

Calvin Speaks



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BLESSINGS AND CURSES* (Part 2)

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Sermon 150. 28 February 1556. Deuteronomy 27:11-15.

Summary of the First Part

Blessings and curses are useful to us because, first, they serve to seal and reinforce God's law, and second, men must say "Amen" to them, taking the law upon themselves. We must also note that God's promises of rewards for faithful obedience are not given in a vacuum, for our sins would always condemn us, but rather are given on the prior foundation of grace. It is to those who are already His children that He makes these promises and threats. The promises are rewards to the children, and the threats are that the child who continues in rebellion may be cast out of the household.

Instruction from God

Let us now look at the order here set out. Moses, together with the priests of the tribe of Levi, commanded the people that six tribes were to stand on Mt. Ebal, and six on Mt. Gerizim. And afterwards He said, "Keep My statutes and commandments, which I command you this day, for you are made a people unto your God." This has already been expounded, but it is good to bear in mind always what has been said concerning it, which is that God speaks by the mouth of His priests as if He were there visibly in His own person. And that is so that His words should be received with the greater reverence. For when we see men who are just as mortal as we are, we are of the opinion that whatever proceeds from them may very well be rejected, and if no account is made of it, we think that the matter is not very important. And thus we see that the Word of God is often esteemed lightly. For when we see no one speaking but creatures like ourselves, we think that their pronouncements are nothing but a sounding of words.

But God wants the majesty of His words to be known, and even though it is brought by men, He will not have its worth to be diminished so that men ignore it, but He will have every man to bow before it and receive the yoke which He puts on him. God therefore speaks in this place of Moses and the priests, but in such a way and in such language as to cause the people to lift up their minds higher, to realize that although they are taught by the means and ministry of men, yet they ought to confess that God is the Author of the word which men preach to them,

and that they ought to receive it as from God Himself and so be silent in listening to it, making no reply or criticism of it. For such contempt is not aimed at the mortal creature, but God Himself is despised by it. Therefore, let us note well all the ways in which God authorizes His word, that we may be held to it and be ordered by it, so that every one of us bows down his head submissively as often as men speak to us in the name of God.

And moreover, we also see the order which God has appointed in His Church. He will have all the world answer "Amen," for we ought all to be partakers of His teaching. It must not be kept stored away only for great men, but the smallest also must be instructed by it, so that they might be edified and profited by it. But however the case stands, there were always priests to speak, who were ordained to teach the people, as it is said in Malachi 2:7, "For the lips of a priest should preserve knowledge, and they should seek law from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts" (NASV).¹ We see then that God in all times appointed some in the office of teaching the people, and of bearing abroad His Word.

And so, we today also need such an order, and we know what St. Paul says on this subject, in Romans 12:6, 1 Corinthians 12:28, and Ephesians 4:11.² And it is proved to us also throughout all the Holy Scripture, that God will have certain laws established, and certain men appointed to bear abroad His Word, to be teachers in His church, and to instruct the people in His name. We gather from this that when God has appointed such an order, all those who cannot allow themselves to be taught by this common order with the whole body of the church, though they may call themselves Christians, yet they are no more holy than horses, for they think that it is enough for them to grant in a word that the gospel is the Word of God. But on the contrary, we see here that if we want to be of the body of the church, and have God take us for His children, we must hear the Word of God as it is ministered to us by the

1. It is useful to note that the Levites were not only located in Levitical cities, but also in every Israelite town (Deut. 12:12; 14:27; Jud. 17, 19). These Levites conducted worship and instruction every sabbath (Lev. 23:3), and this was the origin of the synagogue. (Note: Lev. 23:3 proves that the synagogue dates from Moses' time, not from Ezra's, Acts 15:21.)

2. These verses all teach that there are special offices in the church.

ministry of men. But because this point has been dealt with at large previously, I have only at this time glanced at it by the way.

The Privilege of Obedience

There is also this point: "Today you are made the people of God, if you keep His commandments" (vv. 9, 10). Therefore, just as our Lord receives us into His house, so must we also wholly give ourselves unto Him, knowing that to this end He has taken us out from the rest of the world, and will have us to be His own, as it were His peculiar inheritance. All men, of course, are bound to serve Him; but yet notwithstanding, when He calls us to Himself, and shows Himself our Father, does He not bind us to Himself with a double bond? Yes, surely. Are we not then bereft of all sense and reason, and wholly bewitched, if we are not moved to yield ourselves over to His will, so that He may guide us and bear rule over all our whole life? Let us, then, weigh well these words: "Today you are made the people of the Lord your God, and therefore keep His commandments."

How are we made the people of God except by being His church, and by having the use of His sacraments, and that is all the same as if He appeared among us? For we may not expect that God should come down from heaven in His own person, or send His angels to us. Rather, the true mark whereby He will be known to be present among us is the preaching of His Word purely unto us, for there can be no doubt but that then He bears rule in our midst. So then, let this thing profit us, that we know that our Lord receives us to Himself and will have us to be of His own household. Seeing it is so, let us take pains to obey Him in all our life, and to keep His commandments. Let us not wander like brute beasts as the wretched unbelievers do, because they never knew what it was to be of the house of God.

Curse on Secret Idolatry

But now let us come to the rehearsal Moses makes of the curses. First of all he says, "Cursed is he who makes any idol or any molten image, or any carved image; all this is abominable to God. And cursed is he who puts it in any secret place. And all the people shall say Amen." Let us note that Moses does not specify in this place all the curses, each one by itself, but rather sets down certain examples to show that all those who swerve aside from the law of God seek nothing other than to run willfully into utter ruin and destruction.³ The effect, therefore, of all this is that if we want to prosper, we must draw near to God, seeing that He is the fountain of all happiness and prosperity. Whereas, on the other side, all those who depart from Him go and cast themselves into utter destruction. All those who cast off the yoke of God, who do not yield themselves to follow His law and His Word, depart from Him and do as much as is in their power to banish themselves from His presence. And so, it is all the same as if they had cast themselves into the bottom of hell, and sought nothing else in this life but to provoke the vengeance of God against them, and thus to seek their own woe. So, this is what we have to keep in mind.

3. Calvin misses the point here, I believe. It is in Deut. 28 that we find the general discussion of blessings and curses. Here in Deut. 27, these curses follow after many chapters giving penalties, civil curses if you will, for visible sins. Now, so as to seal the people into private as well as public righteousness, curses are placed on secret sins. All the curses listed in 27:15-26 are either said to be performed in secret, or in the nature of the case would be concealed from public view.

Now God begins with His own service, and not without reason for (as we have declared before) the law is divided into two tables⁴ to show us that men ought first of all so to behave themselves that God might be honored, and this is the first and principal duty which we ought to perform, because we are His creatures, and because He has fashioned us for His glory. Let us work toward that end, and let our lives be lived with reference to it, seeing that the first table shows us briefly how we ought to behave ourselves towards our God. This is the reason why God now says in these curses, "Cursed is he who makes any idol."

But as I have told you before, Moses only rehearses certain curses, so as to comprehend the whole in one part, as we have seen examples of. In effect, therefore, when it is said, "Cursed is he who makes any idol," it is the same as if Moses had in general pronounced a curse upon those who falsify and corrupt the service and worship of God. It is as if he should say, "You know how and after what manner our God wants to be worshipped by us; whoever invents any manner of idolatry, whoever devises any manner of superstition, makes idols." And that is not to serve the living God, but rather to follow their own fancies and imaginations, and therefore they are all accursed. You see then how we ought to expound this place.

It was Moses' intention to set down for us here such a specific instance as would cause us to see most plainly an intolerable corruption of the worship of God. For when God is misshapen in any painting, or in any puppet,⁵ or in any other piece of wood or stone that men will use to represent His image and say it is a resemblance of Him; this is a thoroughly gross and outrageous affair. Unfortunately men do not share this opinion, as we see in Popery when men say, "Lo, yonder is God, even a remembrance of Him." It seems that they are so brutish that they think there is no Divine majesty in heaven unless it is represented in the shape of an idol. In contrast, however, those who have had a taste of what God is, and have heard any syllable of His Word, where it is said that God is an immortal and infinite spirit, the fountain of life — such men know that it does immensely great injury to Him to represent Him by a dead thing and by a corruptible creature, to give His name to a mere puppet as if He were but a creature, and less than even we.

Those therefore who have even a slight taste of this doctrine abhor the setting up of any idol and the notion of serving God by going to one. They abhor the notion that any should pray to a dead thing, or look for health from something that can do nothing, neither good nor bad. Therefore, if this were well marked, we should find that Moses intended in this place to make idolatry more detestable, according to that rule which we have heretofore expounded.⁶

4. Modern exegetical and archaeological studies have argued rather convincingly that the two tables of the law were two copies of the entire Ten Words; cf. M.G. Kline, "The Two Tables of the Covenant" in *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972). (The editor of *Calvin Speaks* is not commending the highly dispensational aspects of Kline's theology as presented in this book.) Of course, no one is denying the obvious fact that the Ten Words move from laws pertaining to the love of God to laws pertaining to love for the neighbor; the only question is whether or not the term "two tables" should be used for this division.

5. "Puppet" is a term of contempt for carved images, implying that such idols only speak as their human masters direct.

6. "More detestable;" that is, men who know the Scripture already detest idols, but the curse is added to make idolatry even more detestable.

Yet notwithstanding, we have two things to note in this place. The first is that God cannot permit His infinite majesty to be represented under stone, wood, painting, or any other creature in the world.⁷ This being the case, what must we do when the representation is introduced into the very worship of God? We ought to lift up our minds above the world, and know that we may not stick nor make any idol or puppet unto Him, for He cannot abide it. This is one point to be noted.

Secondly, we must also note that God will not be served or worshipped after our fancies, but He will have us to walk according to His Word, without adding anything thereto or taking away anything therefrom, so that all the inventions of men are equivalent to so many idols. They think that God will be pleased with that which they do, but this is simply a bare guess on their part, while they ignore what He has said He desires. Therefore, they are really serving their own selves and not the living God, for He has given them a rule to live by. In sum, all of their so-called worship of god, deviously drawn up after their own fancies without warrant from God (for they cannot say, "This He commanded me"), are but idols of their own forging. Let this be well noted.

Now let us consider how God says, "Cursed is he who forges idols." Papists take pains to trudge from altar to altar, mumbling their prayers before their images, decking them out with candles, and performing other rituals, and if a man tells them that God dislikes all this, it spites them to be told such, and they fall to railing against God Himself. And although they think they are winning a score of heavens, every step they set out is a casting of themselves into the gulf of hell. And why? Because no matter how fair their replies, yet the Judge pronounces this sentence on them: "Cursed are all they who make idols." Let them go and seek their wages at the hands of the devil; our Lord has already pronounced His sentence, which is contained here: cursed are all idolators.

Now, someone may say that it is no great harm when a man acts from a good intent, saying, "I think it is good; I believe it is well to do so." All the same, God detests every bit of it, because it is a forging of a new god when men turn themselves from the pure simplicity of the worship of God to devise this or that. Although they think to do well, yet they are accursed. And why? Because God dislikes and condemns that which they do. After all, it is not for a mere mortal creature to promise this or that to himself, but God must promise and we must answer Amen. And similarly when He threatens we must be confounded, and every mouth stopped before Him. He must have audience, and we must receive His threats and confirm them, as I have told you.

And here mention is purposely made of a secret place, to show that although a man might not be convicted before the eyes of the world, yet he is surely guilty in the

eyes of God, for the heavenly Judge will find him out well enough. Therefore, let us not beguile ourselves and think that we can escape and remain unpunished just because men do not reprove us and convict us of the evil we have done. For we may well seek refuge in a hiding hole, but God will find us out, seeing that He says, "Cursed is he who makes any idol and puts it in a secret place."

And again he says, "It is an abomination unto the Lord," to show that men must not beguile themselves by standing upon their own opinions or upon the judgment of the world. It is enough that God says, "Such a thing displeases Me." Even if the world likes us, we gain nothing thereby. So then, let us take heed that we frame ourselves to the will of God in such a way that this world cannot carry us away, and so that we serve not our own lusts nor those of other men, but submit ourselves always unto our heavenly Judge. Thus you see what we have to bear in mind.

For when it comes to the service of God, we must not look to see whether there are any witnesses of our doings here below; for even though we may deceive the whole world, yet God sees us, and we cannot escape His sight. Whatever lurking places we may have, let us know that our condemnation is ready at hand. And so, let us order our lives so that God is served and honored, not only with our feet, our hands, and our eyes, but also with the service of our hearts, that is to say with all our affections, and with all our thoughts given over to Him. And (to conclude) we are taught that the service of God is called spiritual for a good reason (John 4:24), and we may understand from this that it is not enough for us to do Him reverence before men, by kneeling down, and by using other such ceremonies,⁸ or by abstaining from idols in the sight of men; but also in secret when every man is withdrawn into his secret place, even then must we avow Him for our God, and all our affections must be held under His obedience, and we must have the purity which St. Paul speaks of, namely the obedience of faith (Rom. 1:5), by which every one of us may dedicate and consecrate himself wholly unto God.

Prayer

Now let us kneel down before the majesty of our good God, with acknowledgement of our faults, praying Him that we may be touched more and more with true repentance, to be displeased with ourselves, so that when we apply our whole study to mind both His promises and His threats, we may not be so rebellious as to cast off His yoke, but rather be held back always by such means as are necessary and proper to us. Let us pray that we may yield to Him as willing service, so that just as He of His free goodness has called us to Himself, so also He may guide and govern us by His Holy Spirit, that we may give ourselves over to Him and serve Him in humility and fear, embracing His promises and trembling at His threats. And let us pray that in the meantime He will make us feel that if we are thus given over to His service, He will make us prosper, and we shall be most happy, especially happy because He has set before us the inheritance of the kingdom of heaven, which He purchased for us in the Person of His only Son. Let us pray that it may please Him to grant this grace not only to us, but also to all peoples and nations of the earth, etc.

7. What the Bible actually forbids is any attempt to conjure the presence of God in art for worship purposes. An example of the violation of the second commandment is found in Judges 17. Micah thought that he could capture and manipulate God by setting up a house of idols and getting a priest who could work the images. Micah said, "Now I know that YHWH will prosper me, seeing I have a Levite as priest." In short, what the Bible forbids is iconodulism, not religious art.

It is understandable that the Reformers, reacting against Roman iconolatry, should move in the direction of rejecting all religious art; and it is legitimate to fast from any proper aspect of life which has been grossly abused. We must say, however, that in Scripture God showed Himself in visible signs and images, and that since all creation reflects Him, there is a sense in which everything in creation illustrates Him. Nothing in creation, however, can function as a mediator, so that we may never "bow down and worship" anything as a channel to God. God is very near to us, and we approach Him directly through Jesus Christ, who is Very God of Very God.

8. Calvin has proper ceremonies, such as kneeling for prayer in worship, in mind here. The Reformers would be amazed and thoroughly disgusted to see our modern churches with people sitting during prayer!

A REMINDER

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