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Does God Hear the Prayers of Non-Believers?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about whether or not God hears and answers the prayers of non-believers, and thoughts about a church sign that reads (as if from God), “Just love everyone. I'll sort them out later.”

* Does God hear non-believers’ prayers, and if he hears them, does he answer them?

* How would you evaluate a church sign that reads (as if from God), “Just love everyone. I'll sort them out later”?

Transcript

If you're listening to Amy Hall and Greg Koukl, and for our faithful listeners. Or frustrated listeners. In our last episode, we couldn't find the name of a book that Greg can mention, so we have it now.

It's called Good News for Anxious Christians, and it's by Philip Carey, C-A-R-Y. All right, so that might sound mysterious. If you haven't listened to it, now you have to go back and listen to it.

So the book is Good News for Anxious Christians, 10 practical things you don't have to do. You don't have to do. So now you all have to go back and listen to that one.

It does tie into our conversation about hearing from God and finding God's will and all of that, which he says are things you don't have to do. So on to this episode. Hopefully we have it together now, Greg.

This question comes from Jessica. Does God hear non-believers' prayers? If he hears them, does he answer them? Well, I did some thinking about this a couple of months ago, and I went to a number of texts. Now, where is it? In the Proverbs was the first thing that alerted me to a problem here.

And that is that even how does it start? It's like regarding the unbeliever or the godless man, even

his prayer is an abomination. Now, and there are a number of places that are like this. And again, I wish I could give you chapter and verse in Proverbs, but it's something to that effect.

It makes a very strong statement there. And now there are some exceptions to this. Go ahead.

Do you have it? Yes, it's Proverbs 28-9. He who turns away his ear from listening to the law, even his prayer is an abomination. There you go.

Okay. And so in other words, people are doing their own thing. They're not following God.

This reminds me of Romans 8 when he talks about those who are after the flesh and after the spirit. And those who are after the flesh, Paul says, can't please God. It's impossible to do that.

If you're not in the spirit, which he describes as being regenerate, the spirit of God dwells within you, then you're after the flesh, and you are not pleasing to God. So I see these as two separate categories biblically, and those, as the Proverbs puts it, who are in the flesh, cannot please God, or actually that's Romans 8, but who don't listen to the law, even his prayer is an abomination. And I think about people, I remember doing a TV show many years ago, and in the makeup room, I started talking to the guy doing makeup.

And apparently he was sick. Maybe had cancer or something like that. And I said, well, do you mind if I pray for you, or I will pray for you, something like that? And he said, well, yeah, I can use all the help I can get.

Now, I was offended by that. I did pray for him, and I did chastise him. But I was offended by it, because God isn't there just to get stuff when you need it.

As far as I could tell, this man had no interest in God. Didn't express that. No behavior seeking to honor God or glorify him, not listening to the law to use the language of Proverbs.

But now he's going to toss up a prayer to get something when he needs it. And from my take on that text, that prayer is an abomination to God. And characteristically, this is what you have with non-believers who might throw up a prayer.

Now, I think there's an exception to that. And it's interesting that you have a non-believer in the New Testament in the Book of Acts, chapter 10, making that chapter, yeah, chapter 10, Cornelius. He's a pagan.

Well, he's a Gentile, and he's a centurion, a military man. However, he's doing the best he can with what he has. And he's seeking God.

He's a God-fearrer. And he gives alms. And he's carrying on as a faithful Gentile with the God of Israel as a Gentile.

And he ends up getting a vision, and Peter does it at the same time. And that arranges the

visions, kind of broker a meeting between them. And then Peter gives him the gospel, which he and his household, then put their faith in believe, trust Christ, and given the gift of the Holy Spirit.

So there is a situation where a non-believer is praying, but he is praying in a way that's consistent or faithful to God seeking God. The best way he knows how in God responds to that. So the conclusion I came up with as I kind of surveyed these passages is that characteristically, no, God does not hear the prayer of a non-believer.

No, God can make exceptions to that. It's up to him. But characteristically, that's not the case.

And I guess in many cases, because those are just self-centered, or they only want God when they can use God for them, for something, for them. The exception is somebody who's seeking God in truth, which is Cornelius, for example. And then God responds.

So, I mean, that's the way I put it together. I do want to add there's exceptions. God can make any exception he wants.

But characteristically, God is not listening to the non-believer. And it's not as if he doesn't know they're praying. Of course, God hears everything.

It's not that he can't hear them just because they're not in covenant with him. But God, this is what you said, right? God will not be used. He is not going to be used.

Sometimes when you're asking yourself these kinds of questions, you have to look at what is the purpose of prayer and even more than that, what is the purpose of everything? What is God doing here? If God has brought us here and created us for the purpose of glorifying himself so that we can know him fully and enjoy him fully forever, this is the whole purpose of creation, then how does prayer fit into that? Well, prayer is a way that God is glorified because when we pray and God acts, he gets the glory. We see that he's the one who's working, that he's bringing history about, that he has answered things we've asked for or he's enabled us to do things that we needed help with, whatever it is. So, he is not going to answer prayers to other gods for sure because then those other gods will get the credit.

And that goes against the purpose, not only of prayer, but of everything God's doing. So, for sure, I would say he's not going to do that. Now, will he answer the prayer of someone who is a non-believer? I think maybe if it will glorify him.

So, let's say there's someone who decides, well, I'm going to pray to Jesus and see what happens. And in answering that, they see God's glory and then they come to him or they tell others about him or whatever it is. I think that's possible, but he's certainly not going to answer prayers to other gods.

Sometimes you see this in the text in the Gospels where Jesus looks at the multitudes and he's

moved with compassion or somebody comes to him and out of compassion, Jesus does a healing. And oftentimes that results in them believing. But I'm thinking of what the ten lepers out of the ten that he healed, only one came back and said, thank you.

And so, you wonder, well, what was the status of the other ones? And think of all those people that came to Jesus in John 6, and he multiplied the bread and fed them. But he also chastised them because many were coming to get a free meal. Basically, he actually fed large groups twice, one four thousand, one five thousand.

And so, even those who were the recipients of that miracle were more self-centered, even though actually Jesus took the initiative to do that. It wasn't their prayer. In any event, there are times when God has moved with compassion for someone and will respond.

But that's the exception, I think. And characteristically, it's the non-believer who has no regard for God or is worshiping a false God, is not going to be heard by the true God except in circumstances where there's tremendous amount of humility and a willingness to hear the truth and come to God in truth as he truly is. And what you just described from the Bible, that actually matches kind of my, one of the things I said, which is, okay, so the lepers were healed and they didn't come back to thank.

But God is glorified by his answer to that prayer of to this day. So here's an example of God answering their prayers. Their request, right? Their request.

And he's still being glorified by it. So I think there could be examples of that happening. And of course, God gives things to people all the time.

You know, God brings rain on the just and the unjust. So there's general. Every good and perfect gift, you know, from hell.

So it's not that he's not working everywhere. It's just if someone makes a specific prayer, God is not going to do it in a way where he won't be glorified or he'll give his glory to another. But I think that could happen even in the case of someone who's not a Christian.

Let's say he prays for something and someone else hears and God acts and that other person sees the glory of God through it. So who knows? Okay, let's go to a question from Elaine. A local church sign states, quote, just love everyone.

I'll sort them out later. God. I was immediately agitated by the sign imagining someone who was, quote, loved but didn't know he or she would be, quote, sorted and on what basis? My friend loved this sign.

How can we evaluate this slogan? Well, I think she's done a good job already. There's a certain sense in which the statement is true. That is, it is our job to love, love your neighbor.

The word just is a qualifier and that's suspect. But love that will love and God will sort about. Okay, but that's not going to be a pretty picture when God sorts them out, who know the criterion by which he does.

Generally, that kind of claim is meant to support behaviors that many have characterized as morally benign and that if Christians object in any way, they're being unloving. Okay, and so just love. In other words, just be affirming of this behavior and it's generally sexual when this thing comes up.

Just be affirming and love them, love them, love them, love them. Let God sort it out. Of course, the way God's going to sort it out is neither fornicators or adulterers or homosexuals are going to inherit the kingdom of God.

That's 1 Corinthians, what? 6 or 9? Yeah, see the 6, 9 or 9, 6. 1 Corinthians says, and so, yeah, God will sort about and that's not going to be a pretty picture. And part of our obligation is to help people to see that when you get sorted, you don't want to be a goat. You want to be a sheep and that depends on Jesus.

And if you are persisting in immoral behavior, then you're going to be a goat. You promote lawlessness and you're going to be held responsible for that. So this kind of phrase, I'm trying to think how I would respond.

I guess this kind of phrase is meant to serve a certain end. And even though there are parts of it we would agree with as far as it goes, it's the word just that probably is doing most of the work. So if somebody said to me, just love people and let God sort them out.

And I guess what I want to say is, wait a minute, I agree with you that we should love people and I agree that God is going to sort them out. But why the word just? Because the word just is meant to instruct the person just to leave everybody alone and be benign about their behavior or even supportive of whatever they're choosing. And by the way, this works in reverse because I know that's what's going on here, which is why it bothered Elaine because she saw the subterfuge of it, the just.

Why don't you just love me and let me do whatever I want to do regarding these other people and these other things? Say what I want to say. Just love me and let God sort me out later. See, this can, you know, what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander, but they don't think of it that way.

It's not like whatever. It's whatever I think is right, you ought to be doing that. And then they kind of baptize it with spiritual language there or God will sort it out.

Yeah, it's the great white throne judgment. Read it. That's not a pretty picture.

I think what you also need to do is bring out the hidden claims. And that is, what does it mean to love? Right. Just love everyone.

Okay, well, what does that mean? What are you actually telling me to do? Because you're using the word love, but I don't think we're using the word the same way because God certainly defines what love means in his word, but I suspect what you mean by love is something different than what I mean. So what do you think? Describe to me what it means to just love someone. Because they're using this word, but they're just not defining it.

So if their definition of love, as you mentioned, is leaving people alone and not saying anything, maybe what you could say to your friend Elaine is, is it love to not tell people the gospel, to not tell them about Jesus, to not tell them about their need for forgiveness and the availability of grace and God's forgiveness and being with him forever. Is that not loving someone? So there are passages, well, Paul explains that the whole of the Old Testament, the mosaic law is written so that we would know what love is. And it's there to direct us.

This is from 2 John 10, 6. Now I ask you, lady, not as though I were writing to a new commandment, but the one which we have had from the beginning that we love one another. And this is love that we walk according to his commandments. So you can't even know what it means to just love someone until you know what his commandments are.

Love is rejoicing in righteousness and not rejoicing in unrighteousness and speaking the truth. First John 5, 2, by this we know that we love the children of God when we love God and observe his commandments. So these are all, you have to start with the biblical definition of love and that is warning people who are storing up God's wrath against themselves and telling them the good news.

So warning them and telling them the good news is loving. It's not loving to not warn people and to not tell them the good news and then let God sort them out. That's not loving.

So I think there's so many things. What is the gospel? What is love? All of these things are hidden in this one statement that you have to bring out by asking questions. Yeah, you've actually used a great tactical approach to this by asking for clarity of the meaning of these words.

When you say love, just love and that's what is love and what do you mean by that? How are you using that? You're giving me a recommendation. How does that look if I were to practice your recommendation and why the word just? That's the giveaway. Jesus would agree with the main phrases love others.

This is a great commandment. God will sort it out. That's the great white-grown judgment.

That's the sheep and the goats. Those are all facts. We can agree with that.

Anybody helped by just knowing those things, especially if they don't know what love looks like, that's your question, or the criterion upon which the judgment would be made. That was Elaine's question. So Elaine could ask her friend, how do you think God will sort people out? What do you think the criteria is? It's hard for me to know if her friend simply, because what happens is we hear these slogans so often and they sound so nice and we like the good feeling it makes us feel.

And we like the idea that we don't have to tell anyone anything difficult. I mean, of course we do. We want everyone to like us.

We don't want to say things people don't like. So we just accept these things without thinking too much about them. But it also might be the case that her friend doesn't know how God will sort people and doesn't know how God defines love.

So it's worth having a conversation to find out what she means by both of those things. Now, if she has the right answers to those things, then you can say, well, then how would that work with this slogan? Isn't this slogan a little bit misleading? And isn't it hiding the gospel from people? So I think it's hard to know where she's coming from without that. The another thought that I have kind of about what's embedded in this comment is that don't judge God will be the one who judges.

So don't say things that sound judgmental. Don't say things that are morally critical of people who are following these behaviors. It's all been to silence the critic.

And even in some measure, there's truth to that. We're not to be condescending judgmental people, but we are too. I mean, Paul says do not participate in the evil deeds of darkness, but even expose them.

So there's a place for us certainly communicating. Look when Paul was talking with Festus or a gripper, whoever. I mean, about judgment, I've spooked them out.

You know, in the book of Acts, they said, well, you know, go away. I'll talk to you later. And he never talked to him again.

Two years past. So it is not the case that Christians are not supposed to communicate the facts of the circumstances. That pertain to salvation, which entail judgment.

Well, the good news doesn't even make sense unless you first know the bad news. Yeah, that's right. Exactly right.

Well, thank you, Jessica and Elaine. We appreciate hearing from you. And we would love to hear your question.

All you have to do is just go to X and use the hashtag STR. Ask or you can go to our website at str.org. We really appreciate all the questions that you all send in and look forward to hearing your questions. This is Amy Hall and Greg Cocle for Stand to Reason.