

## Condemnation and Justification

### COPING WITH AN IMPORTANT CONTRADICTION

God made a statement in Exodus 23:7, "I shall not acquit a wicked person." In Romans 4:5 Paul talks about the person who believes in God, "who justifies the ungodly." The use of words in both is parallel. In the Hebrew of Exodus 23 the word for "acquit" is the regular word for "justify" or "declare righteous." Other translations for the regular Hebrew word for "wicked" are: "in the wrong", "guilty", "impious" and "transgressor." In the Greek of Romans 4 the regular word for "justifies" has, as synonyms, "acquit" and "declare righteous." Other translations for the word for "ungodly" in Romans 4 are "impious", "godless", or "wicked." There is a distinct colour of irreverence or churlishness about the word "ungodly" in Romans 4.

So the two opposite statements are quite parallel. How can we cope with such a glaring contradiction? The first one was made in a series of laws that God gave Moses for His people after He had given the Ten Commandments. He had said about Himself, when He gave the Ten Commandments, "For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the sin of the parents upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Me." He is holy and just. For the Israelites the sight of Mount Sinai surely confirmed that. They saw thunder and lightning flashes, with a heavy cloud over the mountain, and heard a very loud trumpet blast. All the people who were in the camp trembled. They heard God's voice directly and were so terrified that they asked Moses to relay His commandments to them through Moses in future. Because God is holy and righteous, it is impossible to think that He did not seriously mean what He said, that He would not acquit a wicked person.

St Paul knew His Old Testament very well, and it is impossible that he forgot God's words in Exodus when he wrote that God justifies the ungodly. In the preceding verses Paul laid the foundation for this statement. Although all have sinned and come short of God's glory, God is gracious. He has set forth His Son, Jesus Christ, as the propitiatory sacrifice, so that God justifies the person who believes in Him. God justifies him without regard to his works under the Law. A righteous life has been ruled out absolutely as a way towards God's justifying verdict. The basis of God's verdict is a person's faith in Jesus Christ.

What, then, of the statement in Exodus 23, "I shall not acquit a wicked person"? Yes, it contradicts what St Paul wrote. However, that is precisely the difference between the two great messages in the Scriptures. The Law tells people how they ought to be and to live. It shows them God's strict justice and holiness, and it condemns everything in human beings that is wicked, impious and ungodly. It threatens God's enduring punishment on everything ungodly. The result of God's verdict under the Law is temporal death, and eternal punishment.

We affirm that, although the Law and the Gospel come from the same God, they are contradictory. Someone has said "more than contradictory" (if that were possible). The Gospel tells people what Jesus Christ has done for them, for their justification and salvation. It shows God to trembling sinners as a God of grace, favour, love, compassion, and mercy. It points sinners to Him as their Saviour. It promises them everlasting life through faith in Him.

God's revelation in the Old Testament re-affirmed God's grace and favour also. He promised a Saviour repeatedly. He had made gracious promises to Abraham before He required circumcision, and long before Mount Sinai. When Moses had a glimpse of God's glory on Mount Sinai, Moses heard God reaffirm both the Law and the Gospel. He said, about Himself, "He certainly does not declare anyone exempt from punishment. He avenges the wrongdoing of the fathers upon the children and upon the children's children, upon the third and fourth generation." However, Moses heard mainly Gospel words: "The LORD, the LORD, the merciful and compassionate God, slow to anger, abounding in unfailing mercy and truth, 7 who preserves mercy for thousands, and forgives wrongdoing, rebellion, and sin. (Ex 34:6-7).

This alternation between condemnation and justification, curse and acquittal assumes a very basic role in the life of every Christian. He remembers God's holiness and strict justice, and is repeatedly aware that he deserves nothing by condemnation and punishment. On the other hand, he flees from the Law to the Gospel. The Gospel reminds him that God has reckoned his sin, guilt, and punishment to Jesus, his Substitute. God has made Him who knew no sin the Sinner. Through faith in Jesus' obedience, which was not his own obedience, God has reckoned Jesus' obedience to him. God was true to His word, and did not acquit the Sin-bearer, the Substitute, who was bearing the sin of the world. He treated Him as guilty and wicked. In a great change of places, God justifies the believer, although he has been wicked, and although he continues to sin daily.

So it is right to ask, how has God resolved this great contradiction? The answer lies in the cost that Jesus Christ has paid. It demonstrates that God is just after all. He has not ignored sin, but taken full account of it. He was not

unjust in making Jesus Christ the Sin-bearer, because His Son willingly took on Himself the sin of the world. In the cost that Jesus Christ has paid God's strict holiness and justice and His love and mercy have come together. He has lovingly redeemed sinful and wicked people when they did not deserve His love at all. That has also made His love an attractive, winning, and restoring love.

Often people misunderstand the resolution of this great contradiction. They assume that God can receive sinners if they first stop sinning. They assume that God can acquit guilty and wicked people only if they first give up their wickedness and try to make amends for their wicked deeds. They assume that wicked people can contribute towards their justification through their efforts to live righteously from that point on. They assume, as the Catholic-Lutheran dialogue repeatedly affirms, the Roman Catholic view that God's verdict of acquittal always includes a person's renewal or sanctified life as a prerequisite part of a process. That denies that God justifies the ungodly.

This loses sight of what justification is. It is the opposite of condemnation. Condemnation is a declaration that a person is guilty. Justification is not a declaration that a person has been righteous all along, for he, like all others, has been a sinner. It is not a process through which a person moves towards a better state. Both "condemnation" and "justification" are exclusive. There is no middle ground. Either God declares a person guilty or does not. Either God declares a person righteous or does not. Justification does not make a person righteous in the sense that the person stops sinning from that point on. It is a declaration by God to the believer in Jesus that he is righteous in His sight, freely, without works, without the law, so that, in God's sight, the person is indeed righteous. God has reckoned to the ungodly person a righteousness that is not His own. He has reckoned to him the obedience of Jesus Christ.

The righteousness of the Law and the condemnation of the Law rest on what a person has done or not done. That is so in the context of the statement in Ex 23:6-8 "You shall not pervert justice when your poor person has a public dispute. Have nothing to do with anything false. Do not put an innocent and righteous person to death, because I shall not acquit a wicked person. You shall not accept a bribe, because a bribe blinds clear-sighted persons and distorts the cases of righteous people." The righteousness that matters for sinful people, the righteousness of God, comes through faith. Faith is not doing. God wants faith, certainly, but faith is reception of His gracious gifts. Faith is not a work of the Law, though through faith the Law is fulfilled. Indeed, God graciously works faith in ungodly, wicked people. That is, humanly speaking, impossible, but it happens by God's gracious and powerful working through the Gospel itself. Through the Gospel about Jesus' Christ redemptive work, God works faith, and faith is the means through which the blessings of Christ's redemptive become the wicked, sinful, ungodly person's very own. Praise God that He has resolved the great gulf between His strict justice and His grace, in Jesus Christ, our Lord!