

## “...a shocking twist...” (part 2)

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### Intro:

How does the passage we studied last week (Mt 5:43-48) fit in with verses like the one below:

*Psalm 139:19-22* “If only you would slay the wicked, O God! Away from me, you bloodthirsty men! They speak of you with evil intent; your adversaries misuse your name. Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord, and abhor those who rise up against you? I have nothing but hatred for them, and I count them my enemies.”

How are we to pray concerning our enemies: for their salvation or for their downfall?

- This is the question we will tackle in tonight’s message...

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- I. What passages are we attempting to reconcile with Matthew 5?
  - a. The ‘Imprecatory Psalms’
    - i. To pray for someone else’s wellbeing is to make *intercession* for that person.
    - ii. But to pray for someone’s destruction is to make an *imprecation*.
    - iii. *Note:* To express confidence in the eventual downfall of the wicked does not make it an imprecation.  
  
Ps 55:22-23 Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous fall. But you, O God, will bring down the wicked into the pit of corruption; bloodthirsty and deceitful men will not live out their days.
    - iv. The Imprecatory Psalms are as follows: 35, 79, 109, and 137. (although many others contain imprecatory elements as well: 5:10; 7:6-9; 9:19-20; 10:2,15; 17:13; 28:4; 31:17-18; 40:14-15; 41:10; 54:5; 55:15; 56:7; 58:6-10; 59:5,11-14; 68:1-2; 69:22-28; 70:2-3; 71:13; 83:9-18; 94:1-4; 104:35; 119:84; 129:5-7; 139:19-22; 140:8-11; 141:10; 143:12.).
  - b. Any other passages in Scripture that contain imprecations against God’s enemies.

- i. 2 Samuel 3:29,39 – David prays that God would repay Joab for murdering Abner, and he calls down a curse on him: that his house would never lack someone who has leprosy, leans on a crutch, falls by the sword, or is hungry.
- ii. 2 Samuel 15:31 – David prays that Ahithophel’s counsel to Absalom would come to foolishness.
- iii. Jer 20:12 – Jeremiah prays that he would see God’s vengeance on his enemies who have beaten and imprisoned him.
- iv. Lam 3:64-66 – Jeremiah asks God to curse and destroy those who mock and plot against him.
- v. Lk 10:10-11 – Jesus tell his disciples that if they enter a town that does not receive them, they are to shake off the dust of their feet in judgment against that town.
- vi. Acts 13:9-11 – Paul calls down blindness on Elymas.
- vii. 1 Cor 5:1-5 – Paul prays that the Corinthian man who has slept with his father’s wife would be delivered unto Satan ‘for the destruction of the flesh’.
- viii. Rev 6:10 – The martyrs ask God how long it will be until he avenges their blood.

II. What kinds of things are found in these imprecatory prayers that make us so concerned?

- a. The author proudly declares that he hates God’s foes, and he counts them his enemies.

Ps 139:21-22 Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD, and abhor those who rise up against you? <sup>22</sup>I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies.

- b. The author prays that God would declare his enemy guilty, and not innocent.

Ps 5:10 Declare them guilty, O God! Let their intrigues be their downfall. Banish them for their many sins, for they have rebelled against you.

Ps 7:6-8 Arise, O LORD, in your anger; rise up against the rage of my enemies. Awake, my God; decree justice. Let the assembled peoples gather around you. Rule over them from on high; let the LORD judge the peoples. Judge me, O LORD, according to my righteousness, according to my integrity, O Most High.

Ps 9:19 Arise, O Lord, let not man triumph; let the nations be judged in your presence.

Ps 79:6 Pour out your wrath on the nations that do not acknowledge you, on the kingdoms that do not call on your name;

Ps 69:28 May they be blotted out of the book of life and not be listed with the righteous.

- c. The author asks that the enemies be humbled.

Ps 9:20 Strike them with terror, O Lord; let the nations know they are but men.

Ps 31:17-18 Let me not be put to shame, O LORD, for I have cried out to you; but let the wicked be put to shame and lie silent in the grave. Let their lying lips be silenced, for with pride and contempt they speak arrogantly against the righteous.

(for more of the same, see 35:4, 26, 40:14,70:2, 71:13, 129:5)

- d. The author asks that God would intervene and fight against his enemies.

- i. The author asks that God would put an end to the violence of the wicked.

Ps 7:9 O righteous God, who searches minds and hearts, bring an end to the violence of the wicked and make the righteous secure.

Ps 55:9 Confuse the wicked, O Lord, confound their speech, for I see violence and strife in the city.

- ii. The author asks that his enemies would be ruined in this life as a consequence for their wickedness.

Ps 28:4 Repay them for their deeds and for their evil work; repay them for what their hands have done and bring back upon them what they deserve.

Ps 94:2 Rise up, O Judge of the earth; pay back to the proud what they deserve.

Ps 35:8 may ruin overtake them by surprise— may the net they hid entangle them, may they fall into the pit, to their ruin.

- iii. In some cases, the author simply wants his enemies to be defeated.

Ps 10:2 In his arrogance the wicked man hunts down the weak, who are caught in the schemes he devises.

Ps 10:15 Break the arm of the wicked and evil man; call him to account for his wickedness that would not be found out.

Ps 58:6 Break the teeth in their mouths, O God; tear out, O LORD, the fangs of the lions!

Ps 17:13 Rise up, O Lord, confront them, bring them down; rescue me from the wicked by your sword.

Ps 35:1-2 Contend, O LORD, with those who contend with me; fight against those who fight against me. Take up shield and buckler; arise and come to my aid.

- iv. But in other cases, the author goes as far as to pray for the death/total destruction of his enemies.

Ps 54:5 Let evil recoil on those who slander me; in your faithfulness destroy them.

Ps 143:12 In your unfailing love, silence my enemies; destroy all my foes, for I am your servant.

Ps 55:15 Let death take my enemies by surprise; let them go down alive to the grave, for evil finds lodging among them.

Ps 104:35 But may sinners vanish from the earth and the wicked be no more. Praise the LORD, O my soul. Praise the LORD.

- e. The author asks that God would rescue him from the wicked and cause the righteous to prosper.

Ps 7:9 O righteous God, who searches minds and hearts, bring an end to the violence of the wicked and make the righteous secure.

Ps 35:1-2 Contend, O LORD, with those who contend with me; fight against those who fight against me. Take up shield and buckler; arise and come to my aid.

Psalm 35:23 Awake, and rise to my defense! Contend for me, my God and Lord.

Ps 17:13 Rise up, O Lord, confront them, bring them down; rescue me from the wicked by your sword.

Ps 70:1 Hasten, O God, to save me; O LORD, come quickly to help me.

- f. The author asks that God would raise him so that he can be the one who brings vengeance against his enemies.

Ps 41:10 But you, O LORD, have mercy on me; raise me up, that I may repay them.

III. There are several major questions that arise from these Psalms:

- a. Can we really 'hate' God's foes and count them our enemies (Ps 139:21-22), when Jesus tells us to love our enemies and pray for them (Mt 5:44)?
- b. Can we really pray that God would hold our enemies guilty (Ps 5:10), when Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk 23:34)?
- c. Can we really pray that God would 'break the teeth' of our enemies (Ps 58:6), when this seems to be contrary to Jesus' "turn the other cheek" ethic in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:39)?
- d. Could we really ask God that we could be his instruments of justice (Ps 41:10)? How would this fit in with Rom 12:19, which says, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay"?

IV. How do these imprecatory psalms fit in with what we learned last week: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you"? (3 options)

- a. Option #1: David's model of praying against his enemies was acceptable under the Old Covenant (when God was more focused on wrath and judgment), but now it is no longer ok under the New Covenant (since God is now more concerned with grace and love).
  - i. If this were true, then God has contradicted himself, saying that a behavior is ok in one era, but not in another.
  - ii. If this were true, this would mean that God's character has changed over time. However, Scripture says...

James 1:17 Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

- iii. God is both a God of love and of wrath in BOTH Testaments.

1. Imprecatory prayers are not just found in the Old Testament but in the New Testament as well (See above, point I.b. - Lk 10:10-11, Acts 13:9-11, 1 Cor 5:1-5)
2. God is also a God of love and mercy in the Old Testament.

Ps 86:15 But you, O Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.

- b. Option #2: David's attitude of praying against his enemies has always been wrong, and Jesus' way has always been right.
  - i. Several Christian commentaries and theologians have taken this view, since they see it impossible to reconcile David's words with Jesus'
    1. "So with this [Ps 35] and other imprecatory psalms, they give us not God's precept, but man's defective prayers." (The Pulpit Commentary)
    2. These Psalms "are not God's pronouncements of His wrath on the wicked; but are the prayers of a man for vengeance on his enemies, just the opposite of Jesus' teaching that we should love our enemies". (Halley's Bible Handbook)
    3. These prayers of the psalmists "are indeed devilish" (C.S. Lewis)
  - ii. The problem with this view is that these Psalms are presented as-is. –They do not have any end notes that inform us that these should be taken negatively.
  - iii. It would be odd that the children of Israel would have allowed these verses to be included in the Book of Psalms, a book used for corporate worship, if they are in fact, meant to be the opposite of how we should pray.
  - iv. If all Scripture is "God-breathed" as 2 Tim 3:16 says, it would be difficult to see how God could inspire such an evil prayer and allow it to appear in his Word.
- c. Option #3: There have always been circumstances where praying for judgment is ok, but praying for them is even better (and preferred).
  - i. So in essence, you could do either one, but if you really want to take the high road, pray for your enemies.

- ii. This seems like a cop-out answer. God does not typically give us several options as to what is right, allowing us to choose.
- d. Option #4: We could render these psalms in the future tense, so that they are not requests for God to judge the wicked *now*, but rather predictions of what God will do in the future.
  - i. Thus, a sentence like “come to my aid and destroy my enemy” becomes “(one day) you will come to my aid and destroy my enemy.”
  - ii. Unfortunately, you would have to ignore all rules of grammar in order to translate these Psalms in this manner. This option is not a valid one.
- e. Option #5: David and Jesus are not contradicting each other. It is possible to pray as David did and still follow the guidelines of Jesus in Mt 5:43-48.

Here are the reasons why I believe Jesus’ words in Mt 5 and the imprecatory prayers can be harmonized:

- i. The imprecatory psalms are not prayed out of jealousy, selfish ambition, or out of a desire for personal revenge.
  - 1. This is what Jesus was concerned about when he said we should “love our enemies”.
    - a. He was not saying that we shouldn’t pray for justice in the world.
    - b. Rather, he was saying that we shouldn’t pray for a person’s downfall out of a desire to get even.
  - 2. So when the psalmist says he has “nothing but hatred” for those who are enemies of God (Ps 139), it is not a corrupt human, sinful hatred like racists or terrorists have, but a righteous disdain for evil in the world (like God has).
- ii. The psalmist is not asking for a chance to ‘pay back’ his enemies himself, but rather for God to bring justice into a fallen and chaotic world.
  - 1. The leaves the task of dealing out justice to God, and not to himself.

Ps 68:1-2 May God arise, may his enemies be scattered; may his foes flee before him. <sup>2</sup>As smoke is blown away by the wind, may you blow them away; as wax melts before the

fire, may the wicked perish before God.

Ps 69:24 Pour out your wrath on them; let your fierce anger overtake them.

2. Even in the example of Ps 41:10, where David says, “Raise me up so I may repay them”, he is not requesting this because he is bloodthirsty or looking to get even. Rather, he is expressing his strong desire for God to bring justice into the world soon, and he will do anything to speed that process up.
  3. It is important to remember that there is nothing wrong with asking God to bring justice into the world.
- iii. We do not pray for hardship to come upon our enemies so that we gloat over their downfall, but rather so that their wickedness would not continue to prosper and spread, to the detriment of God’s kingdom.
1. Many see prayers such as “destroy my enemies completely” as being contradictory to Jesus’ command to “pray for those who persecute you”.

But there is a fine distinction here...

- a. While we are to pray for the wicked and their salvation...
- b. This does not mean that we should pray that the wicked continue to prosper, or that nothing bad would happen to them.
- c. Quite the contrary, sometimes it is necessary to pray for a person’s downfall so that in their broken state, they come back to God in repentance.

1 Cor 5:5 – Paul handed the immoral Corinthian man over to Satan (desiring his downfall) so that his “sinful nature might be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.”

- iv. These biblical imprecations are ultimately spoken with the chief purpose of bringing glory to God’s name.
1. The psalmist does not wish for the death of the wicked *only* for his own personal comfort.

2. Rather, he prays that the wicked would be humbled so that men would cease in their arrogance and recognize that the Lord is God.

Ps 79:9-10 Help us, O God our Savior, for the glory of your name; deliver us and forgive our sins for your name's sake. Why should the nations say, "Where is their God?" Before our eyes, make known among the nations that you avenge the outpoured blood of your servants.

Psalm 83:16-18 Cover their faces with shame so that men will seek your name, O LORD. May they ever be ashamed and dismayed; may they perish in disgrace. Let them know that you, whose name is the LORD— that you alone are the Most High over all the earth.

3. The psalmist desires to see the holiness and justice of God maintained and defended.

**Conclusion:** In answer to some of the questions we raised above...

1. Yes it is possible to hate God's enemies, if we do so out of a righteous hate of evil, and not just as an excuse to carry out sinful, human hate against someone.

2. Yes, we can pray that God will hold his enemies guilty and judge them for the wrongs they have committed against him.

*(...but we can also pray for their salvation at certain times too. Like God, we should have a dual concern in our prayers: to see men saved, but also to see justice established.)*

3. In answer to the fourth question that we raised on page 5, I would say that no, we should not seek to become the instruments of God's judgment.

And so, finally, I would say that the imprecatory Psalms and Jesus' words about love for our enemies do not contradict each other. **We are to strike a balance between loving all people who are made in the image of God (even if they are our enemies), and desiring to see God's justice established on the earth).**