms are descriptions of God drawn from human life, depicting God as having human qualities, including feelings, changes of heart, the ability to smell and hear (some examples.) And they are fundamental to the way God condescends in Scripture to help us know Him. But as Packer warns:



We have to remember that man is not the measure of his Maker, and that when the language of human personal life is used of God, none of the limitations of human creaturehood are thereby implied ... those elements in human qualities which show the corrupting effect of sin have no counterpart in God.

KNOWING GOD (P. 169)

This is a good place to bring this session to a close and to bring us back to where we started. Packer in these chapters is seeking to help to create in us a greater capacity for knowing who God is by expanding our imagination according to the scope of all of Holy Scripture. Not just the God of our own imaginings, which we often imagine to be a human being on a grander scale, but an image of God shaped by the whole scope of Scripture.

So that when we think of God's wrath, when we think of His goodness, or a severity, when we think of his jealous love for his people - we see him as he is truly revealed in his word and ultimately in THE WORD, Jesus Christ, the divine word, who took on human form and revealed that while God has no need of us. He wants us. And nothing in heaven or on earth, nor in even death or hell itself, can stop his relentless pursuit of making all things new - in us and in all the world.

GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is one thing from this week's assigned chapters that has really stuck with you?
2. In Chapter 15, did you find anything comforting or consoling about the way Packer says Scripture portrays the idea of God's wrath? If so, what? Was there anything that challenged the way you think about His wrath? How did it do so?
3. What do you make of Packer's idea in Chapter 16 about "Santa Claus Theology" when it comes to understanding God's goodness and severity? Do you find yourself susceptible to a picture of God as something more like an indulgent grandfather than a loving father? Related to this, what might cause you to struggle with the idea of God's severity? Did you have a good relationship with your father? How does it influence your understanding of God's goodness and severity?
4. Did you find Packer's distinction between the two kinds of jealousy (p.170) helpful in Chapter 17? If not, why? If so, how does it help you understand God's jealousy better?
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?