

Justifying the Wicked #1

Proverbs 17:15; Romans 13:3-4

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God has instituted government in this world in order that there might be righteousness, peace, and order in the home, church, and nation. Those civil powers that are legitimately called “the ordinance of God” in Romans 13:2 must have certain moral qualifications. (1) They must not be a terror to good works but rather a terror to evil works (Romans 13:3). (2) They must be the ministers of God to thee (i.e. to the faithful Church of Jesus Christ and to the citizens at large) for good (Romans 13:4). (3) They must be ministers of God showing forth God’s vengeance in executing wrath upon those who do evil (Romans 13:4).

But how is the civil magistrate to know what is good and what is evil? Does Congress or Parliament, does the Supreme Court, does the will of the people, or the Constitution of a nation determine what is good and what is evil? Absolutely not! Only God determines what is morally good and morally evil. And He has revealed what is good and evil in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Therefore, when rulers blatantly and obstinately disregard the commandments of God by establishing and enforcing their own sinful laws and constitutions, they will be a terror to the righteous rather than a terror to the wicked, and they certainly will not be a minister of God to the faithful Church of Jesus Christ for good. In so doing, all rulers depose themselves as the ordinance of God and dispossess themselves of God’s moral authority to rule. They may be rulers, but they are the mere ordinance of man, rather than the ordinance of God. They may enact and enforce laws, but God says (in Psalm 94:20) that they “frame mischief [or trouble] by law.”

Dear ones, it is only those who fulfill the divine conditions laid out by God in Romans 13 who have the moral authority from God to rule. When God grants to us such moral rulers and such moral constitutions, we will joyfully submit to their authority for conscience sake. But until then, we cannot recognize the authority of those who despise God’s commandments, even though we submit to them for wrath’s sake (much like we would submit to a thief who held a gun to our head and demanded our wallet). We love our country. We pray for repentance to be granted to civil magistrates that they may be converted, and we pray for continued peace even under such magistrates. We beseech the Lord that He will hasten the day of reformation when magistrates will be a terror to the wicked rather than to the righteous.

Andrew Melville, a burning and bright light of reformation in Scotland (during and after the time of John Knox), correctly observes in his commentary on Romans 13 that it was only those who fulfilled the divine conditions listed in these verses that were legitimate magistrates (and not all magistrates indiscriminately):

Therefore it is good princes and legitimate magistrates, of whom the apostle here treats and so graphically describes, to whom all legitimate obedience is due.

From our text in Proverbs 17:15, let us consider the following three main points: This week we shall consider (1) It Is an Abomination to Justify the Wicked. Next week we shall continue with the last two main points: (2) It Is an Abomination to Condemn the Righteous; (3) It Is Not an Abomination for God to Justify the Ungodly.

I. It Is an Abomination to Justify the Wicked.

A. Solomon describes as an abomination two acts committed by rulers. The word “abomination” expresses many times the abhorrence God has toward specified sins. Now that does not mean that God views some sins as deserving of his holy wrath and condemnation and not others. For God does not distinguish sins into categories of mortal and venial as does the Church of Rome in which some sins (namely, mortal) deprive

one of grace and deserve God’s eternal punishment, while other sins (namely, venial) do not deprive one of grace and do not deserve God’s eternal punishment. God says, “For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all” (James 2:10). Likewise according to *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* (#84),

Q. What doth every sin deserve?

A. Every sin deserveth God’s wrath and curse, both in this life, and that which is to come.

B. However, even though every sin deserves God’s eternal wrath and condemnation, some sins are specifically called an “abomination”. Abomination means that which is hated and abhorred. Some of the sins specifically mentioned in Scripture as abominations unto God are: sodomy (Leviticus 20:13), idolatry (Deuteronomy 7:25), child sacrifice (Deuteronomy 12:31), and incest (Leviticus 18:29). How many of us have committed the abominations listed in Proverbs 6:16ff? We cannot so easily excuse ourselves because we have not sacrificed one of our children (or aborted one of them). For we are all guilty of hateful abominations before the Lord our God—not only before our conversion, but also after our conversion. For this reason, each of us continually stands in need of the mercy and grace of Jesus Christ.

C. Abominations are indeed sins which God detests with all of His being. They are sins which deserve the eternal judgment of hell. And yet abominations are sins which God freely pardons through the meritorious sacrifice of Christ. Christ suffered hell for our abominations that we might never suffer hell for them. All the legal demands of God’s Law against our abominations have been fully satisfied in Christ, and we are forever free from the curse of those abominations which we have committed or shall commit in this life through faith alone in Jesus Christ. Dear ones, that is why as we grow in our understanding of the greatest love ever known (that of God’s love for abominable sinners like you and me), our conscience cannot delight in sinning against Christ. For how can we delight in slapping such a Savior in the face by trampling upon an everlasting love that died to remove forever the guilt and punishment of those abominations and to mortify the power of those abominations in our lives? Dear ones, a true understanding of God’s love does not lead to a lawless and reckless life of rebellion, but to a thankful and joyful life of obedience.

D. But here in Proverbs 17:15, we find the same word used to describe two acts of rulers—which acts God says are an “abomination” to Him. These two acts make it into the same hated category of abominations in God’s sight as those abominations we have just mentioned. What are they? We will only time this week to consider the Abomination of Justifying the Wicked.

1. God considers it an abomination when rulers justify the wicked and justify the cause of the wicked. To justify means to declare someone or something righteous. It is a legal, judicial term. It does not mean to make someone or something righteous. For when a judge gives his judgment in a case, he does not make a person innocent. To the contrary, he declares a person to be innocent. Dear ones, according to our text, God does not have some neutral opinion toward magistrates in a nation (or even elders in a church) who justify or declare righteous that which is wicked. He abominates, hates, and abhors such sins for it completely undermines the foundation of all government established by God, which exists in order to justify that which is good and righteous, and to be a terror to that which is evil and ungodly (Romans 13:3-4).

a. Let me give a contemporary illustration of how rulers in our nation are even required by the Constitution to justify the wicked. For if the civil magistrate cannot uphold or enforce Commandments 1-4 of the Ten Commandments because they are religious, by necessity they must ignore and rule contrary to God’s holy law and thereby justify that which is wicked rather than that which is righteous. The problems with such a national Constitution are numerous, but let me give you three.

(1) **The first problem**—it implies that some of God’s commandments do not apply to members of society in their official capacities. Nothing could be further from the truth. For as our

Confession of Faith teaches (as do all the Confessions of Reformed Churches of the First and Second Reformations) the 10 commandments are a summary of the Moral Law of God which obliges all people, in all capacities, and in all periods of history. The office of the civil magistrate is ordained of God and he is established to rule on behalf of God (and this is why in Romans 13:4 he is called “the minister of God”). But our magistrates have stated they have no official obligation to God to keep those Commandments 1-4 which also pertain to him in his official capacity as a magistrate.

(2) **The second problem**—it violates the clear teaching of God’s Word. God makes it very clear that the nations of the world and their civil magistrates are obligated to honor Him and His anointed Son in their official capacities as civil magistrates (Psalm 2:10-12; Psalm 9:17; Psalm 33:12; Psalm 79:6; Isaiah 37:16; Isaiah 60:12). Not to embrace the one true Reformed Religion as a nation is not neutral, but is antichristian according to the Lord. All such nations and civil magistrates will be judged accordingly by God for their national atheism or polytheism (in excluding the one true living God from the Constitution and laws of this land). Removing “under God” from the pledge of allegiance is simply consistent with an atheistic nation. For what does “under God” mean according to Congress, the President, or the Supreme Court? It means basically whatever you want it to mean. It is really an idolatrous and polytheistic phrase in the present historical context.

(3) **A third problem**—if civil magistrates are to uphold Commandments 5-10 but not Commandments 1-4, then man has more rights than the one true living God who by His almighty providence raises nations up and puts them down for His own glory. In fact, God has no legal rights to preserve His own honor or His religion in a nation where the civil magistrate is not obligated to keep Commandments 1-4. Your dog or cat has more rights than God does in such a godless nation. The civil government can officially protect the rights of dogs and cats that are abused, but the civil government cannot protect the rights of the one true living God when He and His religion are abused. Thus, the magistrates of this nation (and all of the nations of this world as well) cannot do anything else than justify the wicked and their wicked causes, for they cannot (according to our immoral Constitution) promote and defend the one true living God nor officially establish that religion alone that is revealed in Holy Scripture.

b. Let me give you another realm in which rulers may justify the wicked or justify wicked causes—within the Church of Jesus Christ. For when ministers and elders promote and defend denominationalism, they promote and defend schism and division within the Body of Jesus Christ (which Christ prayed should be visibly one throughout the world in John 17:21). One of the chief purposes of the Solemn League and Covenant (1643) within the kingdoms of England, Ireland, and Scotland was to unite the Church of Jesus Christ in these nations, to remove denominationalism in each kingdom, and to promote unity and uniformity of the one true Reformed Religion so that the name of God (and His revealed religion) may be one throughout the whole world. Thus, sectarianism is a wicked cause which rulers in churches justify. Heresies, impure worship, and tyrannical church government are an abomination unto God for these errors likewise justify that which is wicked. Showing partiality to preferred people in the congregation (due to their wealth, or due to their family relationships, or due to their influence) is likewise to justify a wicked cause. There is no room for favoritism or partiality. There may be certain circumstances that need to be taken into consideration in considering a situation in the church, but those circumstances would then necessarily apply to all people if they were in them. Dear ones, this too is a hateful abomination to the Lord our God. How it behoves us a ministers and elders to carefully rule according to the commandments of our Lord, lest we be guilty of justifying that which is wicked.

c. Finally, you may justify a wicked cause as a parent, as a husband or wife, as a son or daughter, or as a friend. How so? Whenever you ignore or condone that which is immoral in your life or in the life of others, you, in effect, justify wickedness (you declare wickedness to be righteousness by your consent or approval). Are we as parents guilty of such an abomination before the Lord our God by giving our approval to immoral movies, music, or literature that commends the breaking of God’s moral laws? Are we

guilty in our own lives of such an abomination by justifying sinful habits in our lives?

d. Dear ones, let us not follow in the paths of those who justified that which was wicked as did the Pharisees, who justified themselves before God and men; or as the Jews, who justified Barabbas instead of Christ; or as Lot's wife, who by her looking back to Sodom and Gomorrah with a longing for it, justified its wickedness rather than condemning its wickedness.

2. In conclusion, in order that we may avoid justifying the wicked, let us give careful attention to the following practical guidelines.

a. Realize that in the decisions you make in your life, you are continually facing these options: will you justify that which is wicked or justify that which is righteous? For you implicitly justify that which is wicked when you do not consciously choose that which is good and righteous.

b. Therefore, treat the decisions in your life as unimportant (as purely secular).

c. Gather carefully all the information you need before making decisions (even if others think you are unnecessarily slow in coming to a decision). Don't be rushed to make an important decision.

d. Prayerfully seek God's Divine wisdom that you may know the truth which you are to justify and know the error which you are to condemn.

e. Endeavor (by God's grace) to obey the revealed will of God in those areas you know to be true. For you cannot expect God to grant you wisdom in discerning a righteous cause from an ungodly cause (in areas concerning which you may be unsure), if you are not consistently justifying that which is righteous in areas you know (and are certain) to be true.

f. Wisely apply God's holy commandments as a rule to all decisions which you make in life, lest you find yourself justifying that which is wicked rather than justifying that which is good and righteous. In so doing, excuse not yourself (or others) from God's Moral Law (regardless of their official capacity, whether magistrate or minister, father or mother, son or daughter, rich or poor).

g. Justify that which is righteous not in order to justify yourself before God, but rather to manifest your love and thankfulness to a Savior who has so perfectly justified and declared you to be righteous on the basis of Christ's perfect righteousness. These are not acts of the flesh that flow from the Covenant of Works, but acts of God's undeserved mercy that flow from the Covenant of Grace. Your ability to justify that which is good and righteous is all of grace and not due to your inherent goodness, knowledge, wisdom, discernment, and gifts. Boast not in yourself or take any credit to yourself in this matter, for if it is an abomination to rob men (as is taught in Deuteronomy 25:13-16), then how much more it is an abomination to rob an infinitely holy God of all glory and honor due to Him?

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