

Justification: What does it Mean?

He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the LORD. Proverbs 17:15

We naturally feel outraged in the face of injustice. God, who is perfectly just, detests injustice even more than we do

The judge's role is simple; he should be fair and impartial. 'If there is a dispute between men and they go to court, and the judges decide their case, and they justify the righteous and condemn the wicked' (Deut 25:1). After considering the evidence, he should decide if the accused is guilty of violating the law. If so, the judge should pronounce a sentence of guilt. The judge should *condemn* the wicked. On the other hand, if the accused had abided by the standard of the law, the judge should *justify* him. He should pronounce him righteous and free him from any penalty. That is justice.

On the contrary, it is a blatant injustice when a judge 'justifies the wicked' or 'condemns the righteous', as often happens in human courts. We can be sure that this will never happen in God's court.

But that is not very comforting to us, is it, since we are all law-breakers? We have all sinned. We have all disobeyed God's commandments. Yet, amazingly, the Bible speak of God justifying the ungodly!

What does that mean? Does it mean that God makes us righteous? No. To justify does not mean 'to make righteous', but as we saw, justification is a judicial sentence, a declaration that the person is 'righteous' and 'not guilty'.

If 'justifying the wicked' means that the judge makes him righteous, surely that would be a good thing to do, and not 'an abomination' to the Lord. But that's not the judge's work. He does not make the accused either good or bad, but simply pronounce a sentence on him.

'To justify' is the very opposite of 'to condemn'. When a judge condemns a criminal, he does not make him bad, but simply states what he really is. Similarly when a judge justifies a person, he does not make him innocent, but simply declares that he is so. Justification, then, does not mean 'to make righteous' but 'to declare righteous.'

The implication is most serious. We can never be justified before God if he simply deals with us on the basis of justice alone. He would be unjust and untrue if God declared us righteous. With the psalmist, we must admit before him, 'If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?' (Psalm 130:3).

None of us will be justified on account of our moral record. We must appeal to God's mercy and grace, and yet we know that God cannot and will never be unjust in his dealing with us. Is there a solution to this dilemma? Yes, justice and mercy embrace each other in the gospel of Jesus Christ. God acts both as a Judge and as a Redeemer, in perfect justice and amazing grace.