

QUESTION 76

Malediction

Next we have to consider malediction or cursing (*maledictio*). And on this topic there are four questions: (1) Can one licitly engage in malediction against a man? (2) Can one licitly engage in malediction against a non-rational creature? (3) Is malediction a mortal sin? (4) How does malediction compare to the other sins [involving words]?

Article 1

Is it licit to engage in malediction against anyone?

It seems that it is not licit to engage in malediction against anyone:

Objection 1: It is not licit to depart from a command of the Apostle's in which, as 2 Corinthians 13:3 claims, Christ was speaking. But in Romans 12:14 he commands, "Bless, and do not curse." Therefore, it is not licit to engage in malediction against anyone.

Objection 2: Everyone is obligated to bless God—this according to Daniel 3:82 ("Bless the Lord, you children of men"). But as James 3:9ff. shows, blessing God and cursing men cannot proceed from the same mouth. Therefore, no one is permitted to engage in malediction against anyone.

Objection 3: Whoever curses another seems to will evil for him, either the evil of sin or the evil of punishment, since a curse (*maledictio*) seems to be an invocation of evil (*imprecatio*). But it is illicit to desire evil for another—just the opposite, it is necessary to pray that everyone be liberated from evil. Therefore, no one is permitted to engage in malediction.

Objection 4: Through his obstinance the Devil is especially subject to malice. But no one is permitted to curse the Devil, just as no one is permitted to curse himself; for Ecclesiasticus 21:30 says, "When the wicked man curses the Devil, he curses his own soul." Therefore, *a fortiori*, no one is permitted to engage in malediction against a man.

Objection 5: A Gloss on Numbers 23:8 ("How shall I curse him whom the Lord has not cursed?") says, "There cannot be a just cause for cursing when the sinner's sentiments (*affectus*) are unknown." But a man cannot know the sentiments of another man; nor can he know whether the other man has been cursed by God. Therefore, no one is permitted to engage in malediction against any man.

But contrary to this: Deuteronomy 27:26 says, "Cursed is he who does not remain within the words of the Law." Again, as 4 Kings 2:24 relates, Elijah cursed the boys who were mocking him.

I respond: Malediction (*maledicere*) is the same as speaking evil (*malum dicere*). Now there are three ways in which speaking is related to what is spoken:

(a) In one way, they are related by the *mode of enunciation*, as when someone expresses himself in the *indicative mood*. And in this sense speaking evil (*maledicere*) is nothing other than relating something bad about someone else—and this pertains to *detraction*. Hence, sometimes those who speak evil (*maledici*) are called detractors.

(b) In a second way, the speaking is related in the *mode of a cause* to what is spoken. To be sure, this belongs primarily and principally to God, who made all things by His word—this according to Psalm 32:9 ("He spoke, and they were made"). But it belongs in a derivative way (*consequenter*) to men, who by their word move others to do something by commanding them. And for this purpose verbs of the *imperative mood* were instituted.

(c) In the third way, the speaking is related to what is spoken as *the expression of a sentiment belonging to one who wishes for* what is expressed by the words. And for this purpose verbs of the *optative mood* were instituted.

Therefore, leaving aside the first way of speaking evil, which occurs through the simple enunciation of evil, we have to consider the other two ways. Here one should notice that, as is clear from what was

said above (*ST* 1-2, q. 20, a. 3), doing a thing and wishing for that thing track one another with respect to their goodness and badness. Hence, in those last two ways in which evil is spoken, viz., in the mode of one *commanding* what is evil and in the mode of one *wishing for* what is evil, something is licit or illicit for the same reason. For instance, if someone commands or wishes for something evil for another insofar as it is evil—in the sense of intending the very evil itself—then speaking evil in either of these ways will be illicit. And this is what it is to speak evil *per se* (*hoc est maledicere per se loquendo*).

By contrast, if someone commands or hopes for what is evil for another insofar as it is something good (*sub ratione boni*), then in such a case it is licit to speak evil. Nor will this be an instance of speaking evil *per se*; instead, it will be an instance of speaking evil incidentally (*per accidens*), since the speaker's principal intention is aimed at the good rather than at the evil. Now there are two types of good by reference to which one can speak an evil by commanding it or wishing for it:

(a) Sometimes the evil is spoken by reference to *the just* (*sub ratione iusti*). And this is the way in which a judge licitly speaks evil to the one upon whom he commands a punishment to be inflicted. This is also the way in which the Church speaks evil in anathematizing someone. So, too, the prophets, in conforming their will to God's justice, sometimes call down bad things on sinners (even though imprecations of this sort can also be understood the manner of a prediction).

(b) By contrast, sometimes the evil is spoken by reference to *the useful* (*sub ratione utilis*)—for instance, when someone wishes for a sinner to suffer some illness or some obstacle, or in order that he himself might be made better, or at least in order that he might stop being harmed by others.

Reply to objection 1: The Apostle prohibits speaking evil *per se*, while intending the evil.

Reply to objection 2: A similar reply should be given to the second objection.

Reply to objection 3: To wish evil for someone as a good is not contrary to the sentiment by which someone wishes good absolutely speaking for someone; just the opposite, it conforms to that sentiment.

Reply to objection 4: In the case of the Devil, one must consider his *nature* and his *sin*. His *nature* is good and from God, and so it is not licit to curse it. By contrast, his *sin* has to be cursed—this according to Job 3:8 (“Let them curse it who curse the day”). However, when a sinner curses the Devil because of the Devil's sin, he judges himself to be worthy of malediction for a similar reason. Accordingly, he is said to curse his own soul.

Reply to objection 5: Even if a sinner's sentiment is not seen in itself, it can nonetheless be perceived from a manifest sin for which a punishment is to be inflicted. In the same way, even though one cannot know whom God has cursed as far as final reprobation is concerned, one can nonetheless know who is cursed by God as far as guilt for a present sin is concerned.

Article 2

Is it licit to engage in malediction against a non-rational creature?

It seems that it is not licit to engage in malediction against a non-rational creature:

Objection 1: Malediction seems to be licit mainly insofar as it relates to punishment. But a non-rational creature is not susceptible to either sin or punishment. Therefore, it is not licit to engage in malediction against it.

Objection 2: The only thing found in a non-rational creature is the nature that God has made. But it is not licit to curse such a nature—even, as was explained above (a. 1), in the case of the Devil. Therefore, it is not in any way licit to engage in malediction against a non-rational creature.

Objection 3: A non-rational creature is either something permanent like a body or something transient like time. But as Gregory says in *Moralia* 4, “It is useless to curse something that does not exist,

but it would be vicious to curse it if it did exist.” Therefore, it is not in any way licit to engage in malediction against a non-rational creature.

But contrary to this: As Matthew 21:9 relates, our Lord cursed a fig tree (*ficulnea*); and as Job 3:1 tells us, “Job cursed his day.”

I respond: Blessing or cursing (*benedictio vel maledictio*) properly belong to that entity which things can happen well or badly to, viz., the rational creature, whereas good or bad is said to happen to non-rational creatures in relation to the rational creature, for the sake of which they exist.

Now there are many ways in which non-rational creatures are ordered toward the rational creature:

(a) In one way, *in the manner of assisting him (per modum subventionis)*, viz., insofar as human needs are met by non-rational creatures. And this is why in Genesis 3:17 the Lord says, “Cursed is the earth in your work,” in order that the man might be punished by the barrenness of the earth. This is also the way to understand what Deuteronomy 28:5 says: “Blessed shall be your barns ...,” and later (28:17), “Cursed shall be your barn ...” So, too, according to Gregory’s commentary, David cursed the mountains of Gelboe (2 Kings 1:21).

(b) In a second way, the non-rational creature is ordered toward the rational creature *in the manner of signifying him (per modum significationis)*. And this is the why our Lord cursed the fig tree insofar as it signified Judea.

(c) In a third way, the non-rational creature is ordered toward the rational creature *in the manner of containing him*—more specifically, in the manner of time or place. And this is why Job cursed the day of his own birth because of original sin, which he had contracted in being born, and because of its subsequent penalties. And this is also why David is understood to have cursed the mountains of Gelboe, as it says in 2 Kings 1:21, viz., for the sake of slaughtering the people who lived in those mountains.

By contrast, to curse non-rational creatures insofar as they are creatures of God is a sin of blasphemy. And to curse them considered in their own right is useless and vain and, as a result, illicit.

Reply to objection 1 and objection 2 and objection 3: The replies to the objections are clear from what has been said.

Article 3

Is malediction a mortal sin?

It seems that malediction is not a mortal sin:

Objection 1: In his homily on the fire of purgatory, Augustine counts malediction among the slight sins (*inter levia peccata*). But these are venial sins. Therefore, malediction is a venial sin and not a mortal sin.

Objection 2: Things that proceed from a slight movement of the mind (*ex levi motu mentis*) do not seem to be mortal sins. But sometimes malediction proceeds from a slight movement. Therefore, malediction is not a mortal sin.

Objection 3: It is more serious to act in an evil way than to speak evil. But to act in an evil way is not always a mortal sin. Therefore, *a fortiori*, to engage in malediction is not always a mortal sin.

But contrary to this: Nothing except mortal sin excludes one from the kingdom of God. But malediction excludes one from the kingdom of God—this according to 1 Corinthians 6:10 (“Neither those who engage in malediction nor those who engage in violence (*neque maledici neque rapaces*) will possess the kingdom of God”). Therefore, malediction is a mortal sin.

I respond: The sort of malediction we are now talking about is that through which something evil is spoken either by commanding it or by wishing for it. Now to wish for evil for another or to move someone toward evil for another is in its own right (*secundum se*) incompatible with charity, by which

we love our neighbor by willing the good for him. And so it is by its genus a mortal sin. And the sin is more grievous to the extent that we are more obliged to love and revere the person whom we are speaking evil against. This is why Leviticus 20:9 says, “Let him who curses his father and his mother die the death.”

However, it is possible for a word spoken in malediction to be a venial sin, either (a) because of the insignificance of the evil called down upon the other in the malediction, or (b) because of the sentiment of the one who pronounces the words of malediction, when he pronounces such words from a slight movement or for fun or without deliberation (*ex subreptione*). For, as was explained above (q. 72, a. 2), sins involving words are weighed especially on the basis of the sentiment behind them (*maxime ex affectu pensantur*)

Reply to objection 1 and objection 2 and objection 3: The replies to the objections are clear from what has been said.

Article 4

Is malediction a more serious sin than detraction?

It seems that malediction is a more serious sin than detraction:

Objection 1: Malediction seems to be a certain sort of blasphemy. This is clear from what is said in Jude 9: “When Michael the Archangel, disputing with the Devil, contended over the body of Moses, he did not dare to bring against him the judgment of blasphemy ...,” and, according to a Gloss, ‘blasphemy’ is here being taken for ‘malediction’. But blasphemy is a more serious sin than detraction. Therefore, malediction is a more serious sin than detraction.

Objection 2: As was explained above (q. 73, a. 3), homicide is more serious than detraction. But malediction is a sin equal to homicide; for in *Super Matthaenum* Chrysostom says, “When you say, ‘Curse him and destroy his house and make everything perish,’ you are no different from a murderer.” Therefore, malediction is more serious than detraction.

Objection 3: A cause is greater than a sign. But one who engages in malediction causes evil by his command, whereas one who engages in detraction merely signifies an already existent evil. Therefore, the one who engages in malediction sins more grievously than the one who engages in detraction.

But contrary to this: Detraction cannot be done well. But as is clear from what was said above (a. 1), malediction can be done both well and badly. Therefore, detraction is more serious than malediction.

I respond: As was established in the First Part (*ST* 1, q. 48, a. 5), there are two kinds of evil, viz., *the evil of fault or sin (malum culpae)* and *the evil of punishment (malum poenae)*. As was shown in the same place, the evil of fault is worse. Hence, to speak the evil of fault is worse than to speak the evil of punishment, as long as the mode of speaking is the same. Therefore, to speak the evil of fault belongs to vilification, gossip, detraction, and even derision, whereas what belongs to the one who engages in malediction, in the sense in which we are now talking about it, is to speak the evil of punishment but not the evil of fault (except perhaps as a punishment).

However, the mode of speaking is not the same. For the four vices just mentioned involve speaking the evil of fault only by enunciating it, whereas engaging in malediction involves speaking the evil of punishment either by causing it in the manner of a command or by wishing for it. Now the very enunciation of fault is a sin (*peccatum*) insofar as some harm is thereby inflicted on one’s neighbor. And, all other things being equal, it is more grave to *inflict* harm than it is to *desire* harm. Hence, an instance of detraction, according to its common definition, is a more serious sin than an instance of malediction that expresses a simple desire. On the other hand, since a malediction which is pronounced in the manner

of a command has the nature of a cause, it can be (a) more serious than detraction if it inflicts more harm than a diminishment of someone's reputation or (b) less serious than detraction if it inflicts less harm.

Now all these points have to be taken in accord with what belongs *per se* to the nature of these vices. There are also other things which can be considered incidentally (*per accidens*) and which either add to or diminish the aforementioned vices.

Reply to objection 1: Speaking evil to a creature insofar as it is a creature redounds upon God and so it has *per accidens* the character of blasphemy. However, this is not so if the creature is cursed because of some fault. And the same argument holds for detraction.

Reply to objection 2: As has been explained, malediction taken in one sense includes the desire for something evil. Hence, if the one who engages in malediction wishes for someone to be killed, then he does not differ from a murderer in his desire. However, he does differ from a murderer insofar as the exterior act adds something to the act of will.

Reply to objection 3: This objection goes through for malediction insofar as the malediction involves a command.