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Are All Sins Equal to God?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about whether God looks at all sins as being equally severe, how to reconcile Jesus' statements that judgment will be degreed with the idea that everyone who rejects Christ will spend eternity in Hell, and an objection to Christians warning people about Hell.

- * Are all sins equal to God—one isn't more severe than another?
- * How can I reconcile Jesus' statements that judgment will be degreed with the idea that everyone who rejects Christ—from defiant murderer to "moral" secular humanist—will spend eternity in Hell? Wouldn't that make all judgments equally severe?
- * I love a good eternal threat if I don't agree with how you choose to live your life.

Transcript

This is Stand to Reason's hashtag, S-T-R-S, podcast. And Greg Koukl is here to answer your questions. And I'm here to let him do all the hard work and then throw in something at the end.

Okay, Greg, this first question comes from Erin. How would you explain to an agnostic that God looks at all sin as equal, that one sin isn't more severe than another? Well, I wouldn't explain that to agnostic because I don't think that's true. Moral common sense dictates otherwise and Scripture does too.

So this is what I call a pastorism. It's like when pastors say, well, all sin is sin. Well, that's true as far as it goes.

It's a tautology. So you can't argue with it as put, but what people are suggesting oftentimes is what you just mentioned, that all sin is sin whenever you're sinning, you're sinning, okay, to God it's all the same. And I think the point ought to be more precise, and that is the way James put it.

If you do one sin, but not another sin, you are still a lawbreaker. Okay, a person who doesn't murder but commits adultery is still a breaker of the law. So any sin qualifies you as a

lawbreaker and you're in the category then of a criminal before God and are subject to punishment.

James did not mean to imply that no sin is worse than any other sin. All right, notice when Jesus, this is often misquoted to Jesus talks in the Sermon in the Mount. And he says that if you look at a woman with lust in your heart, then you have already committed adultery with her in your heart.

It's not adultery in the physical. Obviously, it's adultery in your heart. His point is that it's still a sin, whether it's outward or it's inward is still a sin.

Earlier he says, don't murder. Didn't do that. Would you ever call your brother a fool? Yes.

Well, then you're guilty enough to go to hellfire. So the truth of that pastorism, sin is sin, is that any sin, even one sin can qualify you for damnation. But of course, nobody's guilty of just one sin.

We sin constantly. If you just think of the two greatest commandments, love God with your whole heart, mind, soul and strength and love your neighbor as yourself. I've never kept the first one for a moment in my life and hardly ever the second either.

So my life is filled with sin that needs to constantly be cleansed by Christ. Okay. So I am guilty.

Everybody's guilty. The law shut up all men under sin. Okay, that's the first half.

The second half of the pastorism seems to imply that no sin is any worse than any other. And I would not want to try to convince that agnostic of that because it's false. And the agnostic probably knows it just by moral common sense.

You steal a pencil or you murder a child. Are those equal in terms of their gravity? No, of course not. This is a worse sin than another.

This is clearly the case. Okay. In terms of moral common sense.

Oh, but sometimes our moral common sense, what we think it isn't the same as God's common sense. All right, well, let's see what God has to say about it. Here's Jesus at his trial before Pilate.

Pilate says, don't you know that I could condemn you or something to that effect? And Jesus says, no, you wouldn't have any power over me unless it's been given to you from above. Therefore, the one who turned you over to me has the greater sin. Jesus words.

Now he's probably referring to the high priest. They're not to Judas. But the point is Jesus is acknowledging that some sins are greater than others.

You planted in sackcloth and ashes, but you didn't and therefore the judgment against you will be greater. So those are just two examples from the text that shows that God's point of view

about these things comports with our moral intuitions. Some things are worse and some things are less.

You know, nevertheless, they're still sin. They all qualify us for punishment. But the punishment is not going to be the same for everybody because different people have different sin debts and the ones with the greatest sin debt.

The more entries in the log, so to speak, in the books that are opened at the end of the end of history, as we know it, they're going to be judged according to their deeds and they're going to be punished accordingly. Now, the punishment for everybody is eternal separation for God, but that's going to feel different to different people, depending on the level of their sin. And it seems to be intimated in the text that the greater the revelation given to the individual who rebels, the greater the punishment will be to that individual.

All things made equal. This is why the chief priest or if that person is Jesus is referring to as Judas, obviously the punishment will be greater for either of them because they knew more. They had more to sin against more revelation to suppress than for a pilot.

Pilot was just a gentile. He's just doing his job. It wasn't a good man.

But this is why Jesus made that comment. So I would say to the agnostic, our view, the biblical view is actually the same view that you have that there are some crimes that are greater than others and some acts of goodness are greater. And greater love has no man than this that he laid down his life for his friends.

So both goodness and badness are coming grades. And if badness didn't come in grades, you would never be able to solve what's called a moral dilemma. More of the lemons where you have one or two choices is a dilemma between two things between a rock and a hard place.

You have to choose one of them, but either one chosen on its own would be wrong. Now what? Well, you have to choose one or the other and you would not be able to adjudicate between the two unless there was a moral way of morally waiting the actions. If you have an opportunity, lying is wrong, but if you don't lie, then you're going to surrender human life to be sacrificed.

That's rehab the harlot and Cory 10 boom and other righteous gentiles who had Jews where they had to lie all the time, but they were lying to save human life. And if they didn't lie to save human life and they told the truth, they would be doing the greater evil by telling the truth. And subsequently causing the the death of another human being that could have been avoided if they were to lie.

So in that circumstance, it's the right thing to do to lie. And that's the way the text represents the rehab the harlot and also the Jewish midwives during the Exodus, etc. So I want to tweak the question just a little bit because the first part of your explanation about how every sin is enough to make you a sinner and to separate you from God.

So let's say that is the question Aaron is asking, how would you explain to an agnostic that all sin can separate you from God no matter what it is big or little? The obligation of us to be good and when and therefore he gives commands and in virtue of those commands, it's clear that we have not done what he has told us to do. So now we are guilty before a sovereign and the simplest parallel is just using the government. If you are a member of your community under the laws that govern the community and you break the laws, you are liable to punishment appropriate to the laws that you break.

You can't say you look at, you know, I was speeding on the freeway, but I stopped at all the stop signs before I got a freeway and was a good citizen then, you know, because it isn't like, you know, the more good things you do way out the bad things you do. It doesn't work that way in law. And if you have a community crimes for five years, you're not going to get a note from the DA saying, gee, I've seen you had a clean record.

Go out and knock off a couple of gas stations on us. You have credit on your account. You know, that's not the way that law works.

And by the way, I'm appealing there to a normal ordinary intuition that we have about law. God's law is the same thing. He doesn't miss anything.

And there's a whole lot more things that are wrong in God's eyes than are illegal in the government's eyes. And so that would be the root that I would take. And plus I would maybe appeal to his own existential awareness of the feeling of guilt.

We all feel guilt. The only people that don't feel guilt or sociopaths or psychopaths, you know, they don't feel bad for bad things they've done. That's an unusual circumstance.

Most of us do. And what's going on there? And that's a fair question to ask. Who are we beholden to when we do something wrong and feel guilty for it? Something's going on.

And the Christian worldview explains it because there's a God who's watching you, agnostic, everything you do, and the guilt you feel is a guilt before him, not before anyone else. And he will hold you accountable for that. And also, I think sometimes what people will do is give some sort of hypothetical example where the only thing someone has ever done is steal a paperclip.

Yeah, right. That's just not how it is. We are actually sinners.

We are very bad at evaluating our sin also because we're so used to seeing it. We're comparing ourselves to everybody around us who's also sinners. We're climatized.

Yes. And so I think we can't really evaluate it well. We can't really evaluate God's holiness the way we should.

And this is why you see somebody like Isaiah dropping to his knees and saying, Whoa is me when he's... For I'm a man who's unclean with unclean lips when he's before God. And this is

Isaiah who wrote a very long book of the Bible. A prophet.

But when he was face to face with God, he saw both God's perfection and his sinfulness. But this is something we have a very hard time doing. And so the punishment might not make sense to people because they're not seeing things as they are.

And I've told this story so many times. But in case someone hasn't heard this before, there was this study that they did of prisoners who all said, you know, they were good people. Like they found, guess what? The prisoners are very bad at evaluating their goodness.

Which is not hard to understand because if everyone is like you, then you're pretty average, right? You're okay. But that's where we go wrong. And I think if we could see that this would make more sense.

And there are ways to appeal to that, as you said, to appeal to his own guilt and that sort of thing. All right. So the next question follows from that one, Greg.

This one comes from Donita. I'm trying to reconcile the Orthodox view on hell with Jesus statements that judgment is degreed. Matthew 10 15 Luke 12 47 48 at all.

If any, if everyone who rejects Christ from defiant murder to moral secular humanist, moral and quotes, spend eternity in hell wouldn't all judgment or its consequences be equally severe. Well, here's a simple parallel again back to our own judicial system. You can go to prison.

You can go to minimum security, or you can be in isolation for the next 10 years in a place in the dark pit. Okay. I don't know what hell is going to be like in this regard.

I don't know if there's flames in there. The language that's used in scripture clearly is analogical. It's a place of darkness, but there's flames will flames have light.

You know, so what it's trying to explain in human terms is that this place is bad. You don't want to go there. Okay.

But if you follow Jesus comments and think of our own system, there are degrees of punishment, even our own system. You are fully incarcerated and you might be incarcerated for life, but you might be in a minimum security situation. You may have a lot of freedom within the walls.

You may have jobs to do. You may be able to use facilities that the prison provides that make your stay more pleasant. As it were, or you may be in the worst of circumstances.

And actually, when we hear, and this has to do with recent politics the last few years, people who seem to have committed misdemeanors and then are put away in isolation for a few years. This seems inappropriate. The punishment doesn't fit the crime.

And a principle in the Old Testament of jurisprudence, jurisprudence is Lex Talionis. It's called

the law of the law, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but that is not meant to characterize revenge. People are taking it that way.

It's meant to characterize that the punishment must fit the crime. You take an eye for an eye. You take a tooth for a tooth.

You don't cut off a person's hand for stealing a loaf of bread that's incommensurate. So even in that circumstance in the Old Testament law, we see the propriety of the punishment relative to the crime that's been committed. And a similar situation in hell.

We don't have lots of detail, but we have statements like that from Jesus, and we have these principles we see operating in Scripture. So even though the duration of hell is the same for everyone, it's forever and ever. And it represents, in part, a removal from the presence of God.

That's the word I'm looking for. We are expelled from God's presence. When I say what happens in a country, you are exiled.

We are exiled from God's presence. And that's forever. But the experience of that is going to be different for different people.

Some people will be much more extreme. The duration is the same. The intensity is not.

And that's how justice is meted out with regards to hell. So we have one more question, Greg. This one is also about hell, but this one, maybe you can bring a little tactics into this one because it's more of a snarky comment that we received.

And just you can explain how you would respond to someone who said this to you. So this comes from Lucas. I love a good eternal threat if I don't agree with how you choose to live your life.

I love a good eternal threat. If I don't agree with how you choose to live your life. Okay, so there's there's two things going on there.

One is a presumption of relativism. On Lucas's view, all we're saying is that a person is going to get punished on our view because of our private morality. So preferences preference.

So Lucas, are you suggesting that there is nothing that a human being does that is objectively wrong and worthy of punishment? Because that seems to be the suggestion. Whatever it is, Christians are saying someone might be punished in hell for. That's just their personal private morality.

That's just your thing. So that's a what do you mean by that kind of question? What exactly are you getting at, Lucas? That's part of it. Okay.

And the the other part is the beginning is about a threat, right? I love a good eternal threat if I don't agree with the eternal threat. Okay. So what makes him think that it's a mere threat and

he must be convinced that there's no truth to it.

That is an empty threat. But what would be the purpose of the empty threat? When Christians talk about hell, they are convinced to exist because Jesus was convinced to exist. And that they aren't doing something.

They aren't going to punish the people that disagree with them. This is something that God's going to do. Okay.

Now let's see the true or false. And that's the question that has to be engaged. Does he think there is no God? Or if there is a God, does he think that God doesn't care about how you behave? Or does he believe in justice? If he believes in the virtue of justice, is justice done here on this earth? Obviously not.

Lewis makes this point. Well, then maybe justice will be done in another lifetime if justice is to be done. Okay.

So these are the kinds of things that I bring up. You're right. It's kind of snarky.

And it's a clever way of kind of asserting a moral relativism and that all this is just an empty threat that means nothing. As if it's just a power play, like a manipulative power play for us to say, Hey, we want you to do what we want you to do. Therefore do it or else you're going to go to hell.

Yeah. Yeah. It is snarky.

I said, Oh, I like it when people do that to me. I think it's fun when you give me empty threats like that. Well, there are threats that are not empty.

You go to a doctor and the doctor can assess you and say, this is not good. If you don't get this taking care of right away, you're going to die in a year. Okay.

Is that a threat? Well, I would call that a threat. I would call it a diagnosis because threat has such a, you know, it's kind of a manipulative connotation. You're manipulating something, but it is a consequence.

And maybe the word threat would apply with regards to God's laws because God is letting a person know that there is a consequence for their behavior that is appropriate punishment. You're going to get it. So if you want to use threat, okay, I can live with that, but that by using the word like that and snarking back using the word, it doesn't make the threat disappear.

The question is whether the threat is real and it has to do with the nature of morality and the existence of God and our behavior regarding the nature of morality before the God who exists. Those are the questions that have to be asked. And frankly, I think most people are pretty much aware that morality in the objective sense exists, even if you don't engage the God question yet, because they complain about the problem of evil.

And there would be no problem of evil if morality wasn't objective. People are actually doing things that are wrong. How could God allow that? That's the question.

If it was just a matter of, you know, people are doing things I don't like, that's the relativist thing that I wouldn't do. I mean, that's not enough to ground the problem of evil. So the complaint about the problem of evil and I go into depth in this in street smarts, the complaint about the problem of evil affirms the existence of objective moral truth.

Now that has ramifications for worldview. And this is the way that the discussion would go. I mean, if I were trying to have it with Lucas and I'd want to, you know, kind of deflect some of the snarkiness, which just obscures a question that needs to be answered, even by Lucas, and which he's just dismissing as this is silly.

And I think that's not really that's a threat. Maybe, and maybe it's a legitimate threat. Maybe it's a real threat.

Maybe you're not taking the threat that hangs over your head seriously. I think I would also ask him, are you, are you a kind of person who cares about justice? Do you think there is such a thing as justice? Do you care about it? Is it a good thing? Well, if it is, then that means something's wrong. Well, that means some things are wrong.

And it's more than just about choosing it. Should the government stop putting people in jail? Should the government stop threatening people with jail if they disagree with how they choose to live their life? Well, the reason why they disagree is because it's wrong and bad. And we have to remove them from society.

So, so maybe you could ask, well, is that how you would describe our justice system? Or do you think that people actually do wrong things that actually do require punishment? I'm just trying to figure out if you care about justice and you agree that that evil thing should be punished? And maybe let's just start there. And that's a part that I'm glad you mentioned. It's not just remove them from a circumstance that can hurt other people, but actually punish them because punishment is due because they're culpable for what they did.

They're blame worthy. And I would suspect he does. And even if he doesn't admit it right then, maybe he'll think about it a little bit later.

But this is just a way of making us sound petty and just doing power plays. But every person has a category for understanding justice and punishments. And so I would say, look, so the question is, is what we're saying true or is what we're saying not true? It's not this relativism thing just doesn't fly because we all know justice is real and good.

Even if we deny it, I think deep down people do know it. I agree. All right, Greg, we're out of time.

Thank you, Aaron and Donita and Lucas. We appreciate hearing from you. And we would love to

hear from you if you have a question.

Just send it on X with the hashtag SDR. Ask or go to our website at str.org. This is Amy Hall and Greg Cocle for a stand to reason.