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Aren't Good Non-Christians Evidence That God Isn't Required to Live a Moral Life?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about how to respond to someone who says the existence of good non-Christians is evidence that God isn't required to live a satisfying, moral life, whether God can save someone convicted of treason, and when it's time to leave a church that promotes itself more than it exalts God.

* How do you respond to an atheist or agnostic young person who knows kind, loving non-Christians and believes that's evidence that God isn't required to be transformed to live a satisfying, moral life?

* Can God save someone convicted of treason by the government?

* When is it time to leave a church that spends more time promoting itself in the worship service than exalting God?

Transcript

[Music] I'm Amy Hall with me it's Greg Koukl and you're listening to Stand to Reason's #STRaskpodcast. Good morning, Amos. Good morning, Greg.

Alright, let's start with a question from Paige. How do you respond to an atheist or agnostic young person who knows very quote good non-Christians who are kind, loving family members and good citizens and believes that's evidence that it's not God that is required to be transformed to live a satisfying moral life? I don't know any aspect of Christian theology that suggests that a regenerate people can't live a satisfying life and also can't perform acts of goodness. In fact, this notion goes all the way back to Thomas Aquinas and all the way back to Augustine.

This acknowledgement that humans made the image God are certainly capable of these kinds of things. That's not the question. Though I can see how it would be a difficulty, especially when someone's comparing a person who claims to be Christian and their

moral behavior with a person who is not a Christian and their own moral behavior.

Now, C.S. Lewis talks about this at length. I think he does it in mere Christianity. And he says, "The comparison, the appropriate comparison is not between the Christian and the non-Christian.

The appropriate comparison is between the Christian BC and the same Christian AD. That's the appropriate comparison." Lewis points out some people just have personalities that are more pleasant and more easygoing and less vulnerable to the kinds of sins that are visible to everyone else. This is why the testimony of Christianity is that the Holy Spirit is given and regenerates the individual Christian so that individual Christian can go from where they're at and embark on a sanctified life.

But where individual people start is going to be different. And so one individual Christian could be starting at a much nastier place than one individual non-Christian. And so the Christian who then becomes regenerate may have a long way to go to pass up, in a sense, the visible virtue of the non-Christian person.

That's the key comparison. All those points were all those comments from me regarding one side of this equation. And the one side of the equation is what we see.

Now you've got another side of an equation. And that is actually the most important one. If a person is advancing the gospel so that here is what Jesus will do for you, he'll make you nicer.

And today, well, that isn't an element in a single preachment in the book of Acts. And this is these are the people who Jesus personally trained to take the gospel after them. And we're not focusing on what we get on our side, like be nicer people.

They were focusing on the liability that we have as sinners before God. And even the nicest person by our standards is still deeply and profoundly guilty by God's standards. Okay.

Now think of the two great commandments. Jesus gave these two great commandments on purpose, not just to inform a way of summing up the whole law, but also to demonstrate the in-capability of anyone, even the nicest person keeping it. And so, I love the Lord your God with your whole heart, mind, soul and strength, which 49 years and three weeks as a Christian, I have never done for a split second in my Christian life.

And love your neighbor as yourself and then he clarifies your neighbor's your biggest enemy, Samaritan example. And so I think sometimes I've done that, but not very often. In other words, my life is consistently a life of sin, even as nice as some people think that I've become after 49 years of God working on me.

They don't know about my interior life. They don't know about my thoughts. They don't

know about that kind of stuff.

I'm aware how every single day, how much I need the Jesus Christ who constantly intercedes for me, thankfully, as my high priest. So this is the other side that people don't see, and that is the, they think, well, let me back up and put it this way. If you say, you know, if you make this point to people who are really great, nice, well, I'm no Hitler.

Well, you're right. That's good. One was enough.

But you know Jesus, either. And Jesus is the standard, not Hitler, or any of your friends. The standard is Jesus.

You are to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect. By the way, that's just before Jesus said, I mean, just after Jesus said in Matthew 5, do not commit murder. Oh, didn't do that.

Do you ever call your brother a fool? Of course you're going to hell. Don't commit adultery. But didn't do that.

Do you ever think about it? You're going to hell. That's Jesus. That's the standards of the law.

So there is not a single living person, no matter how a single person, no matter how righteous they may seem, compared to some regenerate Christian, they are still completely lost in their sins. And the simplest way to see this is just start running down the 10 commandments. Oh, these are really nice people.

Did they ever put something before God in their life? Of course, they don't even believe in God. Oh, they violated the first commandment. Okay.

I mean, just in that honoring the father and mother, lying, stealing, adultery, and as Jesus pointed out, murder a lot of these things entailed the attitude of the heart. No, our hearts are deceitfully wicked. And as Jeremiah says, our iniquities like the wind carry us away.

That's true of the nicest person we know. Greg, what you have stated in various ways here is that this atheist or agnostic young person has completely missed the point of Christianity. They've bought into the idea of the moralistic therapeutic deism idea that Christian without the deism without the idea that the whole point of Christianity is for us to be transformed to live a satisfying moral life.

That's their understanding. Now, shame on the church for propagating this idea. And I think there are, unfortunately, a lot of Christians who think this is the point of Christianity.

So someone said this to me, I would, I think I would say, I'm not sure I'm not sure I

understand your point. What is your understanding of what Christianity is for? And have them explicitly explain what they're saying here implicitly, and that is to make us a good person. By the way, doesn't Lewis have a chapter in mere Christianity called Nice People or New Creatures? Something to that effect.

I can't remember, but I probably read it. I think it is. Nice people are new creatures.

You know, and he talks about the good infection and how something has meant to transform us. And then he makes the point about comparing the Christian to the way Christian that Christian was before he became regenerate, not comparing it to some other person who maybe was born Nice. Yeah.

So I would make them, you know, make them, I would ask them to be explicit about what they think Christianity is for. And obviously, we are being transformed so that we will bear fruit for God. That's, that is one of the things that, you know, happens in the new birth.

However, the point of Christianity is to reconcile us to God. And that involves forgiveness of our sins, removal of our guilt, and enjoying the company of God, being with God. And they've completely left God out of this.

As if God were a tool to bring about- Make us nicer. To make us nicer. So they've inverted here the point.

They've said, "I don't need God as a tool to make me nice." When the point of Christianity is not that God is a tool for some other purpose, the point of Christianity is God. We want to be reconciled to Him. We want to return to Him.

We want to have our guilt removed. We want to have everything forgiven. So for the purpose of being with God, and they've missed that entire point.

So I think if someone came to me with this, I would try and help them understand that the point of Christianity ultimately is to enjoy God forever. Incidentally, I saw a statistic sometime, which is really, I mean I didn't follow through, but it strikes me as entirely believable. Something like 70% of the people in America believe in hell.

And almost none of them think they're going there. That's it. Well, and this goes back to the idea that we are just comparing ourselves to other people.

I know I've mentioned this- I'm a good person. I know I've mentioned this on the show before, but two things I think about all the time. One of them is a study that was done among prisoners to find out if they were good at evaluating their goodness.

Turns out they're not. They all thought they were good people. And that's what we're doing.

We're not comparing ourselves to criminals. You mean criminals? Yes. We're comparing themselves to each other.

We're comparing ourselves to ourselves. And incidentally, this is why the Pharisees wanted to kill Jesus. Because in comparison, they realized they were not wholly compared to Jesus.

And whenever they were around someone who was truly good, they had to get rid of him. Because then that was revealing their own sin. The other thing I think about is when Adolf Eichmann, who was the architect of the final solution for Hitler- Yeah, one of them, yeah.

He was put on trial and he said he didn't feel guilty. Right, right. Now, if it's possible for him not to feel guilty about that, just imagine what we don't feel guilty for that we ought to feel guilty for.

He was the second lieutenant to Reinhard Hadra, who was really the top of the notch. But he got assassinated fortunately by partisans. And anyway, that's another issue.

There are a lot of nasties right up there at the top. You're right. And feel guilty, right.

It's interesting. I just read this. I sent the email at home in front of me just to the guys yesterday.

Because over the weekend, when we had reality in Seattle, there was a progressive or actually deconstructed Christian who said, "Now that I don't believe in God, I have tremendous sense of freedom. I don't have shame. I don't have anguish.

I don't have guilt. I do what I want, when I want, how I want it. What a tremendous sense of freedom it is." Okay.

And that was kind of a paraphrase, but that was certainly the spirit of it. I don't know if you saw that slide or not. Okay.

And then I turned to something in Richard Wormbrand's book, *Torture for Christ*, the Romanian pastor who brutally tortured. And one of the guards said, "I think the God I do not believe in, that now I have the freedom to live out all of the hatred in my heart." And then Wormbrand describes him as one of the most brutal tortures that were there. Now what's interesting to me is that both of those quotes are exactly the same.

That is, both are saying, "I am free from any external restraint. I get to do what I want." Now maybe this deconstructed Christian, a deconverted Christian will follow what we consider a more noble person. It is a more noble path, but it can't be more noble from an atheistic perspective because there is no objective moral grounding in atheism.

And it turned out that the Romanian persecutor, torturer, had the same sense of liberty

and freedom without God. He just used it to follow some other aspect of his own nature. But the move was exactly the same.

And no atheist has any grounds to object to what that Romanian torturer did and the path that he chose in light of his atheism. And I can't remember how we even got on this topic, but except that it relates to the idea that we are not able to tell how good we are and we're not able to save ourselves. So, okay, Greg, here's kind of a related question from Casey Larson.

Can God save someone convicted of treason by the government? Can they be forgiven and go to heaven? Well, this, maybe you could see my, I have a furrowed brow here like I don't understand this question. The crimes against the government and the crimes against God are, they are two different categories, okay? And some things that are in a sense universal crimes against God may not be universal crimes, may not, let me back up, crimes against the government may not reflect a universal moral requirement from God other than that we are supposed to provisionally obey the government lathors above us. That's not an absolute provisional.

So, I remember when George Bush, the second, was governor of Texas and there was an inmate who had committed a brutal murder, a woman, and she had become a Christian. And so she made an appeal for clemency from the death penalty because now her life has been changed. And what George Bush said was, I think, sound and wise.

He said, "God has his court and I have mine." God may decide to forgive in his court and he will may for his reasons because of Jesus. But that doesn't mean that any governor has to then forgive the crime that has been committed against the people of the state. And I think he's right.

Caesar does not bear the sword for nothing. I think it was Paul who said that. And so the state has an obligation to execute justice and sometimes that justice is execution, which is why he used the metaphor of the sword or made the reference to the sword.

Okay, Paul says, I'd rather not refuse to die if I did anything illegal. I just didn't do anything illegal. You know, I'm not worthy of death because there's no crime worthy of death.

So that God forgives in his court is one issue whether or not the state forgives in their court is another. Now the state has no obligation to forgive any crime against them. They can exact the punishment that's appropriate for the crime.

God, on the other hand, is willing to forgive any crime given the turning to him in the request of mercy. So in God's court, a repented person that is a person who returns and sorrow for a sin to God receives the forgiveness that God offers regardless of the crime. It could be murder, Paul was guilty of murder.

He oversaw the murder of Christians. He calls himself the greatest of sinners as a result. And murder, self murder, which is suicide, abortion, which is another form of murder, all of these things are forgivable in God's court.

If Jesus came to cancel out sin, how can any sin cancel out Jesus? So this is what I want people to realize. This isn't licensed to sin, of course, but it is. It is a proper understanding of the nature of forgiveness that God offers.

The state, you might be a traitor in your state and suffer the death penalty. That hasn't happened for a long time with bonafide traders of the US of A who become social figures of great note as a result. But if the state decides to execute the traitor, that traitor can still be forgiven in God's court.

I was just looking up the passage where Paul talks about being the greatest sinner. It's 1 Timothy 1 16. And he says the reason why God saved him was so that he would be an example so that people would know that they could be saved.

If Paul can be saved, anyone can be saved. The greatest of sinners. By the way, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was also hung for treason.

So he had violated it, but what he did wasn't wrong in God's court, not in my view, trying to depose Hitler. So just because a state considers an act of treasonous doesn't mean that that act is wrong in God's court. That's another wrinkle.

Right. Yeah. So that's true.

And even if it were the case that it was a terrible sin, God can still forgive. I think this is really important to understand. And so, Casey, I don't know if you were asking this for someone else or for yourself, but any sin can be forgiven by Jesus.

And Paul talks about how where sin abounded, grace abounded all the more, not that we're supposed to sin, as you said, but it is greater than any sin that we could commit. All right, Greg, let's do one more. This one comes from Drew.

When is it time to leave a church? My church seems to spend more time promoting itself in the worship service than exalting God. I am plugged in as a Sunday school teacher, but the worship service is really bothering me. Well, I'm not exactly sure what that looks like and I probably want to ask more questions.

And if it only happens in the worship service, as opposed to the teaching and the other ways that the church comes across to people, then that may not be prohibitive. That might just be an annoyance. I've been to churches where I've stayed for a long time and I haven't cared for the worship that much, you know, but it wasn't because of self-agred dicement, you know, that wasn't the reason.

I remember visiting a new church and we were greeted at the door and it was one that my daughter wanted us to go and consider going to, because she liked the youth group there. We said, "Hi to people. Well, this is our first time here." And he said, "Oh, great.

Well, we're a spirit-filled church here in our community. We're a spirit-filled church." And to me, that was just a total put down on other churches. Like, we've got the spirit.

We don't know about all those characters down the street, but we're the ones who got the spirit. I knew immediately, well, let's put it this way. This was a very bad sign.

And after I sat through the service, there were a whole bunch of other things that kind of followed that were added on to that concern. And to me, that was self-aggrandizing in a very inappropriate way and at the expense of the churches. And so, plus the word "spirit-filled," I mean, this is a, usually it's a very, they mean a very, in a very theologically constrained way or narrow kind of fashion.

It was just bad. So the question is, when do I leave this church? And if you are in a church that you cannot respect the leadership for whatever reason and you just don't respect them, then these are leaders that you're, to some measure, to submit to. And it's probably a good idea to find another church.

Of course, we've often said, you know, there's no perfect church. And if you're following one, they won't let you join or me join, you know, because we'll mess it up. But every church has its flaws, no question.

But when you have, if you're, if you can, when you go to church, you're consistently critical of some significant aspect of the church. It's probably a good idea to change. Even if you're teaching in Sunday school, you know.

And I think, Drew, the first thing I would do before you leave is go talk to them, because maybe whatever it is that's bothering you. And again, you're right, Greg, it's not entirely clear what is meant by promoting itself. But I would talk to the leadership first and see what's behind what they're doing, find out if maybe there's something that can change.

Now, what you described, Greg, I think is a really bad sign, and that can show up in different ways. So, for example, I've been in churches before where they've constantly said things like, now our church is safe, and everything in our bookstore is safe, but we can't, you know, other churches, they're not safe. And there was this kind of turning inward where it became almost cultish, and then everybody, it became a cult of personality.

And, you know, this happened to a church I visited a few times, and I realized there's something really weird going on here. So, if that's what you're talking about, that's a bad sign for a whole bunch of things in leadership. But if it's something that maybe they're just talking about their programs or trying to get people, you know, giving all these

announcements and spending time on that, that's something that could be changed if you talk to the pastors there.

And it can also, that would you just describe, just could be kind of a unavoidable annoyance. I mean, this is part of what churches do, try to let people know what they're doing, and here is our body life. Here are the particulars, and if that's all that is, that's just a way of informing people.

But I will say, if they're not exalting God, if you're leaving there, and all people are thinking about is how great the church is, and people aren't thinking about God, that is a big problem. And that will wear you out, because you are there to worship God, and to see God, and to know God. If that's not happening, then you might have to leave.

But again, it's hard to evaluate. Hopefully those will give you some things to look for, and then you can make a decision based on that. I mean, the fact that he's making a contribution that Sunday School is valuable, and that needs to be factored in.

But these all kind of have different weights for different people. It in lot depends on how bad it actually is, which we don't know. There is something to be said for staying at the same church for a long period of time and building up roots and having communities, so don't throw that away unless you really have to.

But if there's something as serious going on that can't be fixed, then you might have to consider it. But it should not be our first... I don't think we should leave as easily as some people do leave. I was 25 years in my first church.

They changed pastors more than before they changed me. In other words, my pastors rotated out before I rotated out. Thanks for sending in your questions.

If you go to Twitter, you can send your question in with the hashtag #STRSK. Or you can go through our website, just go to our podcast page, find #STRSK. And you'll see a link there that you can use to ask us a question.

We look forward to hearing from you. This is Amy Hall and Greg Cockel for Stand to Reason.

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