

**RESPONSE TO MARK KARLBERG'S CRITIQUE OF  
FUTURE GRACE  
By Alex Chediak**

**Summary**

Future Grace is a helpful distillation of *how* justifying faith leads to progressive sanctification in the life of Christians. Dr. Piper shows that the fight of faith is a fight to be increasingly satisfied with all that God is for us in Jesus, such that the passing and deceitful pleasures of sin become decreasingly alluring. Faith in future grace receives God's empowerment moment-by-moment and hence leads to greater holiness. Gratitude for past mercies encourages this faith. Karlberg's critique that Piper draws a false dichotomy between gratitude and faith in future grace is invalid. Karlberg's confusion regarding Piper's understanding of merit is found to be legitimate; Piper appears to have lacked clarity regarding the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Redemption. However, Piper does maintain a clear distinction between justification and sanctification. Karlberg's claims to the contrary are unfounded.

**Practical Theology  
Dr. John Piper**

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Piper's central message in Future Grace

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The central thesis of Future Grace is that a vibrant, persevering faith in the promises of God, with respect to a believer's immediate and long-term future, is meant to be the motivating drive of the Christian life, drawing the believer into ever increasing Christ-likeness in thought, deed and love for God the Father. Just as we *begin* the Christian life by faith in Christ, so are we to *persevere* in the Christian life by faith. We are to work out our salvation by recognizing that at every moment, "all that God promises to be for us in Jesus stands against what sin promises to be for us without Him" (Piper, p. 10). The Christian life is the fight of faith to see God (with increasing clarity and delight) as supremely valuable and hence preferable to any allurements sin might be offering us at the moment.

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By "future grace" Piper means more than the grace of God to be revealed to the believer in heaven. He means the grace of God to be revealed day-by-day and moment-by-moment. Faith is what prizes and is satisfied with the goodness of God, which it continuously receives with an outstretched, empty hand. The fight of faith is the fight to consciously, habitually place faith in the future grace of God, and thus cultivate a spiritual affection for God that regularly exceeds our residual passion for sin. Christians weak in spiritual affection for God are weak precisely because they do not see the blessings that God promises them to be all-satisfying—that is, they are failing to place their confidence (i.e., faith) in this "future grace" of God. Consequently, they see sin as more alluring: it promises them happiness, and they incline toward it *because they believe its deceitful promises*. Sanctification, then, hinges on believing the promises of God (for future grace), and thereby displacing fleshly inclination to believe the (deceitful)

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promises of sin. Both sin and God offer happiness, and the believer will incline himself towards whichever offer he sees as more credible at a given moment. *good*

Prior to conversion, we only believed the promises of sin to make us happy. As Christians, we have a new principle within us: a genuine love for, and desire to obey, God. Thus, conversion to Christ marks the beginning of the fight of faith for the believer. We fight for faith to trust (believe) God more and more—namely, to trust that He will truly make us happy. We escape sinful habits by the expulsive power of this new affection for God, which is born in us at conversion (solely by God’s grace), but which we must cultivate. That cultivation is the essence of the fight of faith.

Future Grace is hereby an extension of the thesis Piper unpacked in a previous book, Desiring God. *- give bibliographic info in a fn* There, Piper argued that our desire to be as happy as possible and God’s desire to be glorified in His creation were not two goals but rather one. God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him. We actively kill our sin (lest our sin kill us) not so much by thinking about what we ought not to do, but by the expulsive power of a superior affection for God. This superior affection for God is invariably accompanied by a superior trust in God’s commitment to be our all-satisfying Treasure, such that we trust in God’s promises to give us pleasures forevermore (Ps 16:11).

There are two other noteworthy considerations in Future Grace. The first is that gratitude (looking back to what God has already done in the life of the believer, including God’s sending Jesus to die on the cross) is not meant to be the motivating factor for Christian love for (and obedience to) God. This is simply a negative expression of that which I previously described positively. *redundant* The trouble with encouraging Christians to obey God out of gratitude for what God has already done is that it encourages a “debtors

ethic". God gave us such a wonderful salvation, and now we must work for Him to, in essence, pay Him back for His benevolence. The problem is two-fold (1) one can never pay back God, because every imperfect act of Christian obedience leaves the believer in greater (not lesser) debt to God's grace who alone enables our obedience (Phil 2:13) and (2) the very notion of paying God back is an affront to His glory, because in any transaction it is understood that the Giver (not the receiver) receives the honor for being the resourceful, generous one. And God will not share His glory with another. The thought that we might pay God back therefore severely misunderstands the nature of God's gift of salvation. It represents a (perhaps unintended) robbing of God's glory.

In no way, however, does Piper negate that Christian gratitude is fundamentally important. No true Christian lacks gratitude for what God has done for him. Rather, gratitude and faith in future grace fulfill complementary functions. Gratitude looks back in thanksgiving, awe and wonder, at the power, grace, and justice of God in paying for sins once-and-for all at Calvary. Faith in future grace says, "Just as God has been faithful in the past, so I can trust him for every moment in my future. His mercy and kindness will pursue me all the days of my life!" And such faith overcomes the world, the flesh, and the devil.

Lastly, Piper draws attention to the *conditional* aspects of God's *unmerited* grace. Piper explains that election (God's choosing us for salvation) and calling (whereby God breathes spiritual life in us, or regenerates us), are given freely by God without regard to our previously meeting any conditions. Common grace—things like sunshine and rain—are also showered on humanity unconditionally (Matt 5:45). Yet Piper says that other aspects of God's grace, while not deserved, are given based on our meeting

conditions. For example, he states that justification, sanctification, and glorification are all given on the basis of faith. So we must meet the condition of having faith, even though faith, ultimately, is an unconditional and gracious gift of God.

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to never  
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chapter.

7. ~~In the next chapter~~, Piper spells out ten distinct conditions (such as crying out to God), pointing to Scriptures that say things like, “Be gracious to me, O Lord, for to Thee I cry all day long” (Psalm 86:3). Piper then shows how all of these conditions are simply different ways of describing the heart of faith. The import of Piper’s comments regarding conditional grace boils down to this: justifying faith—the faith that is God’s gift, and on the basis of which God justifies a sinner—is a faith that *invariably* leads to sanctification (greater holiness in word, thought, affection and deed). Where there is no sanctification, there was no justification. Piper’s concern is pastoral: many professing Christians are shocked when if living in perpetual sin someone says, “If you keep on living that way, and never repent, you will go straight to hell.” Their reply is, “How can that be? I cannot lose my salvation.” But such a person never had any salvation in the first place. I John 2:19 describes them: “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.” The proof of justification is in the perseverance of one’s faith. These, and only these, are saved in the end.

**Mark Karlberg’s critique of Piper’s theology as expressed in Future Grace**

The essential elements of Karlberg’s critique can be summarized as follows:

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1. In our consideration of Christian love for God and obedience to God, we ought not to distinguish between the role of gratitude for God’s past mercies and trust in God’s promises of future grace. To do so sets forth a false dichotomy.

2. A Christian theology of grace requires a category of divine justice. Understanding the Covenant of Works is imperative to grasping the Fall of man in Adam, what Christ accomplished for the elect, how God receives Christians into heaven and judges their works, and how God dealt with Israel under the Mosaic Covenant.
3. The essence of saving faith ought not to be confused with those fruits which saving faith produces in sanctification (e.g., confidence, joy, hope). Piper confuses matters by collapsing the evidential working of faith back into justification. <sup>1</sup>

Add a sentence indicating Karlberg's critique, namely, that he believes Piper rejects the CoW.

As the reader may be unaware, I will briefly describe the concept of “Covenant of Works” as it is central to both covenant theology and Karlberg’s critique. Covenant theology sees God’s dealings with mankind, throughout all history, in either one of two Covenants: one of Works, and the other of Grace. When God made Adam, and before Adam had sinned, God’s dealings with Adam were based on an implied covenant of works. That is, God *explicitly* told Adam, “Eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and you will die.” (Gen 2:17) In doing so, God was *implicitly* saying, “If you do not eat from this tree, you will live.” Now there was another tree in the garden—a tree of life (Gen 2:9). From the beginning of Genesis up to the account of the Fall (when Adam and Eve first disobey the command of God given in Gen 2:17), there is no record of whether Adam (or Eve) ate of the tree of life. However, after the Fall, when God pronounces the curse, the text says: “Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, *lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life*

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<sup>1</sup> Other aspects of Karlberg’s critique include: the difference in the Holy Spirit’s function in the life of Old Testament versus New Testament saints, and whether Israel, as a nation, experienced a probationary period terminating in the death of Christ. These are deemed to be secondary, and are not treated in this paper due to length constraints.

and eat, and live forever...” (Gen 3:22) This “lest he...” language suggests that neither Adam nor Eve had yet eaten of the tree of life. So now God banishes them from the garden, sacrifices two animals to clothe them, and the Covenant of Grace with humanity is thus inaugurated.

The Covenant of Works maintains that had Adam and Eve obeyed God, they would have effectively passed a test. As a result, God would have allowed them to eat from the tree of life, which would have confirmed them in their state of sinlessness forever.<sup>2</sup>

Karlberg sees Adam relating to God on this system of merit as paradigmatic of Christ’s relating to God with respect to His earthly ministry. Where Adam fails on behalf of his progeny, so Christ succeeds and earns salvation for those who are united to him by faith.

### **Review of Karlberg’s critique**

Karlberg himself assumes (incorrectly) that if gratitude and faith in future grace serve different functions, there must be a false dichotomy. On the contrary, Piper does not draw a “sharp distinction” between the two, for as Piper explains, gratitude and faith play complementary roles. Gratitude looks back in thanksgiving, awe and wonder, at the power, grace, and justice of God in paying for sins once-and-for all at Calvary. Faith in future grace says, “Just as God has been faithful in the past, so I can trust him for every moment in my future. His mercy and kindness will pursue me all the days of my life!” Gratitude in fact stimulates faith in future grace.

good

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<sup>2</sup>Even if Adam had eaten of the tree of life prior to the Fall, that would not in itself disprove a Covenant of Works. But such details are beyond the scope of this paper. See, for example, “Covenant of Works”, Justin Taylor, published April 2005 at <http://theologica.blogspot.com/>.

On p. 413, Piper states: "...I am hesitant to call Jesus' obedience in life and death the fulfillment of a 'covenant of works'. This term generally implies that 'works' stand over against 'grace', and are not the fulfillment of faith in grace. Thus works implies a relationship with God that is more like an employer receiving earned wages than like a Son trusting a Father's generosity." Piper here inaccurately represents the Covenant of Works: in fact, "works" need not stand over against "grace".<sup>3</sup> This sentence suggests that "works" implies that Adam was to obey God *in his own strength*, and that God would then be in Adam's debt—owing him eternal life. But that is not what the Covenant of Works teaches. First, Adam's obedience was to be enabled by dependency upon the power of God. That is another of way of saying that Adam was to exercise faith—after all, the only way to do anything depending on God's strength is to do it by faith. Secondly, God would have "owed" Adam eternal life in exchange for obedience only because God had (graciously) obligated Himself to Adam via covenant. It is not as though Adam's obedience would have inherently merited eternal life: As Piper rightly recognizes, Adam did not even "merit" his existence (God freely chose to create him). Nor could Adam's obedience have been performed in any other strength than the power of God (laid hold of by the means of faith). So Piper is mostly right: It is faith in future grace that pleases God.

Excellent Clarification

good

However, because Piper does not want a system in which God is in debt to man, he goes on to misrepresent Christ's work in the p. 413 footnote. For Christ was the "last Adam", and where the first Adam failed, the last One succeeded (I Cor 15:45). Yes, Jesus' life of perfect obedience was empowered exclusively by the Holy Spirit—whose strength was received moment-by-moment by the channel of Jesus' perfect faith in future

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<sup>3</sup> Perhaps it'd be better to say "Covenant with Adam". But then, as we'll see, we'd also have to call it "Covenant with Jesus".

grace. Piper is correct in that regard. And on account of such obedience, God highly exalted him. God's sustaining and empowering Christ's work does not negate the fact that it is Christ's work (and not another's) that merits eternal life. I have no problem with Piper saying that ... tends to refer to a "gracious" gift. I simply think we need to think of this "graciousness" as not mutually exclusive with Christ "meriting" eternal life (in the sense that Adam also could have "merited" eternal life, had he obeyed). Secondly, we need to read Phil 2:9 alongside texts such as John 17:2,6; Rom 5:18-19; Isaiah 53:11-12; Hebrews 10:7-9. These texts, taken together, teach that God the Father had promised the God the Son that on behalf of His offering a perfect sacrifice for sin, that offering would be accepted and He would receive the reward of His suffering: resurrection, glorification, all authority in heaven and earth (Matt 28:18), and a people for His own possession.<sup>4</sup>

*Perhaps a footnote explaining "merit" would be helpful here, especially since Piper has such a problem with the term "merit".*

It is unfortunate that Karlberg didn't root more of his argument on the fact that the obedience God required of Adam (and Christ) was meant to be a God-empowered, faith-filled, Spirit-dependent obedience (Heb 11:6). I do recognize that significant elements of an understanding of Christ's work in dying on behalf of others are scattered throughout Future Grace.<sup>5</sup> Yet Piper's lack of clarity on how grace and merit are interwoven in the Covenant of Works results in some confusion. The consequence is that Karlberg associated Piper with ideas such as: (1) justification and sanctification being indistinguishable, (2) too much continuity between the Old and New Testaments, (3) confusion over Rom 9:31-32 and the "obedience of faith"<sup>6</sup>, stemming from a failure to

<sup>4</sup> This idea is commonly referred to as a Covenant of Redemption.

<sup>5</sup> Karlberg's quotes from pages 26-27 of Future Grace are good examples.

<sup>6</sup> Such confusion is exhibited sporadically in Future Grace chapters 11-12 and critiqued obliquely, and to some extent accurately, by Karlberg.

*An example would be helpful*

understand law-grace distinctions such as: Gal 3:11-12, the promise being to those who perfectly obey, and Lev 18:5 taken with Rom 4:4-5.<sup>7</sup>

Lastly, on this topic, it is important to note that while both believers and pre-fallen Adam are called to live by faith, this faith functions differently for believers today than it did for pre-fallen Adam and Jesus' earthly years. The latter placed their faith in God as their all-surpassing Treasure who alone was worthy of all allegiance. But faith for them did not have an added dimension of relying on another person for their redemption. Both aspects are essential to believers after the Fall. Yet our faith in Jesus is not the ground of our salvation. Rather, faith secures our salvation because it brings us into union with Christ, and thus to share in His (merited) righteousness. The perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ is the sole ground of our salvation. Good works we do give evidentiary attestation to the reality of our salvation.

Finally, as to the last critique of Karlberg—that Piper doesn't sufficiently distinguish justification and sanctification—I do not find Karlberg to be persuasive. Piper could have tightened his language here and there a bit<sup>8</sup>, but there are several strong sections in Future Grace that show Piper has good command of the justification-sanctification distinction. Karlberg quotes an example p. 26 where Piper notes that justification is an act of God's reckoning whereas sanctification is an act of God's transforming. The distinction Piper makes here and elsewhere is completely biblical. So when Piper later on says that "an essential element in the faith itself is confidence and joy

<sup>7</sup> Given space limitations, I cannot pursue all of these.

<sup>8</sup> For example, I would not have called love a secondary "condition" (p. 257). This makes it sound as if justifying faith is not quite justifying until love is added to it. Also, I would not have said the effects of faith are part of the "warp and woof of faith" (p.205). There are more careful ways to word such thoughts. Also, given chapter 15 footnote 9, it is not clear how Piper says "a bit more than Hodge". I think Hodge would have agreed that confidence, joy, and hope are elements of faith.

Are these works  
as Karlberg contends  
that Piper is adding  
justification?

and hope”, I don’t find him contradicting the justification-sanctification distinction he previously drew. What Piper is trying to guard against here, and throughout Future Grace, is the sort of “faith” that a man can say he has, and yet refuse to forgive others, fight sin, or rejoice in God. Piper is saying (rightly): that’s not saving faith!

### Conclusion

Future Grace is an outstanding book on the Christian life. The fight of faith is a fight to see God so clearly as our all-satisfying treasure that sin loses its alluring appeal. Gratitude looks back at bygone grace (including the death of Christ) and says to faith in future grace, “Just as God has been faithful, so will He be faithful until the end!”

Karlberg’s paper is helpful at pointing out some areas of confusion that may arise (particularly among Reformed scholars) because Piper either did not discuss certain topics using the clearest of terms, or if he did discuss them, omitted certain balancing Scriptures and concepts. These topics include: Christ’s atoning work, the relationship between God and pre-fallen Adam, the imputation of Christ’s death (credited to our account by means of our union with Christ by the instrumentality of faith), the role of the law in the Old Testament, and the distinction between justification and sanctification.

→ Do you mean righteousness?

That said, the only legitimate, substantive critique that Karlberg’s essay reveals is Piper’s mischaracterization of the Covenant of Works. Even here, Karlberg would have been more helpful had he discussed the faith-dependent obedience that was required of Adam and supplied by Christ.

Over →

Alex -

Your understanding of Future Grace, Covenant theology, and Piper + Karberg is excellent as is your explanation of each.

Your summary was helpful, but I think the paper would be better by writing an introduction that lays out your purpose in the paper and how you will arrive.

You bring up many things, but aren't able to go into them because of space. It is best in instances like these to only focus on the things that are most important and not bother mentioning other things.

All in all, nice work.

A  
JP