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Is God's Inability to Change an Imperfection?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about responding to the idea that God's inability to change is an imperfection, why God loves us, and whether evil can "claim" a child.

- * If God is perfect, then he can't change, but not being able to change is an imperfection, therefore God is not perfect. How would you respond?
- * Does God love me only because I'm in his image or because of my personality and who I am?
- * Can evil "claim" a child?

Transcript

Welcome to Stand to Reason's #STRask podcast with Amy Hall and Greg Koukl. This morning, Greg, we are going to start with a question from Liam. Alright.

Sounds good to me. In conversation with a friend, he said, "If God is perfect, that means He cannot change." Not being able to change isn't imperfection, therefore God is not perfect. How would you approach this and respond? Why would not being able to change be an imperfection? Okay.

So that's the presumption. There's a part of the premise. So he's trying to say that God being perfect and unchanging is there's something wrong with that.

So let's say I write to use a kind of trite example, $2 + 2 = 4$. That's a perfect equation because the solution is reflected in the numbers and everything like that. So that's perfect. And it's always the same.

Well, it can't be perfect because if $2 + 2$ can't be 5, it can only be 4, that means it can't change and therefore it can't be perfect. But why is change entailed in the notion of perfection? That's what the presumption is. Now, it may be convenient for finite creatures to be able to change, but for a number of reasons, whatever.

But that's irrelevant to the issue of perfection because you could have a blue car or you could have a green car so you can change the color. But one is no more perfect than the other. Okay? So when we talk about perfection, when talking about God, you have to even zero it down a little bit more of what you mean.

But the idea of not changing indicates there can't be anything amiss with God that he needs to repair. There can't be any lack of knowledge that God needs to get to make himself better. When you are at the best, and by the way, this is unrelated to whether the Christian claim is true, this is a claim that the notion of a perfect God is somehow incoherent and contradictory.

But perfection, the notion of being able to change suggests that something is amiss in the being that he would change to be fuller or more better or whatever or gain more knowledge or whatever. So this to me is similar to saying, well, God must be able to sin because if God can't sin and I can, then I can do something God can't do. Now that's a confusion because the ability to sin is actually a positive way of stating an inability.

And the inability is to do right all the time. And so when we say we are able to sin, all that means is we, that's in a sense, in a positive way, what we're able to do is not really the ability. It's a positive way of saying, identifying an inability.

I'm trying to think, I can drown because I can't swim. Oh, see, I can do something those swimmers can't do. I'm better than swimmers because I can drown and they can't drown.

I mean, please. So I think that this is the kind of mistake that's being made here. Why assume why assert that a perfect being who can't change lack of ability to change is somehow an example of it imperfection.

And by the way, if it is an example of it imperfection, then the person who says this is going to have to define perfection. What is perfection that ability to change is an exemplification of perfection? There's all kinds of confusion that's in place with this kind of statement. I'm just going to sum up because I think you hit the two main things here, Greg, that possibly this person has gone wrong.

Either he's confused by the idea that not being able to change is an imperfection because that's true for us. It's true for us that if I can't change and get better, yes, and get better, then there's something wrong with me or it's a failure on my part. It's something less than good.

So either he's confusing the idea and he's taking a human concept that being able to change is a good thing. It's a positive thing and he's placing that on God. But of course, being unable to change is only an imperfection if you need to change.

Right. There you go. If a perfect being changes, then by definition won't he become less perfect in his character or whatever it is.

So I think this is something that happens a lot, I think with atheists is that they'll look at God in terms of human categories and problems. So for example, they look at him judging people and they say, "Well, if a human being did that, that would be terrible." But of course, that's because human beings are fallen and they're not able to be the judge and they don't have the authority to be a judge. And they don't judge accurately.

Exactly. But for God, that's a different matter. So sometimes you just have to separate when someone is putting human categories onto God and judging him as if he were a fallen human when he's not.

And then the second one, Greg, would be what you said about assuming that not being able to do something isn't imperfection by definition, which is obviously not true as you illustrated so well with the drowning scenario. The Greek word for sin is "harmartia," which captures a picture of missing the target. And that's like saying, "I'm a better archer than you are." Why? Because you always hit the center.

I can hit all around the thing. I can hit the ground. I can hit the trees.

I can hit the guy standing over here, you know, man, it is a business. So I'm so much better because I can do something that you can't do. I can miss.

That makes me a better archer. These are great illustrations, Greg. I think they really get the point across of what's happening here.

You have to ask yourself if not being able to do something isn't inability or if it's a function of his ability. So those are ways... I think this objection comes up in various different forms. So you can be on the lookout for those things that will help.

Okay, let's go to a question from Alison. Why does God love me? Is it only because I'm in his image or because of my personality and who I am? Definitely some sort of false dichotomy. Sorry.

Well, actually, it's an interesting question because the notion of God's love is not univocal. In other words, God's love doesn't mean just one thing and is applied in just one way. It would be a mistake to say that God loves everyone exactly the same.

And the reason is, is because the Scripture seems to distinguish between different types of God's love. Now, in the Upper Room discourse, and it might not be possible for me to find this because it's one-third of the Gospel of John. But in the Gospel of John and the Upper Room discourse, which goes from chapter 13 to chapter 17, there is a comment that's made maybe in 15-ish and the 14.

But, oh, here it is. Oh, I found it. Oh, I got highlighted in yellow.

That helps. Chapter 14, verse 21. "He who has my commandments and keeps them is

the one who loves me, and he who loves me will be loved by my Father." I will love him as well.

I just close myself to him. Now, that means whatever Jesus is talking about in terms of the type of love, that is conditional. There is a love that is reserved from the Father and from Jesus for the person that keeps Jesus' commandments.

Now, all I want to notice here is that there is a sense that Jesus is acknowledging in which God loves some for something they do in virtue of that. That particular kind of love is not available to others who don't do that. Now, in John 3, for God so loved the world.

Now, we've got an interesting world as cosmos. In other words, it's the whole world he made. It's not just individual people, but certainly they are entailed in that.

But that's a much more expansive love of the Father that we see here. No greater love has any man that has seen laid down his life for a friend. Now, there's a sacrificial kind of love that God demonstrates, and it's possible through the incarnation because it's only in the incarnation that there can be a sacrificial kind of love.

A love that costs God something. There's another nuance to the love of God, a distinctive to the love of God. You might even call it a different aspect of love.

Then there's this sense that while we are sinners, well, that doesn't use the word love. God is love. First John chapter 4, I think.

First John 4:7. Yeah, we're singing this little ditty, you know, that we learned way back in the Jesus movement time or somewhere around there. Actually, you were just a little squirt back then, weren't you? In any event.

Because you were born on the year that I became a Christian. Yes. Okay, 1973.

Okay, got it. So anyway, these are what this identifies are these different kind of strands or aspects of the love of God. It's not univocal.

And so I think there is a sense that God loves us all in that He has made us in His image and He cares for us as an act of love as a member of His creation. And we have value in virtue of being made in His image. But there is also clearly a sense that there's kind of a bonus love of sorts.

And I don't know how else to take this John 14:21 passage, except for as there are some aspects of God's love that are reserved for those who obey Him. So it does seem that both senses are true. And maybe that's, you know, it's not a false, false dilemma.

I don't know, maybe it is false dilemma. It's not either or it can be both. There's no third option unless you just say that, yeah, there's lots of different ways that actually God loves.

And some seems to be connected to the fact that God made us and made His whole world. And that was an act of His love since God is love for John 4 7 A. But there's also elements of His love that seem to be particular and peculiar, redemptive love, for example, loving those who keep Jesus commandments, etc. I don't know.

What do you think, Amy? So I was just going to throw out one more, well, this would be redemptive love. So this would be specific love, not necessarily because of actions, but this is a special love. You know, that's not for everybody.

That's described in Ephesians 2 where it says, "But God, being rich and mercy because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ." By grace you have been saved. So if there, and of course people disagree on how to interpret this, but if God chooses some to place His special redeeming love on to make them alive with Christ, the question then is why. And I don't think we can answer this totally, but I don't think God is arbitrary, but at the same time I think He chooses to place His love, His redeeming love, and save certain people, not because of who they are.

That passage makes that clear. They were objects of His wrath. They were objects of judgment.

But because of His great love and His mercy, He saves some. Now why He chooses some, I guess that would be according to whatever His plan is and how He created us and what He created us for. Well, it says in the chapter just before, according to the kind intention of His will.

And as far as I could tell, that's as close as the Scripture gets to giving us any understanding. Whatever it is, it's a good thing. It's the kind intention of His will that is the guiding factor for Him, at least the formal guiding factor for Him, and that's all we're told.

By the way, you mentioned that God chooses some for redeeming love. That actually is not a distinctive of reform thinking. It's also Armenian thinking, unless you're a universalist.

God chooses some with redeeming love. Now how a person gets into that category that ends up receiving that special love just for His elect, which is the biblical word, and how people get elected and what that means is different from different. But still, there is an elect group that received that redeeming love.

Not everybody receives that. So that shouldn't be controversial. And this is just another example of a special love or a distinctive love that God chose.

There is a more universal kind of love, maybe you call it common grace, and then there are more precise loves. I mean, there are individuals that in a certain sense God seemed

to have a special affection for. And the text just simply said, "I love them.

He loved them." And whatever Jesus had compassion on Him, he emotionally responded. Now, that's, I think, probably describing a human emotion that's coming from his human nature. So maybe that's not such a good example, but we do have other examples in Scripture where the love of God is uniquely expressed towards individuals.

So yeah, it's not a univocal concept. That is, the love of God in its operation in the world is not just one kind of thing, but it is a couple of different kinds of things, apparently, according to the verses that seem to make these distinctions. And so there is a sense, I think obviously from John, yeah, John 15, that God loves, there is a love reserved for those who do something in particular, and that is those who keep His commandments.

It's right there. Okay, let's do one more, Greg. This one comes from Sarah.

Can evil quote "claim" a child? My mother shared a story about me as a baby when an evil presence came to her in a twilight sleep state, saying that the baby, me, belonged to Him. The evil situation occurred to my sitter a year later stating the same thing. I've been a Christian since 9 and baptized at 13.

Well, keep in mind that Jesus identified the devil as a liar. He speaks for his own nature. He speaks lies and deceptions.

I know I have no reason to believe that any individual belongs to the devil. Okay? Some people read in Matthew 10 where Jesus says, "Don't fear Him who can kill the body and not the soul. Fear Him who can throw body and soul into the hell." And some people read that, "Oh, yeah, that's the devil.

Fear the devil. He can make me go to hell." No, he can't. The one Jesus is talking about there is the Father.

The Father has the authority to do that. The devil will be in hell himself. The devil has no direct control over anybody else's spiritual destiny, period.

And when he says, through whatever minions he uses, that this child belongs to Him, he has no authority to say that. All he can do is deceive people into thinking that. Now, he may exercise extra effort to disboil that individual's life, but God owns everything that he made.

It's God's world. It's not the devil's world. Now, the devil has a certain kind of latitude.

He's the God of this world. But that doesn't mean that he is the God of this world in a way that gives him absolute power and absolute authority. The way that he operates in the world is to deceive.

And through deception blinds the eyes of the non-believer. And as such then holds the

world in his power. It's the power of deception that captures the world.

I mean, there's verses 2 Corinthians chapter 4. 1 John 5 talks about this. The last verse in 2 Timothy chapter 2. The whole world lies in the power of the evil one. He's held captive to do their will and all that.

But the means by which he does that is not by declaring ownership, but by deceiving. And according to 2 Thessalonians chapter 2, I think he's able to do this because the people do not love the truth and therefore they're easily deceived. I'd also add Greg that there's a sense in which we all start out captive to do his will as 2 Timothy says.

As children who by nature, children of God's wrath. We're all starting off fallen. We're all starting off under fallen Adam.

We're all starting off with rebellious hearts against God. So in a sense, we're already captive to his will. Everyone is before they're saved.

But the question is here. Can he keep you no matter what you do? And that is obviously false. God is in control.

God is the one who saves. And if he can save anyone, then he can save anyone. Because everyone is equally a miracle because they're all fallen and rebellion against God with, you know, they have to all be regenerated and changed.

So there's no one who is specially unable to be saved by God. Again, at the judgment, the judgment for each individual person is based on the deeds that they performed in this life, the misdeeds, the sins. Everyone is according to their deeds, not related to whether Satan claimed them or not, but how they comported themselves in this world before God.

And just to add on to that, and another thing, let's anyway misunderstand. There's also a second book and that's the book of life. And if your name is written in the book of life, regardless of what deeds you have written in the book of the deeds, you are saved because that is more powerful than the book of your deeds.

And that's the point that Paul makes in Romans 5 when he's talking about how grace overcomes and graces greater than the sins of Adam. All right, Greg, well, interesting questions today. Those were kind of unusual.

Thank you, Liam and Alison and Sarah. We appreciate hearing from you. If you have a question, send it on Twitter with the hashtag #strask, or you can go through our website.

Just go to our podcast page for #strask. And you'll find a link there to send us a question. We look forward to hearing from you.

This is Amy Hall and Greg Cocco for Stand to Reason.

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