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If a Murderer Accepts Christ, Then Will His Victims Never Receive Justice?

December 8, 2022



#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about whether the victims of a murderer who later accepts Christ will never receive justice for their suffering and whether or not it can be said a person is “forgiven” if the debt was fully paid by another.

* If a murderer accepts Christ, then doesn't that mean his victims will never receive justice for their suffering?

* If Christ paid the price for our sin, then how can it be said we're “forgiven” since the debt has been fully paid by another and the obligation has been fulfilled?

Transcript

(upbeat music) (bell dings) - Welcome to Stanterereasons #STRSQ podcast. I'm Amy Hall and with me is Greg Cokol. - Hello Amos.

- Hello Greg. All right, Greg, let's start with a question from Kate Caesar. - All righty.

- My husband is not a believer. He claims if a murderer accepts Christ, his victims never receive justice for their suffering. I explained that God requires us to forgive as we are forgiven, but he sees heinous crimes like these as far worse than what the average person commits towards others.

- Well, this is one of those challenges, I think that's difficult to respond to in one sense because it falls under the category of an emotional objection. And we've talked in the past about different types of barriers people have to the truth of Christianity. One of them is rational, we deal with that a lot here.

Another's prejudicial, people don't wanna look at any options, they're locked down and got their blinders on. But a huge one is emotional and that is the objections that aren't to the substance, if you will, or to the facts or the evidence for the truth of a thing. The objection is coming from a kind of an emotional place.

And the way I can demonstrate this is by giving the answer to the problem, but it's not going to be satisfying. Okay, the answer is that when we look at each other's crimes, we can see a big difference between certain things that other people have done, like murderers, and things that we have done which aren't as bad, okay? However, when we back off and look from the perspective of the demands of a holy God, and that is complete obedience, and we look at every single area of our life and all of the particular things that according to God's standards, we have done wrong. And this includes not just our actions, but our inactions, and not just those things, but the motives that we have, regarding things we do, so we can do a good thing for a wrong motive, or we can do it in a wrong way.

And all of these things, it is very easy to feel like our crimes aren't that bad, that we are largely sanitized by comparison to somebody who's a terrible criminal. We look at them and I'm no Hitler. And actually I wrote about this in the story of reality.

I'm no Hitler. Well, good. (laughs) What was enough, you know? But you know Jesus either, and each of us is a lot more like Hitler than we are like Jesus.

And see, this is what people have a hard time comprehending. And I think the way I talked about it in the story of reality is that, you know, it's easy for us to look at these distinctions between people, that guy's really bad. How can he be let off? I can be forgiven for mine, but I got to small sins.

Until we start looking to have all the recesses of our lives, you know, in every nook and cranny, in every motivation, in every thought that comes into our mind. And it turns out, you know, that our heart is deceitful and wicked who can know it is what the prophet Jeremiah says. And the answer is that we can't know it.

We always give ourselves a break when we assess our own harms. It's natural to do that. I mean, it's part of our fallen condition.

And so instead of saying, like Paul did, I am the greatest of sinners, and God has showed mercy to me so that, to demonstrate that any of the lesser sinners, and he was a murderer, by the way. In other words, he oversaw the murder of Christians. And so that God would demonstrate his great grace towards Paul, that those lesser criminals can also be covered by the grace of God, okay? So what the objection amounts to is, I'm not as bad as that person.

If God forgives me, well, okay, that's understandable, but if God forgives that terrible sinner, that murderer, then that's not acceptable. And of course, there's a little bit of a justification there in the way the concern was expressed. Because the victims of the, the broader spectrum of victims when somebody's murdered, they're not getting justice, okay? Well, the one to get justice is the one who gets the crime done against him.

But I guess you could say there's a crime done against his loved ones too. They are getting justice. The justice is the justice that Jesus took on behalf of the terrible sinner that puts his trust in Jesus.

And if he doesn't put his trust in Jesus, then he pays himself. Somebody pays either Jesus pays or we pay. The irony is, people are, in general, I think, in principle happy to be forgiven of their own crimes, but then are upset when other people whose crimes they think are of a greater stature get the same forgiveness.

So anyway, that's the answer. There is justice that's done. The justice is done by Jesus, the same justice that is accomplished when all of our individual crimes are forgiven, including Kate's husbands, if he were to become a Christian, all of his crimes would be forgiven as well.

The justice is accomplished through Jesus. So he could be the just and the justifier of him who has faith in Christ, okay? The Romans, but when we start looking at other people, then we can raise an objection. So since this is an emotional objection, I don't know the best way to overcome it.

You know, I think of even people who are close to me in my own family who have challenges regarding Christianity and I realize that they're emotional. The most that I can do, and my RX is to live properly before them and secondly to pray hard for them. Because I'm not sure any other way to overcome some of these emotional objections because they are not tied to what is reasonable.

Anyway, I'm interested in your response to the same because I'm sure Kate is not the only one in the circumstance. And by the way, this is an objection that atheists have raised as well to Christianity. Ironically, ironically, because of an atheist raised the challenge of injustice, their alternative is no God, no justice to anyone anywhere.

- Well, also the interesting thing about atheists is many times they will throw this objection out and then later on they'll complain about God sending people to hell. So they want justice sometimes and then they use justice against God other times. So there's a lack of consistency sometimes with people.

But I would say if at least what he is saying is that he cares about justice, this is a place to start because I think God is a God of justice. And this is where you can help them to understand who God is because his objection, I think behind this, part of it is why would I follow a God who's not just? Why would I follow a God who doesn't punish evil? That's not a good God because he recognizes that good judges judge evil and they punish evil doers. That is a great place to start because that's who our God is.

Our God does not sweep evil under the rug, not even the slightest bit. And this is a beautiful thing about him. In fact, the Psalms are constantly glorifying God because of

his judgments against evil and sinners.

So starting from that point, you can agree. Yes, justice is an important, beautiful, good and right thing. I absolutely agree with you that this is an important thing.

So let's see, the reason why I think it's important is because God thinks it's important. You can read through the Bible. You can see how much he cares about what is right and about punishing evil.

It's throughout the Bible. It's at the end of the Bible, it's the culmination of everything. And then everywhere in between.

And then I think I would just point out that most people who have religious ideas, they'll do one of two things. Either they will say that God has no grace and then it's hopeless. Like you can't make it to him.

He can try and you can try and do certain things to get to him, but you never have that assurance. You never, you're never gonna be good enough. That's one direction people wouldn't take.

Or religions can say, God just welcomes everybody into heaven with him. And he just ignores all the evil. So now you have a God who's not just.

So if you ignore either justice or grace, there is absolute hopelessness for human beings. Either because even if he gives everyone a free pass, now he's not just. So and like her husband wants him to be just, we all want a just judge.

So with all that in mind, you look at the cross and it is the most brilliant solution to this whole thing. And this is why Romans three, I think it's one through 26. Seems like a lot, three.

That can't be right. One through 26, I think. Anyway, it might-- - That kind of covers a lot of ground.

So you're probably going to be safe with that reference. Anyway, it's my favorite passage because it talks about how because of the cross, God is just and justified. So and the one act he not only shows his hatred of sin and punishes sin, but he also shows grace because Jesus took this punishment for others.

So we see both of those things, both of those things are upheld. This is the way God can be gracious and not compromise on his justice. So the cross is the place where you can explain.

If you can make it clear that God is a God of justice and loves justice, he's good. And this is the solution he has. And yes, it's true that that person won't experience the punishment, but God has still expressed his wrath against that evil.

He's expressed the fact that that is wrong, that he hates it and he punishes it. And he's still able to offer grace without compromising the goodness of justice. - Well, that's a, now we know why you get the big bucks here, Amy, that's a great response added to what I had to say.

In fact, I just thought of a tactical spin on it. And that is in the conversation, Kate, that you can have with your husband. You could say something like, "Honey, it sounds to me like you really care about justice.

Is that right?" Yes, of course I do, okay. Explain to me what that in your own mind, what does that entail? Okay, notice these are questions. So this is the tactical spin and he'll probably say something about well, people do bad things should have to pay for them or something to that effect, or really bad things baby, but not so bad things, okay.

And I think the next question is, then what about for yourself at your own life, okay? So do you expect to get justice for the things that you've done wrong? Now this isn't meant to be an accusation, it's meant to be an application of his point, okay. And see what he says. Now I don't know, he might say, "Well, yeah, I do expect to get that." Or, "I'm not as bad as them, so I can be forgiven, but they can't be forgiven." Then another question is, and this goes to your second point, what's the place of mercy? What's the place of God's grace in this situation? Because the question isn't justice or mercy, the way the Christian worldview caches it out, it's both, okay.

There is justice and mercy that are provided. And so those questions might stimulate a conversation. Of course, they're meant to get, in my mind, to get Kate's husband thinking along the lines that you expressed, Amy, that we all need, we all deserve justice and we all want mercy, all right.

And hopefully this is a way of steering his thinking away from justice for others and not for me, and realizing if God is going to give mercy, he's not doing at the expense of justice, given our way of the biblical system, basically of resolving that. But he also does it in a way where mercy is available to even the greatest of sinners. - I looked up that passage, just 21 through 26.

I can always remember where it is on the page, but I can never remember the exact verses. One last thing I wanna add here, this idea when he brings up the idea that they're far worse than the average person. And this goes along with what you were just saying, Greg.

What he's saying is he wants to compromise justice a little bit. So there's another thing you could say, no, I don't think that's right. We should not compromise justice on you just because he's worse.

I don't wanna compromise justice for anyone. You're saying you wanna compromise it for

yourself, but not for others. And how is, if justice is good, justice is good.

You shouldn't be compromising it. And that reminds me, I've heard someone say before, complain about the fact that people can be forgiven because of the cross. And they say, oh, Christianity's just about what you believe, but I think God cares about behavior.

Well, the fact is Christians think God cares more about behavior than that person thinks God cares because we say he's not gonna overlook anything. Every bit of evil and sin will be punished. He cares perfectly about all behavior.

And that is bad news if there's no grace. But it's also good news because justice is good. So there's two sides to this that I don't wanna lose track of.

And at least he cares about justice. - It's a good place to start. - I would rather somebody come in from this direction than from the direction of, God should just let everybody off the hook.

Because now, at least if he loves justice, he loves something important to God, something that you can hang on to and say, this is who God is. But the other way, what kind of judge is that? That's just... - Well, that's what they deny. They deny the judge, you know, and they just want to make God into this avuncular kind old guy who's just, you know, boys will be boys kind of attitude.

I think it's the way CS loves to put it. - I think that's much harder to relate to, but then someone who loves justice. All right, along these same lines, Greg, here's a question from Nigel.

If Christ, quote, paid the price for our sin, literally took our punishment, then how can it be said we are forgiven? If the debt is paid by another, one is not forgiven it, but the obligation itself has been discharged by that other person. - Well, if I understand the question correctly, the notion of forgiveness is related to the discharge, okay? So here's how, here is the... - I think this kind of goes back to our prior discussion. If I'm understanding this question properly, if the debt is paid, then it's not really forgiven.

Forgiveness means you let it go without any payment. That's real forgiveness. If you make the payment, well, the payment's made, so now there's nothing to forgive.

I think that's my sense at least of the comment, of the concern. Forgiveness is the release of a debt. Think of the Lord's Prayer, forgive us our debts as we forgive the debts of others.

And so the concept of moral obligation or moral culpability, blame before God, is characterized biblically as a debt. We owe God obedience, we disobey. And so we are now in his debt.

In fact, we even have the same kind of language, though I don't haven't heard it for a while, in our country where somebody breaks the law and has to pay his debt to society by going to jail and paying for that crime. So there is a... This common notion of how this is characterized is the release of someone from the obligation. That's what forgiveness is.

Now, how do we release them from the obligation and still maintain justice? How do we show mercy and still maintain justice? And the answer is that it's not just a, in a certain sense, a dismissal or an empty release. Oh, never mind. But rather someone sacrifices on behalf of the sinner to pay that debt so the sinner can be released of having to pay the debt themselves.

So keep in mind being released from the debt is the forgiveness. The mechanism for that is the payment of the debt for someone else. The fact that someone else pays the debt doesn't undermine the reality of the forgiveness.

It simply makes the forgiveness possible. You are released from this obligation because someone else has paid. If I'm understanding the objection correctly.

And I think that's the case in any situation like this. I mean, think about the parable that Jesus tells about the man who forgives the person, the money that he owes him. In that case, he's bearing the cost of that.

Someone always bears the cost. So forgiveness is about removing the obligation, but someone always bears the cost because the cost is always paid ultimately. Would you agree with that, Greg? - Well, I'm just thinking in human relationships, if you were nasty to me, which Amy has never been, but if you were and I said, okay, I just let that.

I forgive you and I release you from that. I don't hold it over you. You don't have to pay me back and do nice things to me or whatever to make up for it.

And that's the way a lot of human so-called forgiveness works, you know. If I were to do that, I guess you could say, I've forgiven you, but I, where was the cost? - You're giving up something that you were owed. - Okay, so I'm bearing the cost in that case, okay.

- Yeah, so if there's a, whenever you do something wrong, you owe some sort of restitution to them. And if you say, I'm not gonna make you look, clean my car for a month or whatever, you're bearing that cost of not receiving some sort of satisfaction for the harm done to you. I mean, it's not in the same sense as, say, money or something like that, but I think there's still a sense of that bearing that.

- Yeah, there's a sense. I guess it's not a kind of perfect parallel with what God does because God has offended and he could just let it go. And so he, in a certain sense, bears that cost.

In this case, he actually pays for it through the suffering of Jesus. So, but there's a human analogy there that might be helpful for some people. The key is though that it still is forgiveness even though the debt is paid.

It's what makes forgiveness possible. If not, then the person would have to pay themselves. And that's the simple arithmetic.

Either we pay or Jesus pays. It's one or the other. In either case, the debt gets paid.

It's either justice that we pay or mercy we receive because Jesus paid the price of justice.
- Well, thank you. Greg, thank you Kate and Nigel.

We really appreciate hearing from you. If you have a question for us, you can send that on Twitter with the #STRask. Or you can go through our website, just go to our podcast page and you look for #STRask and you'll see a link right at the top of the page where you can send us your question.

And we will consider it for the show. We can't do this without you, so we'd love to hear from you. Thanks for listening.

This is Amy Hall and Greg Cockel for a stand to reason.

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