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Do Imprecatory Prayers Violate New Testament Commands?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Question about whether praying an imprecatory prayer like Psalm 5 today would violate the New Testament commands to “put aside all anger,” to “forgive or you won’t be forgiven,” and to “bless and not curse.”

* If imprecatory prayers like Psalm 5 are allowable today, how does that square with the command in Colossians 3:8 that we are to “put aside all anger,” the command to “forgive or you won’t be forgiven” in Matthew 6:15, and the command in Romans 12:14 to “bless and not curse”?

Transcript

[Music] You're listening to this Stand to Reason? #STRask. I got a kind of a slow start there, Greg. Sorry about that.

All right. Good morning. Good morning.

I think because I'm already thinking about this first question here. In the last episode, we talked a lot about God's justice. And originally, I was going to talk about this question also.

But we took the whole time. So if you haven't heard that yet, go back and listen to that one. That's probably going to be a lot of the foundation for this one.

This question, Greg, is pretty complicated. And there are different parts to it. I'm going to have to explain a little bit of it because he sent in a second tweet to explain his first one.

So I'll give you the first one as it is, and then I'll give a little explanation. He says, "Should Christians pray in prechatory prayers like Psalm 5 today? If such prayers of curse are allowable, how is that loving? How does that square with the command in Colossians 3 8 that we must put aside all such anger? Shouldn't we forgive wicked rulers and governance if we want to be forgiven?" And as he notes, we did talk about imprecatory

Psalms. I can't believe it was this long ago because it seems like much more recently, but it was in December 28 of 2020.

So it was a while ago. It was because we had a year and a two years almost that just disappeared somehow. Everybody has the same feeling about those years.

Where did they go? So he responds saying, "Yes, you somewhat answered some of my questions in previous shows that touched on imprecatory prayers. I think particularly the part about should we pray these Psalms today." But he says, "I'm still interested in the last two questions." And his last two questions were, "How does that square with the command in Colossians that we must put aside all such anger? Shouldn't we forgive wicked rulers and governance if we want to be forgiven?" So he says, "He's interested in those last two questions. Given Matthew 6 15, forgive, or else you won't be forgiven?" And Romans 12, 14 saying, "Bless and do not curse." So how can we pray imprecatory Psalms? Yeah, there's a lot going on here.

And like many of our perceptive questions, insightful questions like this one, there are a number of different strands that need to be untangled. And first of all, I was a little surprised at the reference to Psalm 5 because I don't see Psalm 5 as an imprecatory prayer, a psalm rather. Imprecatory Psalms is when the psalmist expresses anger and hostility toward someone and asks God to do terrible things to them.

Okay, like, "Dash their children's heads against the rocks." Now, my understanding, of course, is that is exactly what those people who he's praying against, probably David in that case, had done to the Jewish children and he's saying, "God, return that upon them." Psalm 5 doesn't have anything like that. It does say the boastful shall not stand before your eyes. You hate all who do in equity.

You destroy those who speak falsehood. You abhor the man of bloodshed into seed. So, this expresses God's anger against those people, not the one who's praying the anger that person has, but there are other verses like that.

So, I'm not going to pick about Psalm 5, but imprecatory Psalms are praying for bad things to happen to other people. Okay, and, characteristically, the way those are taken is these are emotions. It's a way of emoting and expressing anger and hostility towards evil and those who do the evil and that the one who's praying is not actually asking God to smash little children.

Okay, that's generally the way they're taken. All right. And I actually would not feel comfortable praying and imprecatory prayer like that, although these are people inspired by God.

Now, keep in mind, when people are inspired by God, they're writing their own things and their own feelings and emotions. It doesn't necessarily mean that God is approving

of all those things that are being written. You know, records what happens, but in any event, I think when one considers the genre, this is poetry, and these are the kinds of things that are said in poetry, the poetic fashion and not meant to be taken literally, but meant to express an emotion or whatever, I think that helps us then to understand and position imprecatory Psalms.

Now, for me, I don't feel like I can pray that against other people. I even when and I'm probably not unique in this, I'm a human being, you have bad people do evil things and especially if you are non-Christian for a long time before you become Christian, like me, you want to you want to damn them. You know, you just want to express that regard.

And then I think about, oh man, when you realize what the wrath of God entails, I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy, you think for a little bit about what the eternal wrath of God hell, any of that, that's so awful that I wouldn't wish that on anybody. So I could not bring myself to pray something like that. But I will tell you something that I heard us Guinness say once in a talk, and I understand it now.

So if you have children listening, I'm just going to use the GED phrase here. So you may want to guard their ears or something, but it's the way he used it in the talk that I want you to understand. Okay.

And what he was saying in the talk was that, was that sometimes you behold things so evil that the only response that comes to mind isn't here's the phrase. So my apologies, but he this is what he said. He said, the thing that comes to mind is you want to say, God damn it.

Now he's not using it as an expletive like, oh rats, you know, kind of expression. That's the way it's usually used. It's an expression of desire for God to bring judgment on evil.

God judge that. It's so bad. It's so awful.

That should not be. And I think of things I know John noise does the suicide talk for us at our realities. And he hears horrendous stories of things that happen to children by their parents, what they're said told that make them suicidal.

And he hears these and he's able to bring comfort and perspective and whatever to help them and save their lives, literally save their lives. But you hear these things and you think how could anyone ever say that to their own children, you know, and this is then you feel the urge that is expressed in prectory Psalms. I would never pray that.

Okay. Just because I just, you know, so I'm not encouraging anybody to pray like that. But I think it's fair to be completely honest before God about the unrighteousness that we see and the the the absolute debauchery, the evil, the wickedness, the darkness and the damage it brings to image bearers in their lives.

It's right to be really angry about that. Now that's, you know, so then this transition out to the New Testament statements. Okay.

Forgive. Well, we are to forgive people who harm us. We aren't just to blanket forgive the whole world.

Like, okay, well, that's okay. That's okay. Okay.

Okay. Okay. I'm not gonna say that's okay.

That's fine. I'm just dismissing that. No, that's not what forgiveness is even in a personal sense.

If someone commits a crime against somebody else, we don't forgive that person because the person hasn't committed a crime against us. He owes us nothing. There's no debt towards us.

Forgiveness is a release of a debt. So God wants us to be forgiving. And I think also the New Testament does qualify the circumstances.

If a person, you know, repents, confesses, repents, should we forgive seven times? 70, 70 times seven, Jesus said. So, so the notice that there's some conditions in there. I don't want to get into that detail.

But the point I'm making is the the command to forgive is regarding people who wrong us personally. Okay. And so we don't forgive Hitler.

Hitler Hitler was an evil man who ought to be punished by God and is being punished by God and to desire that is not wrong. And it's not exemplifying a lack of forgiveness because I own no forgiveness to Hitler. Now, Corey Tenboom was, you know, in Raven's book or one of those concentration camps and she, you know, survived and experienced terrible things at the hands of guards, for example, and she met one of those guards after the war.

And she realized she needed to forgive that man. And I don't know all the details of it, but this was noticed though in that particular case, it was an individual who had brought harm to her personally. And that was the circumstance under which forgiveness was required.

One last thing, and I know you have more to say about this too. And I want to hear what you have to say, Amy, but there is the verse that talks about putting anger aside. Okay.

And I think this needs to be qualified too. There are circumstances of righteous anger where we are appropriate for us to be angry. Jesus was angry.

And in fact, when he was just about to raise Lazarus, the text describes him being, it

says he was disturbed, deep in his spirit. He was angry is what he was. He snorted.

I think it's like an animal snorch when it's angry, you know, and so, but that wasn't a sin. If we are consumed by anger, it's very damaging to us who are not to be those kind of people. And we are to resolve issues.

Don't let the sun go down on your anger. So we are to take these things and resolve them. And this is why frankly, I don't watch the news.

I don't watch it. I don't read it. You know, I do get some things that are relevant, I think, for what I do.

But news makes you angry. You cannot watch the news without getting angry, you know, because if it bleeds, it leads. And so I don't watch the news.

And there's a lot of other reasons too, because it's so selective. And they tell you what they think is important. No one really is important.

Then they spin it and blah, blah, blah, blah. But it's just emotionally healthy not to engage in those activities that consistently make you angry. And so I think those are the kinds of things that are that the the apostle is getting at when he writes, you know, be angry at don't sin or put a side anchor.

And sometimes in relationships, there's a lot of anger. And that's something we have to work at. Husbands don't be bitter towards your wives.

Okay, don't be a bitter towards them. There's a reason somebody might be a bitter towards somebody else. And if you dwell on that and stir that up, that's just going to be bad for your soul.

So these are some of, I think the nuances regarding this broader issue. I think it takes a lot of wisdom and understanding to try and put all of this together, which is why I recommend people go back and hear what we said about justice, because I think it's there are some things going on here that have to do with the words anger and forgiveness and the word justice, because there's a difference between anger and a desire for justice, although they could be they're not exactly the same thing always. And there are some people whose role is to bring about justice, not to forgive.

So for example, with with a government, the government's job is not to forgive people. The government's job is to bring about justice. Okay, so I'm just laying a foundation here of some of the things that are going on.

So we wouldn't pray that or we wouldn't desire for the government to let people off the hook. Okay, so we have to start with the idea that justice is a good thing and that forgiveness and getting rid of anger is something we do personally, but not something

we want the government to do. So this is the starting point here for what I'm about to say.

Now, it's very interesting to me, because there are a few verses that I think help us to really understand how we put these things together. And they just happen to be very close to the verses that he gave. And I think he could have gone with any with other verses, but it's interesting to me that he went with these, because I think they're connected and hopefully this will help him to understand.

And the idea I want to bring about will start with the Romans 12 1, because he wants to know how can you bless and not curse and still put aside all anger and that sort of thing. And Paul actually explains to us how we can do that specifically. So he starts in verse 14 with that verse of Daniel sites, bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse.

Okay, now go down to verse 17, never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the side of all men. If possible so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.

And now we come to the key verse, I think, never take your own revenge beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God for it is written, vengeance is mine, I will repay says the Lord. But if your enemy is hungry, feed him and if he is thirsty, give him a drink for in so doing, you will heat burning coals on his head. And so what we see here is that God is actually grounding the fact that we are blessing in his justice against evil.

In other words, we are free to show grace towards people because we're counting on God's justice, because we know that this person is not going to get away with anything. Every time God shows justice, I mean, shows grace, it is backed by justice. Every single time you look at the cross, God showing grace to us, but he's backing that with fulfilled justice.

He never gives grace at the expense of justice. And I think this is key to what how we have to think about this. It's okay for us to pray for justice and to want justice.

If there if there are evil people out there, it's okay for us to pray that God will bring about justice and the government will bring about justice. And many times as this chapter goes on to say, or it might be in 13, yes, it's in the very, the verse is following. The government is the actual tool by which God brings about justice.

So it's in this world, in this world, in this world. So even blessing and not cursing doesn't mean not not prosecuting people who have broken the law. That is the government's job.

It's not the government's job to forgive. It's a government's job to bring about justice. So there's a sense in which we can request justice, ask God for justice, and pray for justice, and turn around and bless and do not curse.

It is both happening because we have different roles here. And our role as individuals is to bless and to not curse, even as we are counting on God, bringing about justice as this verse says. Now let's go to the Colossians one by the way, the cursing there are, I mean, I'm curious about this before you move on.

The cursing is an act of retribution against the person. It isn't an expression of hostility and anger in light of what was done. I mean, maybe not clear the difference here, but in one you're going, ah, you know, that's awful.

I wish, whatever, you're expressing your emotions about it. The other one is you're in vaying against them. You were doing evil against them by cursing.

And in the culture then, placing a curse on somebody was doing something to them. It wasn't just expressing your displeasure like cursing. Like we use the word curse now when we use inappropriate language about something we saw as cursing.

But cursing then was to put a curse on someone, invoke bad to happen to them. And what the apostle is saying, don't invoke bad to happen to them. God will do the, do the justice.

God will get that done. And that's the point you're making. So I just wanted to bring some clarity to that concept of cursing.

And notice that that is what enables us to do it because we don't have to, God doesn't want us to feel like we are cheating people out of justice. That's never going to happen. That this is what frees us.

And we see the same thing in Colossians. Now he mentioned Colossians 3-8 that talks about putting aside anger. But then he says, let's see, he gives the same kind of concept when he's talking to slaves.

And he says, slaves in all things. And this is verse 22. "Obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, as those who merely please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord.

Whatever you do, do your work hardly as for the Lord rather than for men. Knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve." Now he grounds this.

Here's how he grounds this. For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done and that without partiality. So how is it that these slaves are to continue to serve well and bless and not curse even when they're wronged? Because God will bring about justice.

That is why. That is how we do this. That is how all of these things fit together.

There's a role for the government. There's a role for God. And there's a role for us.

And our role right now is to bless and to not curse, to not to stop the government from bringing about justice, but to pray for justice, to pray for God to bring about justice, to work for justice in the government. But in our personal lives and in our response we bless and do not curse. And then the final verse that comes to mind about this is in 1 Peter 2 when it talks about Jesus doing this.

Jesus committed no sin nor was any deceit found in his mouth. And while being reviled, he did not revile in return. While suffering, he uttered no threats.

And now he comes to the first. But kept entrusting himself to him who judges righteously. So why was Jesus blessing and not cursing? Because that was grounded in his knowledge that the Father will judge righteously.

I love the RX of that passage. I mean, I've had to go back to, I know this passage because I've gone back to it so often, but entrusting himself to him who judges righteously. And chapter four ends in a similar way in 1 Peter.

When you suffer according to the will of God and trust yourself to a faithful creator and doing what is right. Yeah, the whole so much of the book, and I know we've talked about this on the show before, so hopefully people aren't getting bored. But the whole thing in 1 Peter is about responding with right actions in response to being hurt and response to being persecuted.

And again, this is all grounded in God's justice. So first of all, I justice is good. So prayers for justice are good.

There's nothing wrong with that at all. I don't think that conflicts with putting aside anger. And it can't conflict with that because that's the grounds that Paul gives for our putting aside anger.

And so I think that's how these two things fit together. And I don't think it's an easy thing to think through. No, you're right.

It isn't. I think of what former President George Bush, when he was governor of Texas, something that he said, because there was a woman on death row who committed a heinous murder who became a Christian in prison. And the appeal to the president was to commute her sentence because now she's a believer and God has forgiven her, which is true, given the genuine, it was a genuine conversion.

Right. But George Bush said this. He said, God has his court, and I have mine.

God can forgive in his court, but I have to execute the justice appropriate for my station. I mean, there's one of his exact words, but except for that, God has his court and I have

mine, you know. And that was, I thought that was very insightful and a very short characterization of the thing we've been talking about here, at least with regards to how God works justice out in the government.

So now his final point here, shouldn't we forgive wicked rulers and governance if we want to be forgiven? And in this case, I think, first of all, as you mentioned, Greg, I think there's the pattern we see in scripture is that people are forgiven when they repent. So has the government repented and turned and started to be just? Then yes, you should forgive. I mean, there are all sorts of examples of our government doing evil things.

I mean, just think about slavery. The government turned the government now prevents slavery from happening in our country. That is repentance on the part of the government.

And we, I don't think we should continue to be unforgiving. Right. By the way, even individuals in government, when Ronald Reagan was governor of California, imagine that, by the way, the he was pro abortion.

And he had a change of heart about that, that radically influenced the rest of his political career, especially as president. So there's an individual who held one view that was obscene and then repented of that view and changed his view. And also a government isn't an individual either.

So that makes us a little bit odd. It's an institution and the purpose of the institution is to do justice. So if there's a government that is unjust, like say, the Nazi government, I mean, and every government has something unjust about it because we're fallen and we're not doing everything perfectly, but we should work to change that.

You don't just ignore it because that's the instrument God has to bring about justice. So this isn't quite the same as dealing with the people in your life or interacting with people. Sometimes you have to oppose it.

That was the American Revolution, for example. Right. So if the, if a government turns from injustice and they do justice, then obviously you move on.

If a government is not acting the way that it was created to act and it's being unjust and it's not doing the job it's supposed to do, that's when we cry out for, for God to, to bring about his justice. That's when we work to bring about a just government. So I don't think that's quite false.

By the way, there are a lot of Psalms like that too, not imprecatory Psalms, strictly speaking, but Psalms that cry out for God to rescue Israel from its enemies and from the injustice that's done. And sometimes it's because the enemies are sent by God to discipline the Jews and David is saying, or the Psalmist is saying, okay, we've had enough, we've had enough. We turn to you, please relent.

Moses did that too with God. When God was bringing justice on the Jews. So to sum up, Greg, you said you don't think you would ever pray a curse on someone like we would see in the Old Testament? No, I would not.

I would not say those kinds of things that were expressed. I, you know, I guess there have been times when I have, you know, very privately expressed those things in anger towards bad things, but I have to apologize to God for it, you know, say, that's not a right attitude, God, I'm sorry, but it's not a right attitude. So I have to address that.

When it happens, let's put it this way, when anything like that happens, I realize that I'm on a line and I have to address that my attitude, you know, I think there's probably a sense that we have now as Christians, a deeper sense of the grace that was given to us that makes that maybe hopefully maybe that makes us more likely to have that sense that you described of I don't want to wish that on anyone. There's also a sense of and I know I deserve that. So I don't really want to call for it.

When Christians for said something like that, forgive as, you know, you have been forgiven or something to that effect. There's more than one place in the New Testament that makes that point. And I think so the justice that the grace that we've received, I think does color the way that we respond to evil now in a lot of ways.

The knowledge of our grace and the knowledge of what we deserved and not receiving that makes us less likely to pray for others to receive that. I think about the man who owed money and he got forgiven all that money and then he turns around and he demands money. So hopefully people know what I just described.

It's a parable Jesus told. And the person who's forgiven much that was not willing to forgive a little to someone else that really made, you know, the God character in the parable really angry soul. So I think that does color the way that we respond to evil.

But there's nothing wrong with praying for justice and crying out for justice ultimately. So hopefully that gives you some things to think about Daniel. And once again, we've done two episodes in a row with only one question.

Yeah. And Daniel had a few questions in there. So hopefully you all enjoyed that.

And we'll see you on the next episode of #STRAsk. This is Amy Hall and Greg Kolkle for Stand to Reason.

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