

## ***Praying for (and against) our Enemies***

Psalm 139:19-24

If you've ever read through the Psalms you've probably noticed what are known as "imprecatory" psalms in which the writer asks God to do terrible things to his enemies. For example, this is what we read in Psalm 109. David is talking with God about a man who had betrayed him:

8 Let his days be few;  
Let another take his office.  
9 Let his children be fatherless  
And his wife a widow.  
10 Let his children wander about and beg;  
And let them seek *sustenance* far from their ruined homes.  
11 Let the creditor seize all that he has,  
And let strangers plunder the product of his labor.  
12 Let there be none to extend lovingkindness to him,  
Nor any to be gracious to his fatherless children.  
13 Let his posterity be cut off;  
In a following generation let their name be blotted out.

We read David's prayer in Psalm 109 and have the strong suspicion that this isn't exactly what Jesus had in mind when He taught (Matthew 5):

43 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on *the* evil and *the* good, and sends rain on *the* righteous and *the* unrighteous."

There is an obvious tension between David's prayer in Psalm 109 and Jesus' command to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. How do we resolve this tension? Can the imprecatory psalms teach us anything about praying for (or against) our enemies, or are they fundamentally incompatible with the teachings of Jesus?

Different Christians would answer this question in different ways. Perhaps the most common response to the imprecatory psalms is to ignore them; it's just hard to know what to do with prayers that contain so much "vengeance." Others would say that the imprecatory psalms are sub-Christian and really have no place in our prayer life. That's a valid option because we consider other portions of the Old Testament obsolete in light of the new covenant (e.g., dietary laws).

This morning I'll argue that even though Jesus calls us to pray for our enemies differently than David prayed, nevertheless David's praying reflects certain perspectives that we would do well to recapture; his praying reflects critical truths that we might tend to gloss over. I don't pretend to be able to give the definitive explanation of the

imprecatory psalms; I won't address every question we have. But I do hope that what I offer this morning will help us know how to think about and pray about our enemies.

You may or may not be able to identify an "enemy" in your life (and there are numerous ways to define the term). You may be reluctant to ever designate someone as an enemy, but perhaps you can identify someone who (at some time) has been an adversary, someone who has actively worked against your best interests, or someone who has been mean or cruel to you or someone you love. The type of praying we'll discuss this morning will have implications for praying about such persons.

We are going to examine Psalm 139:19-24 as an example of imprecatory praying. These verses are all the more striking in light of the first 18 verses of this Psalm in which David describes God's comprehensive knowledge of him. "O Lord, You have searched me and known me. . . Before there is a word on my tongue You know it. . . You formed my inward parts; You wove me in my mother's womb. . . How precious also are Your thoughts toward me, O God!" And then seemingly out of the blue David begins to pray against his enemies.

As we look at the last 6 verses of Psalm 139, we'll discuss three perspectives that help us understand the imprecatory psalms in context, and then we'll look at a couple of implications for our praying in light of Jesus' teaching.

### **Perspectives from the "Imprecatory Psalms" (psalms of cursing):**

The first perspective is that **God has enemies**. This is a rather obvious but critical observation. Notice how David has identified people who aggressively stand in opposition to God.

19 O that You would slay the wicked, O God;  
Depart from me, therefore, men of bloodshed.  
20 For they speak against You wickedly,  
And Your enemies take *Your name* in vain.  
21 Do I not hate those who hate You, O Lord?  
And do I not loathe those who rise up against You?

David is not being "judgmental" in his prayer. His prayer reflects the reality that God has enemies. In verse 20 he even calls them "Your enemies." There are people who stand against everything God is for and who are for everything God is against. For example, David mentions that they are "men of bloodshed." Whereas God is the giver and sustainer of life, these men bring about the death of the innocent. Whereas those who love God love His name (everything He is and does), these men take God's name "in vain" (through word and deed they express that it is worthless). Whereas God's people seek to further what God is doing in the world, these men "rise up against [God]." Objectively speaking, they were enemies of God.

Of course God still has enemies today. There's a sense in which we all start out as enemies of God because of our sin. Romans 5:10 makes this connection: ". . . while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son." But the

imprecatory Psalms don't have this category in mind when they talk about God's enemies. They had in mind those people who actively, aggressively oppose God and His people.

We need to be careful (even reluctant) to designate others as "enemies of God." It's easy to demonize people and put them in that category just because we don't like them. I'm impressed with the Apostle Paul's ability to make this distinction. In Philippians 1, for example, he mentions a group of Christians that were quite nasty to him personally, but since they were preaching the gospel, he didn't condemn them. And we shouldn't designate someone as an enemy of God just because they're on the wrong side of some moral issue; garden-variety ungodliness shouldn't be equated with being an enemy of God in the way we're discussing it this morning.

Nevertheless, on an objective level, we need to be clear that God still has enemies today. Think about the persecuted church around the world. In Nigeria, for example, Christian churches have been targeted in the past few weeks; scores of our brothers and sisters in Christ have been killed through bombs and bullets (see [www.persecution.com](http://www.persecution.com) for accounts). "Men of bloodshed" still exist; some still speak against Jesus Christ. God still has enemies. Not all of God's enemies are physically violent; some use words and other types of coercion to express their hatred for God.

The second perspective from Psalm 139 follows from the first: ***God's enemies are our enemies (if we are "children of God")***. Notice how David takes God's "side" against God's enemies. David had such a passion for God that he was compelled to put as much distance as possible between himself and God's enemies.

19 O that You would slay the wicked, O God;  
Depart from me, therefore, men of bloodshed.  
20 For they speak against You wickedly,  
And Your enemies take *Your name* in vain.

Notice how personally David identified Himself with God and His purposes:

21 Do I not hate those who hate You, O Lord?  
And do I not loathe those who rise up against You?  
22 I hate them with the utmost hatred;  
They have become my enemies.

What would you think if someone looked you in the eye and told you, "***Your*** enemies are ***my*** enemies" or "I hate those who hate you"? You'd think, "Wow, s/he is ***with*** me and ***for*** me no matter what!" That's what David was declaring to God - an unqualified allegiance to the Lord. While we wouldn't advocate hatred toward God's enemies, we do advocate being as passionate as David in "siding" with God; it is virtuous to take God's side in "the battle."

The more we love God and identify with God, the more we will understand (with David) that the enemies of God are our enemies as well. This is true of those who persecute

believers around the world. This is also true on a more personal level. Think, for example, of the person you love the most, whether parents, spouse, children, or friends. You want God's best for that person more than anything else. If someone is actively trying to destroy that person or bringing evil upon that person, you would rightly consider that person an enemy of God; and you could rightly consider that person your enemy as well. This doesn't mean that you hate that person, but in an objective sense, s/he could be viewed as an enemy.

A third perspective (not from Psalm 139) is that **God will punish (or convert) His enemies**. One of two things will happen to God's enemies: they will be punished or they will be converted into worshipers. Saul/Paul, for example, described himself as formerly being "a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor" (1 Timothy 1:13); yet God broke through his hardness of heart and converted him into a worshiper. But those who aren't converted don't ultimately experience God's mercy and grace. David isn't giving God any new ideas when he asks that God slay His enemies. God had already committed Himself to doing this. In Genesis 12, for example, God had declared this to Abraham:

3 And I will bless those who bless you,  
And the one who curses you I will curse.  
And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed."

Since David was a descendent of Abraham, there's a sense in which he is only saying in Psalm 139, "God, do to our enemies what You have said You will do." As well, in the prophets you can read many examples of how God is on record that He will punish His enemies (e.g. Ezekiel 35:5-9).

In the New Testament, the judgment of God becomes less immediate; it's pushed back to the "end of the age." And the judgment of God becomes less temporal and more eternal. But the descriptions of God judging His enemies are no less fierce and certain. The book of Revelation could hardly depict a more devastating judgment against God's enemies - even taking into account the apocalyptic language we find there. This is something to keep in mind: God will either punish or convert His enemies.

### ***Implication for our praying:***

***Praying with Honesty.*** If we learn anything about praying from the Psalms, it's that our praying must be honest. We shouldn't cultivate and nurture hatred toward anyone; but if hatred toward our enemies is already in our hearts, it's better to express it as David did than to keep it bottled up. It's better to pray about our hatred of others than to take revenge. When we pray like David prayed, at least we're leaving things with God. Eugene Peterson makes these observations:

It's easy to be honest before God with our hallelujahs; it is somewhat more difficult to be honest in our hurts; it is nearly impossible to be honest before God in the dark emotions of our hate. So we commonly suppress our negative emotions (unless, neurotically, we advertise them). Or when we do express them, we do it far from

the presence, or what we think is the presence, of God, ashamed or embarrassed to be seen in these curse-stained bib overalls.

But when we pray the psalms, these classic prayers of God's people, we find that will not do. We must pray who we actually are, not who we think we should be. In prayer, all is not sweetness and light. The way of prayer is not to cover our unlovely emotions so that they will appear respectable, but expose them so that they can be enlisted in the work of the kingdom. It is an act of profound faith to entrust one's most precious hatreds to God, knowing they will be taken seriously.

*(Praying through the Psalms, p. 100)*

In a few minutes I'll argue that as Christ followers we should learn to move away from our hatreds. But sometime we experience things at the hands of other people that are so hurtful (and even horrific) that I'd have a hard time condemning someone for praying the way David prayed in Psalm 139. If you have hatred toward your enemies, praying honestly is the place to start. "We must pray who we actually are, not who we think we should be."

David's prayer in last two verses of Psalm 139 opens the door for God to siphon off his hatred and to redirect his heart/mind.

23 Search me, O God, and know my heart;  
Try me and know my anxious thoughts;  
24 And see if there be any hurtful way in me,  
And lead me in the everlasting way.

I wonder what God showed David after he prayed these thoughts. Perhaps He showed David that "the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God" (James 1:20). Perhaps He showed David that his hatred was "hurtful." I don't know the answers to these question. But praying what David prayed in verses 23 and 24 does seem like a wise, humble thing to pray. Instead of assuming that our thoughts are God's thoughts and that our judgments about our enemies are God's judgments, we can pray boldly AND pray that God will search our hearts and show us anything that shouldn't be there.

I can only think of a couple of times in my entire life when I've prayed anything close to how David prayed against his enemies. I was actually surprised by how fierce my prayers were on those occasions. Honestly, I wouldn't want any other person to hear some of the things I've prayed about others. I have to say that it felt good to pray like that. But I'd also have to say that I see things very differently in retrospect. I'm not as convinced that my enemies were actually God's enemies. There was actually a lot of malice and fear and anxiety in my heart that shouldn't have been there. I feel like God has searched my heart and shown me some things about various adversaries I've had over the years.

***Praying as those who have received mercy. (Luke 9:51-56)*** I'd like for us to look briefly at an incident in Jesus' ministry that points us in this direction. This is what we read in Luke 9.

51 When the days were approaching for His ascension, He was determined to go to Jerusalem; 52 and He sent messengers on ahead of Him, and they went and entered a village of the Samaritans to make arrangements for Him. 53 But they did not receive Him, because He was traveling toward Jerusalem. 54 When His disciples James and John saw *this*, they said, “Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” 55 But He turned and rebuked them, [and said, “You do not know what kind of spirit you are of; 56 for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives, but to save them.”] And they went on to another village.

It’s debatable whether or not James and John could have called down fire from heaven (I doubt it). In any case, Jesus’ mission didn’t involve wiping out those who didn’t receive Him. Yes, those who never receive God’s grace and mercy through Jesus will experience God’s judgment. But Jesus’ basic mission involved seeking and saving the lost. Therefore, His disciples are to have the same objective. We should be preoccupied with helping people receive God’s mercy instead of calling down God’s judgment upon them. Why? Because we treat others the way God treats us. The judgment that we deserved fell upon Jesus on the cross. And so we hold out the hope that some who are now God’s enemies will experience His mercy and become His friends.

Since our prayers should reflect our experience with Jesus, we should pray as those who have received mercy. This is where I believe our praying should (eventually at least!) deviate from David’s example. Whereas we should side with God and confess that His enemies are our enemies, and whereas we are to express our hatred to God in prayer when it exists, we are ultimately to get to the place where we can pray for our enemies to experience God’s mercy as we have experienced God’s mercy.

This doesn’t mean that we cannot pray aggressively against evil and evil people. We should pray that God’s enemies would be thwarted in their efforts to lead people astray and to carry out evil on the earth. We should pray that God would confuse and frustrate their plans. We should pray that God’s people would be protected from their evil. But we should also pray that God would somehow break through their defenses and show them the glory of the gospel of Jesus.

Jesus’ praying on the cross epitomizes this type of praying. If ever evil was personified, if ever God had enemies, it was when the Jewish and Roman authorities nailed the sinless Son of God to the cross. But as He hung there He prayed, “Father, forgive them for they don’t know what they are doing.” That was a prayer for God to give them mercy, not justice. When Stephen was being stoned to death he prayed the same thing. As with Jesus and Stephen, we have no guarantee that our enemies will repent and become God’s friends. But that’s not our responsibility; that’s God’s responsibility. Our mandate is to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. When we do that, Jesus says that we are “sons of our Father who is in heaven.”