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Do We Always Need to Make the Case that Christian Morality Is the Best Way to Live?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about whether Christians can simply say that God's moral requirements are a show of loyalty to him rather than argue they're the best way to live, whether references to unforgivable sins contradict the idea that all our sins are forgiven, and praying for Satan.

* Christians often try to make the case that Christian morality is the best way to live, but at some point could we simply say God's requirements are a show of loyalty to him irrespective of any possible impact on society?

* How does the idea that all our sins have been forgiven align with the many references to mortal sins that can't be forgiven?

* How would you respond to Mark Twain's question about why no Christian has had the common humanity to pray for Satan?

Transcript

This is Amy Hall here with Greg Koukl and welcome to Stand to Reason's hashtag S-T-R-A-S-C-Podcast. Greg, are you ready to get going on this episode? Okay, this first question comes from James. It seems that Christians often try and make the case for Christian morality being the best way to live.

At what point could we simply say that God's requirements are a show of loyalty to God? A show of loyalty to him irrespective of any possible impact on society? Well, I think that's kind of a there's a point there, if I understand it, what's being said by Jane, but it's somewhat of a fault. It's James. Yeah.

Okay, thank you, James. It's somewhat of a false dichotomy. To me, it's not an ease or either or.

If morality is like good and bad and God is perfectly moral, that means he's perfectly

good. That means the things that he tells us to do are perfectly good. And if they're perfectly good, they're not just in the abstract, morally good.

They are good for us because they are tied to the way God created the world to function. So, you know, if you have an automobile, gasoline is good for an automobile. Water is not good.

It's not a steam engine. It's an internal combustion engine. So, the goodness there is tied, excuse me, this is a functional goodness in the illustration, but I'll carry this out.

The goodness is tied to the way the engine is meant to run. So, in the case of God, though, God made the world a certain way in part to accomplish human flourishing. My thinking, and I talk about this in the story of reality, is that God created human beings not because he needed anybody, but he wanted to share his happiness with them.

And the only way he could share his happiness with them is if he made them creatures that are kind of like him, and that includes in the moral fashion, morally like him, able to make deep decisions about virtue and vice. And as we grow in making our decisions virtuously, then we are increasing in godliness, which means we're increasing in our happiness too, because that's consistent with the way God made us. So, God's goodness is not just like an internal combustion engine that is pragmatic and functional, but it is functional precisely because there's a deeper moral component in it that we participate in.

So, when we say that we ought to be good, we are saying two things. We are saying we ought to honor the moral requirements of the morally perfect being who has placed those requirements on us. And those things are good for us because the way God has designed the world for human flourishing.

And this is why we have even Jesus in Matthew 19 when he talks about marriage, divorce or remarriage, he goes back to Genesis 1 and 2 to explain the way the world is made. And that, of course, is the foundation for the moral judgment that he makes regarding the question about divorce that was asked. But it also makes that point in light of the structure of reality and that in my mind, it's fairly clear when we read the first two chapters of Genesis that God made things for goodness.

And he looked at everything that was made and he said that it was good. Actually, when he made human beings, he said it was very good. So, I think that's the best way to understand how these two aspects of goodness work together, practical goodness and moral goodness are united when it comes to human flourishing.

And I would also say the very last part of this question says, can't we just say it's following God's requirements as a show of loyalty, irrespective of any possible impact on society. But I don't think the way Christians argue is because this has a good impact on

society, therefore you should do it. I don't think that's quite what it's about.

I think it's more about what you're talking about, Greg, where it's not so much the impact to society that we're making a case for as we're explaining the rationale so that the rules make sense. Because we should want to do what's true and good and beautiful and things that are true and good and beautiful are attractive in themselves because they are reflecting God. So, the more that we can understand the rightness, the truth, the beauty of what God is asking us to do, that helps us to embrace them.

Because it also says something about God because it also points to his goodness and the fact that he's not just arbitrarily telling us to do things, that he has reasons for them. He's orderly. He's the creator.

All of these things are tied together. And knowing why he has asked us to do certain things, I think can only increase our appreciation for his goodness and his being the creator. There's one other thing I want to add to that, though, and I do think there's a sense in which we do it sometimes best to lead with moral arguments or making a moral point about behaviors in society in virtue of the good that accrues to society.

So, let's just say the discussion now about transgenderism. Now, one of the difficulties that's made by many people who are conservatives writing on this issue is that this is encouraging transgenderism is not good for people. Now, we understand why it's not good, and there's where your theological foundation comes in.

But the first thrust is, I think, is most productive by focusing in on the common good. What is good for culture? Now, we have a way of making sense of why this is good for culture. It's the way reality is structured and the reality is structured that way because a God made the world for the purpose of human flourishing.

But most of the time, I think, when we argue in the public square regarding policy issues, we're taking an external approach. We're not trying to make a theological point. We're making the case of what is good for human beings in the long run.

But of course, the point is good that way is because it's consistent with the world that God made, and this gives us an opportunity then to take it further when we're able to. I'm glad you made that distinction, Greg, because, of course, if we're arguing the public square, we're not going to say, do this as a show of loyalty to God. So, of course, that's our goal is to convince people it's good for society.

But that's why I assumed when he was asking this question, if he's talking about telling Christians to do certain things as a show of loyalty, but, of course, this is all connected to each other. Goodness, truth, and beauty are all connected to each other, and they all reinforce each other. And so, whatever we can do to convince people to see that, yes, this is actually good for society, the more beautiful it will look to us, the more we'll desire

to do it.

And the more that reflects well on God. Now, could there be a time when it comes down to just a show of loyalty? Sure, if you can't understand why God is asking you to do something, that doesn't mean you don't have to do it. So, at that point, yes, it becomes a show of loyalty.

But the reason why we can do that is because we see all these other examples where he's showed us what to do, and when we look into it, it turns out, oh, this really is the good and true and beautiful thing to do. So, when something comes along that we don't understand, at least we have this background knowing who God is and what he's done, and we've seen all this evidence of what he asked us to do and the goodness of that. So, we can trust him even if it is at that point, just a show of loyalty.

Good point. All right, Greg, let's go into a question from khaki. There are many references to mortal sins or sins that paraphrasing can't be forgiven.

How does that align with having all sins washed clean through the resurrection? Are there sins we cannot receive forgiveness for? I don't know of the many references to so-called mortal sins. In other words, sins that cannot be forgiven. As far as I know, there's only a single reference and it's a mysterious statement that Jesus makes.

And this is where he talks about sins against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, neither in this age nor in the age to come. Which, by the way, strikes me as hyperbole. It isn't like, well, you got sins that aren't forgiven in this age, but in the next age, they'll be forgiven.

So, nothing to worry about. It strikes me that, and I say this because of other theological statements that the scripture makes about forgiveness and the age to come, et cetera. And so, I suspect this is hyperbolic, that this is the kind of sin we'll never be forgiven.

The difficulty is it's very difficult to make sense out of what that sin actually is. Now, Jesus makes this statement when the Jewish leaders have looked at his miracles and ascribed demonic power to his miracles. You know, you're in league with Satan.

So, when they see the most glorious characterization of the power of Jesus, substantiating his messianic claim, the best they can do is say that you do things in the power of Beelzebub, you know. And now that's pretty far gone. So, that is the context in which he says that a sin against the spirit is unforgivable.

Some think it's not possible to even commit that sin anymore because Jesus is not present to work miracles that you could attribute to the devil. So, that's a possible angle on it. Another possible angle on it is what Jesus is doing there is identifying the hardness of heart towards the work of the spirit that is insurmountable.

That means anyone who expresses this kind of thing and draws this conclusion from Jesus actions and behavior is so far gone, they will never, ever experience forgiveness. And this is the so-called sin blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. In either case, though, it doesn't seem to be the kind of thing that any Christian is vulnerable to because a Christian is already a believer.

And of course, most of us are aware, at least, of people whose lives were utterly and completely profligate in all kinds of different ways. And ended up being rescued by Jesus and being wonderfully regenerated and born again. And so, and are now followers of Jesus.

So, in practical experience, it doesn't seem like those are cases when any sins there would be the kind of thing that would be mortal in that sense. Now, I know the Roman Catholic Church makes distinctions between mortal sins and venial sins. And mortal sins are the kinds of sins that will disqualify you from salvation, take you out of the state of grace.

And venial sins are not good, but they don't take you out of the state of grace. If you die with a mortal sin on your record that has not been cleansed through proper absolution, you're going straight to hell. Now, this is a doctrine, especially as characterized by Rome, that there's nowhere found in Scripture, not even hinted at.

According to Scripture, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and the wages of sin is death. All sins are mortal in that regard. But the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

So, we see either you're in sin and going to perdition, or you're forgiven from all sin and rescued and have the promise of eternal life. That's the biblical calculus, so to speak. So, the only questionable one is the one we were just talking about blasphemy of the Holy Spirit.

And that's hard to figure out, but it seems clearly not to apply to most people. Yeah, I liked what you said Greg. It does seem that the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is being committed by people who are not following Jesus.

And one thing that the text actually says here is that after Jesus says, whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin, the little note here is that because they were saying he has an unclean spirit. So, it does seem to say that it's because they were saying that Jesus was actually demonic, which as you noted Greg, no Christian will say, these are people who aren't Christians. And I think this can relate also to, because I can think of one other place that maybe Keki is thinking of, and that would be in 1 John chapter 5, where it says, if anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will for him give life to those who commit sin not leading to death.

There is a sin leading to death. I do not say that he should make requests for this, but the way that I interpret this, and this goes along with your distinction between people who are following Jesus and people who are not following Jesus. And so, I think the distinction made here, but he also says, you know, you can, Jesus' sacrifice will cover your sins and we have an advocate with the Father, he makes that point.

So, the only way we can put those two together, I think, is by saying he's talking about people who really are Christians and people who aren't. So, people who have repented, they turn from their own life, they're following Jesus, and as they sin we have an advocate with the Father. But then there are those who are not truly Christians, and praying for their sin is not going to make a difference because they're on their way to death.

They don't have an advocate. And by the way, these references are all in the same book, so your reference then about the advocate was chapter 2 in the beginning. And this is chapter 5, and by the way, just above this almost the last verse of the book, it talks about those who have the Son also have eternal life.

And John says, I've written these things to you who believe in the name of the only, of Jesus, in order that you may know that you have eternal life. So, there's a very strong statement of security that's made there before this kind of unusual final parting salvo at the end of the book is made. And so, again, I think we have plenty of reason when you take the book as a whole, the internal evidence that Christians have safety and whatever is going on here does not relate to the safety, the eternal safety of the Christians, since that is secured with promises that are very, very clear.

No one can snatch us out of his hand. I mean, that's what it says. There's nothing that we can do to not receive forgiveness.

And I will say that I just want to add, I don't think, I don't get any sort of sense from the unforgivable sin passage that the reason why they won't be forgiven is that they'll come to him and ask forgiveness, and he'll refuse it. I don't think we need to assume that's what it is. I think it's that they're not asking for forgiveness.

I know we covered this, but I just wanted to say that last bit one more time. All right, Greg, I'm going to throw one. Sometimes I have shorter questions in here that last for a while, and I keep, you know, we never get to them.

So, I'm just going to get to this one. This one comes from Rob. How would you respond to the following quote from Mark Twain, but who prays for Satan, who in 18 centuries has had the common humanity to pray for the one center that needed it most? Well, this is Mark Twain.

So Mark Twain, Samuel Clemens was very hostile to Christianity, first of all. And so it's

hard to know whether we should take this seriously. All right.

Satan is irredeemable. We have a clear statement from scripture, what God's purpose is regarding Satan and what his ultimate end is. So if we have a sovereign purpose of God that has explained his scripture, it makes no point to try to pray against it.

God has already decided, and if you're not sure, just read Revelation 20. And we have a clear statement there. So it isn't as if prayer for Satan is going to help.

He is not redeemable isn't even on the list. And I think this kind of challenge is more not, it's worse than tongue in cheek, but it's, I don't think he's being serious, but he is taking a serious shot at Christianity. There's also no opportunity for redemption.

There's no redeemer for angels. So even if, you know, even if he were to repent, which he's not going to, and there's no sense that any of the fallen angels will repent, there's no way back for the angels. That's why I'm trying to remember where it is.

Oh gosh, I can't remember which book it is, but someone talks about how the angels long to look into these things. They love looking at the gospel because that wasn't offered to their fallen fellow creatures. It's something amazing that God did for us.

So maybe that's taking it too seriously, but I think you're right, Greg. I don't think he meant for that to be taken seriously. All right.

Thank you so much, James and khaki and Rob. We appreciate hearing from you. We'd love to hear from you.

Go to X with the hashtag STRask or you can go to our website at str.org. This is Amy Hall and Greg Coco for Stand to Reason.