

The Goodness & Severity of God

Knowing God, chapter 16

Discussion Questions

1. What aspects of the traditional view of God in Judeo-Christian faith would be received well today? Which aspects are not received well?
2. If modern society were to create a God that they would worship, what would this God be like?

Modern Man's Remaking of God: "Santa Claus" Theology

The habit in question, first learned from some gifted German theologians of the last century, has infected modern Western Protestantism as a whole. To reject all ideas of divine wrath and judgment, and to assume that God's character, misrepresented in many parts of the Bible, is really one of indulgent benevolence without any severity, is the rule rather than the exception among ordinary folk today. (159)

Discussion: what would happen to the importance of doctrine or morality if one took a view of God like this?

Natural Progression of Modern Man's Remaking of God

But on the basis of the Santa Claus theology, sins create no problem, and atonement becomes needless; God's active favor extends no less to those who disregard his commands than to those who keep them. (160)

Yet the Santa Claus theology carries within itself the seeds of its own collapse, for it cannot cope with the fact of evil. It is no accident that when the belief in the "good God" of liberalism became widespread, about the turn of the twentieth century, to so-called problem of evil (which was not regarded as a problem before) suddenly leaped into prominence as the number one concern of Christian apologetics. This was inevitable, for it is not possible to see the good will of a heavenly Santa Claus in heartbreaking and destructive things like cruelty, or marital infidelity, or death on the road or lunch cancer. (160)

Discussion: (for those who do not know what Packer will say) How would this affect people's view of God?

“Saving” God

The only way to save the liberal view of God is to dissociate him from these things and to deny that he has any direct relation to them or control over them; in other words, to deny his omnipotence and lordship over this world. Liberal theologians took this course fifty years ago, and the man on the street takes it today. (160)

Thus he is left with a kind of God who means well but cannot always insulate his children from trouble and grief. When trouble come, therefore, there is nothing to do but grin and bear it. In this way, by an ironic paradox, faith in a God who is all goodness and no severity tends to confirm men in a fatalistic and pessimistic attitude to life. (p.160)

God’s Goodness

Goodness, in God as in human beings, means something admirable, attractive, and praiseworthy. When the biblical writers call God *good*, they are thinking in general of all those moral qualities which prompt people to call him *perfect*. (161)

“The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished” (Ex 34:6-7) (161)

God’s Severity

The principle which Paul is applying here is that behind every display of divine goodness stands a threat of severity in judgment if that goodness is scorned. If we do not let it draw us to God in gratitude and responsive love, we have only ourselves to blame when God turns against us.

The importance of keeping God’s attributes together

Christians are not to dwell on God’s goodness alone, nor on his severity alone, but to contemplate both together. Both are attributes of God—aspects, that is, of his revealed character. Both appear alongside each other in the economy of grace. Both must be acknowledged together if God is to be truly known. (Knowing God, p.158)