

# Calvin Speaks



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## SECRET SINS\*

### (Part 1)

*\*Title not in the original*

Sermon 151. 4 March 1556. Deuteronomy 27:16-23.

16. *Cursed be he who curses [dishonors] his father and his mother. And all the people shall say, Amen.*

17. *Cursed be he who removes his neighbor's boundary mark. And all the people shall say, Amen.*

18. *Cursed be he who misleads a blind (person) on the road. And all the people shall say, Amen.*

19. *Cursed be he who perverts the justice due to the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow. And all the people shall say, Amen.*

20. *Cursed be he who lies with his father's wife, for he uncovers the skirt [corner, wing] of his father's garment. And all the people shall say, Amen.*

21. *Cursed be he who lies with any beast. And all the people shall say, Amen.*

22. *Cursed be he who lies with his sister, the daughter of his father or of his mother. And all the people shall say, Amen.*

23. *Cursed be he who lies with his mother-in-law. And all the people shall say, Amen.*

We have already seen what God was aiming at in appointing this solemnity, that the people should meet together on Mount Ebal, which is over against Mount Gerizim, to pronounce the curses that are set down here. For when God has once uttered His will to us, that is good enough for us, that all of us should consent to it and confess that to cleave to His Word is the rule of all righteousness. For the chief honor which God requires of us, as though it were a setting of our seals upon it (John 3:33), is to declare that there is no gainsaying or replying to that which He speaks, but that it is altogether certain and ought to be adhered to.

Furthermore, we ought to mark also that the condition of men's agreeing to God's word is such that if they do the contrary in their lives, they condemn themselves with their own mouths. For it is not enough for us to profess that whatever God says is rightful and reasonable, but we must also show by our deeds that His teaching has full force and

authority among us. So then, he who gives such a confession with his mouth is his own judge without any other process of law, if he does not follow that which has been taught him, and which he knows to be right.

Now we have seen how God spoke of idolatries and then of superstitions. And I mention then that it is enough for us to have some examples here touched upon, to show us that God requires the full obedience of His law at our hands, as the conclusion of the passage demands.<sup>1</sup> You see then that God ratified His whole service.

### Cursing Parents

Now He comes to the second table, and begins with the honor and subjection that is due to the father and mother. "Cursed shall that man be," He says, "who curses his father and mother." Now this curse is very important, for it includes all that is repugnant to the honor, obedience, and help which children owe to their fathers and mothers. Therefore, whoever does not yield honor to his father and mother, is here cursed by God. We have seen before the punishment that was appointed for them (Deut. 21:18-21), so that if any man had disobedient children, he could bring them before the judges and they were, upon his single witness, to be stoned to death, and so such evil was to be taken away.<sup>2</sup> For it is an unkindly and accursed thing that children should set themselves against those who brought

1. As mentioned in *Calvin Speaks* 3:4, Calvin is not completely clear here. It is true that the curses in this passage are selective, and stand for all secret sins, but the main point to be observed is that all are *secret* sins. The preceding chapters dealt with open sins, which could be punished by civil or ecclesiastical courts. The general curses and blessings upon all obedience and disobedience come in Deuteronomy 28. This section, the curses on Mounts Ebal and Gerizim, has to do with secret sins in particular. Of course, Calvin notes that these are secret sins along the way, though he does not make a point of its being the genius of the pericope.

2. Calvin's sermon on this passage is available in *Calvin Speaks* 1:1 and 1:2. Those making a contribution to this ministry may request copies of these.

them into the world, and have brought them up, and have taken such pain and care for them. For we know that a father occupies the place, as it were, of God toward his own children and offspring. It follows then that he who lifts himself up against his father or his mother, does manifestly despise God, even as if he were a despiser of all religion. Now here, by the way, God tells us that although judges and magistrates may not do their duty [of executing the rebellious youth], or if perchance the wrong done to his father and mother is borne with, yet he has not therefore escaped. Many crimes are buried in this world, but God reserves His judgement even so, and sooner or later they must come to account.

Let us mark well, then, that there is no more speaking here of the execution of justice which is to be done by means of law [lawcourts], for that has been spoken of before. Here God declares that those who have offended through disobedience, even though they are not punished in this world, and even though their faults are not known so that no examination is made of them such as they deserve, have still gained nothing thereby because there is a heavenly Judge, who forgets nothing but keeps all things registered before Himself; and in the end He will perform His office. Therefore let us think well concerning this teaching, and even if men find no fault with us, and no man vexes or troubles us, let us not fall asleep for that reason. Rather, let every man summon himself, according to what is told us here, and consider that we must come before the judgment seat of God.

And therefore let us learn to walk in such a way that He may accept us when we come there, and so that we do not stand in fear of the curse uttered here. Not that any of us can perform the Law (as I have declared more fully in earlier sermons), but that we are obliged to tend toward it, and to put our endeavor into it. For even though we are not completely clean before God, but are on the contrary guilty of many of the faults that are contained here, yet He does not lay them to our charge, if so be that we hate them, and do not give ourselves over to them, nor let the bridle slack. For this reason let us learn to restrain ourselves, and to be sorry, seeing we are not as perfect as is required. But with all that, as I have declared before, let us strain ourselves to please our Lord God and to obey Him, and let us have such a record in our own consciences that we may freely and with open mouth say, "Cursed be he who has not followed the teaching of salvation in such a way as it is showed to us."

To make any long discourse on the honor which every man owes to his father and mother is not needful at this point, because the law has been expounded already before this. It suffices now to know that in this text God declares that all disobedience, as well against fathers and mothers as against all superiors whom He has set in authority in this world, is intolerable in His sight. For He will not have us to live here in a disorderly manner like beasts, but He will have order and government observed among us. And that cannot be done unless we stand in awe of such as bear any office for the common government of men. Whoever, then, breaks God's order, let him look to be accursed, just as St. Paul also tells us (Rom. 13:4) that

those who rebel are not resisting creatures or men, but make war against God Himself when they go about to overthrow the superiority which He has ordained and commended to us. Mark that for one point.

### Secret Theft

Now next is added, "Cursed be he who plucks up his neighbor's boundary marks." We must always bear in mind what I have told you already, namely that here under one heading God includes all similar kinds. I told you at that place (Sermon 114; Dt. 19:14), that if a man's lands are not kept secure, no man will be master of his own possessions, but all will go to spoil and chaos. And surely the maintenance of just weights and measures, of lawful money, and the keeping of boundaries unchanged, are things that are universally acknowledged. How might men buy and sell, or engage in any trade at all, if the coin is not lawful? Again, if weights and measures are falsified, we shall be taken in. What purpose will justice serve any more? And we can say the same for boundaries and landmarks. So then, under this saying God intended to show that it was necessary for us to observe equity and uprightness in dealing one with another.

It is true that laws are made for the punishing of such offences, so that if any man shift his neighbor's boundary mark, or remove it, it will not be enough for him to set it in the right place again, or make amends for what he has done, but he shall also openly be punished as for a heinous crime. The same is to be done for the falsifying of weights, and for the maintenance of false measures. Concerning the counterfeiting of coin, if a man does so, it is not enough for him to pay back that which he has wrongfully taken, but he must also die for it, and with good reason.<sup>3</sup> For otherwise, as I said, all laws would have to be abolished. And it would be better for us to be wild beasts than to live without those means which God has ordained, nature also having taught us the same thing.

But suppose some man defrauds his neighbor, whether by false measure or by some other wicked practice, seeking to advantage himself through another man's loss, and the magistrate does not learn of it [or cannot solve the case], so that it remains unpunished; yet here we are shown that in the end it must come to account before the heavenly Judge. If a poor man is bereft of his right, or oppressed by an authority, by violence, or otherwise, so that he dare not say a word about it, or can find no advocate to take his case in this world, yet God guarantees him justice, and those who think themselves greatly benefitted by enriching themselves by hook or crook will at length find that it would have been much better for them

3. The Bible nowhere enjoins the death penalty for counterfeiting. The penalty for theft in Scripture is double or multiple restitution, not prison and not death. Calvin does not call for the death penalty in Sermon 114 (on Dt. 19:14), and in his *Commentaries* at this point mentions that the Romans punished this crime severely. Calvin may be going beyond Scripture here, or perhaps merely referring to local custom. (If any reader can enlighten the editor on this point, I should appreciate it. Address correspondence to James B. Jordan, at the address for *Calvin Speaks*.)

to have had but one bit of bread to eat, than to have had ever so much to glut themselves with, and that it would have been better for them to have heeded the curse here set down. For God has no need of the help of man. Suppose all men dealt wrongly here, so that all things were confused and put out of order, yet this saying shall not fall to the ground; the man who removes his neighbor's boundary mark shall be accursed, when God performs His office.

It is true that He wants men to use the sword, those into whose hand He has placed it, and He has ordained that they do so. And, if they are slack and slow in doing it, He will show them that He appointed them not in vain to punish crimes and offences. But mortal men cannot prejudice Him. When an earthly Judge fails to discharge his duty, it does not follow that this weakens God's authority, or that He is bereft of fit means to execute His office, or that He is idle. For He is not like worldly princes, who trust to their officers and are well contented to act as blind persons when things go amiss. "As for me," they say, "I understand that all things go well; and concerning my officers, my will is that they should act faithfully to what I have commanded them." A prince thinks it is enough for him to have said the word, but in reality God is looking over them, and controlling them. And even though offenders and transgressors escape the hands of men, yet shall they be punished at His hands in the end.

So then, let us not be worrying [like the thief] that we might be seen, or that we might not do a good quick job of our deceit; but rather let us be worrying about this saying, "Cursed shall he be who pulls up his neighbor's landmark." Men may not see it at all, but God sees it, and we can no more avoid His eyes than we can His hand. So, let us beware of all fraud and false dealings, assuring ourselves that our Lord watches over us, and that He watches in such a way that He will not permit the poor to be crushed, nor the simple to be outraged or devoured, without such things being punished. Rather, He will show in the end how it is not without reason that he claims to Himself the title of Judge of the whole earth.

### Neighborliness

Next we find, "Cursed be he who causes the blind to stray out of the way, or to stumble in the way." This is a cruelty even against nature. For the more need a man has, the more other men ought to pity him and aid him. Here is a poor blind man. Men see him ready to take a fall, and they do nothing to prevent it. Those who take pleasure in such things must be of a totally evil and corrupt disposition, so that there is not one drop of common kindness in them. To be short, they must be lovers of all cruelty and evil. For even the heathen greatly abhorred such things, so that in some places such a deed was as grievously punished as murder, theft, or other similar things. Commonly, however, men made no law for it, the reason being that it was held that every man ought to be sufficiently learned in his own behalf, so that it would be superfluous to have said, "If a man see a blind man, let him set him on his way."

Nevertheless, as I have said before, we have to note that God extends the matter and teaching further. In effect, His meaning is to say, "Cursed shall he be who allows his neighbor to go astray for want of good counsel." For just as a blind man rushes against things and stumbles, and goes astray if he is not led and guided in his way, so also when we lack counsel and good advice, we are surely in the same plight that blind men are in unless we are rescued. Indeed, although a man may have eyes, yet if he is in a strange and unknown country, and goes quite out of his way, so that he is running hither and thither, and men leave him alone, it is all the same as if they had made a blind man go out of his way, and so did the heathens also consider it.

It is not for us to seek excuses, and say, "Why so? God is only speaking concerning blind men." Indeed, but even those who had neither law nor gospel were able to see the duty, and show us our lesson, namely that whoever does not show the way to a traveller when he sees him out of his way, is a very monster, and a detestable creature. And so is he also who is stingy with the light of his candle. I see a poor man whose candle is out, and he comes to me to light it again. Doing this for him costs me nothing, and yet I say to him, "You shall have nothing from me." Are such people worthy to live on the earth? So then, let us mark well God's meaning, where He curses all such as set the blind out of the way, or cause them to stumble.

So, let us gather together what I have touched on heretofore, which is that here God makes us to understand that if any of our neighbors have need of our help, we must help him if we are of ability and have opportunity to do it, especially if it is of no cost or charge to us. Indeed, even if it should cost us something, yet we are bound to help such as are in need and distress; and so what are we bound to do when it costs us nothing, and we need only open our mouths to give counsel? In that case we are not called upon to disburse anything. We are not in danger of losing either time or money, as they say. The thing is to be done at free cost. Shall we then be so cruel as to let a poor man sustain harm through our evil? What kind of dealing is that? Do not such people deserve to be confounded?

But, as I said before, this place does not deal with open punishments, to be executed by earthly judges. God tells us that even though such dealings are borne with, and laughed at, yet it shall come to account before Him.

Now since this is so, let every man look to himself. And first let us beware, that when our neighbors are in any extremity, we are also pitifully moved with compassion to assist them. If it looks as if a man needs our help, let us be pressed and ready to reach out our hand and lend it him. And especially if our Lord grants us the grace to be able to serve our neighbor's needs without cost and without straining ourselves in the matter. Let us understand that He is doing us a great honor. For whoever relieves the needy is the minister of God. Thus God employs us in His service, and promises us that our labor will not be lost. Shouldn't this provoke us the more to it? Note this therefore for a special point, that such as are succorless are here commended to us by God.

And moreover let us realize that if we are bound to

guide the blind lest they stumble or stray out of the way, we ought to be much more forward and ready to advise a man when we see he has need of counsel and is likely to fall into some danger for want of our advice. But indeed much more ought the way of salvation to be regarded, so that if we see a man pushing himself over the line and heading into destruction, we must not disdain to warn him, saying, "Wretched creature, where are you going? What are you doing? Do you desire to perish?" And especially when he does it in ignorance, if we then spare our tongues so that they are not used as instruments of salvation to the poor ignorant soul, who wishes to be taught, surely such recklessness will not go unpunished, nor be forgotten by God. Even though neither law nor justice proceed against it, yet shall this curse be ratified upon it.

To be short, let us mark that our Lord meant by this threat to encourage us to pity and compassion, in succoring all such as have need of us, and especially in employing ourselves when we see poor ignorant persons destitute of counsel, and we ourselves are able to bring them back again to the right way. Thus much concerning that point.

### **Justice and Oppression**

A second statement concerning cruelty immediately follows: "Cursed be he who perverts the justice due to the stranger, the widow, and the fatherless." It is true that to the utmost of our power we must maintain every man's right. Nevertheless, our Lord in this place, as He has before, speaks of widows, fatherless, and strangers, because they lie open to a great number of injuries and

outrages, and no man sets himself in their defense. Indeed, few have any care at all of them, because they are not able to make any recompense. Men see a stranger, see how he can be fleeced, how he can be oppressed, how he can be wronged, yea and that openly, and yet it shall be winked at. And why? Because every man will be friendly toward his own neighbor; but as for that man, he is not of the same country, nor of the same city — he does not belong to us. Thus you see how the poor man is left destitute.

In a similar case are widows and fatherless children. As for the fatherless child, men do not expect him to acknowledge what is done for him today or tomorrow. Sometimes he lies in his cradle, and does not know who does him good and who does him evil, because he has no discretion. He cannot requite the pleasure done to him, and therefore every man leaves him alone. In the same situation do widows stand, especially when they are poor and are of no great reputation in the world. Every man shrinks from them, and they are left as it were in a gob of spittle.

Now, because these things come to pass so commonly, God purposefully takes such people into His protection, saying that if any man wrests or hinders the right of the stranger, the widow, or the fatherless, he will be punished. Even if it is not accounted of before the world, but rather such evildoers are well liked, yet will He call them before Him and show that He cares for those He has taken into His safekeeping. And so under one heading, God meant to show briefly that if we tread upon such as have no reputation, and no means to defend themselves, and no one to lean upon in this world, yet He reserves to Himself their avenging. That is the thing which we have to gather from this text.

*(to be concluded)*

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