

Calvin Speaks



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SECRET SINS*

(Part 2)

**Title not in the original*

Sermon 151. 4 March 1556. Deuteronomy 27:16-24.

Summary of the First Part

The first part dealt with the curses in verses 16-18, and commenced a discussion of v. 19, concerning justice and oppression. Calvin points out that men find it easy to oppress strangers, widows, and orphans, because they are not in a position to defend themselves. God, therefore, takes such helpless persons under His particular protection, promising to avenge them Himself, since they have no earthly protectors.

Justice and Oppression (Concluded)

Now, perverting or hindering the right (v. 19) is nothing other than the unjust and causeless oppression of the feeble and weak, and such as have no one to support and maintain them. That manner or figure of speech which is here set down in Holy Scripture means the same thing as our expression, "to dash a good case to the ground," and in general means to disappoint a man of his right. Now therefore, if I rob a man, when I take to myself those things that belong to him, when I strip him out of his substance, when I thrust him out of all that he has, when I overmaster him and take more upon myself than is properly mine, then I do hinder his right. And so we see, as I said before, that in this text God shows that He will be the Judge of all the outrages which are done to such as have no means to avenge themselves, and are forsaken and forgotten by men.

If we were well advised, surely we would be more afraid to have God be our adversary party, than all the world put together. And indeed, we show that we give small credit to God's Word, since if a man is of a great family and has many friends, if a man is rich or highly favored by the world, we dare not meddle with him. Even if he has molested us, yet we will sweetly swallow it up, and be very careful not to provoke him. In such a way men will put up with all such as have the wherewithal to maintain themselves in this world, even when those who are destitute are robbed and devoured. Yet notwithstanding, God is their defender, and

He says that in oppressing such folk, we make war against Him, and therefore that He also will not be slow to lift up His arm in the maintenance of those whom He has taken under His protection.

But men do not heed that. And thus do we not betray our unbelief? For if we had a true and lively sense that God is not jesting here, when He tells us that His curse shall light upon those who so mistreat the weak and such as have no champions, it is certain that we should quake whenever we were tempted to do evil to any poor creature that has no stay, credit, or authority in this world. I see that this man has neither relatives nor friends. I see that no man regards him. I see that he is undefended. Now, if I advance myself against him, or if I trouble him, God will set Himself against me, for He has set His mark upon the poor man and has told me that if I meddle with such a person, He will take the case to Himself, and I shall be regarded as having challenged and disparaged His own majesty. If we kept this in mind, it is certain that we should be much more restrained and held back by His fear, than we are by all the favors and displeasure of this world. Nevertheless, we see the clean contrary. We are very dull in this regard.

It is certain that such cruelty as is committed against poor folk who have no stay to lean upon, demonstrates manifest contempt of God, and an utter scorning of Him, as if to say that He is unable to execute the vengeance which He has threatened. Now when God is so lightly esteemed, do we think He will put up with it? You see here first how this kind of outrage is even against nature. For if we were not so caught up in our wicked affections, surely every one of us would confess that it is much worse to have hurt or devoured a poor weak creature than to have done harm to a rich man who is well allied and has reserves and the power to avenge himself. All men will grant that. Therefore, it is one of the greatest and most outrageous faults that can be found among men.

Again, it is a scorning of God, a most devilish wickedness when we are not moved at this statement of God, "I have these people in My hand. I will maintain them. Whoever advances himself against them must prepare to have Me as his adversary party." If we make no account of

this, as if God had never spoken it, is it not a token that we are too hard hearted? And therefore, as I have already said, let us learn to bethink ourselves better, and to have a better regard of Him. And when we have dealings with such people as are despised by the world, without alliance, without friends, without deliverers, let us beware that we deal in such a way with them that it may always run in our minds that they are God's children, and that the heavenly Judge will not forget the wrongs that are done to them, especially since He has told us here that those who have been so cruel to the feeble shall not escape His curse.

Sexual Perversion

Now Moses adds further (vv. 20-23), "Cursed be he who lies with his father's wife, with any beast, with his own sister, or with his mother-in-law." This passage treats all the infamous sorts of lechery, even of the most loathsome kinds of them, whether incest or sodomy, or other such corruptions. And it is not without cause that God chooses out these particular kinds,⁴ for it is to the end that we should be touched with the more fear and terror when we go about any kind of lechery.

God could have said simply, in one word, "Cursed be he who commits any lechery," and indeed, this is the very mark at which this text aims. Nevertheless, He did not content Himself so, but as I said He chooses those examples which are most outrageous. Why? So that we should be touched the more to the quick. For we see how slow we are in harkening to the things God tells us. We have His Word, but what about it? It passes out of our minds. We will not tarry to say that it behooves us to keep ourselves from breaking his law. But, if vices are spoken of in only one or two words, will they be esteemed as they ought to be, which is as crimes before God which deserve endless death?

We see how every man excuses himself, so that the secret thief makes no conscience of filching, until he goes from being a petty thief to being a robber; and then it seems to him as if things are no different from the way they were before, until he becomes a murderer and a cutter of men's throats. Thus do men proceed in degrees of theft, and so also they do in lechery. Then they count it as nothing, until eventually they fall into the greatest extremities. Seeing, then, that we are so dull, and are not touched with the kind of fear we ought to have when God condemns sin and would pluck us back from it, therefore it is needful

4. Calvin's point in general is that these perversions are singled out for the purpose of striking fear into the hearer. Without necessarily contradicting Calvin's point, the principal reason for this section of Deuteronomy is to enumerate certain kinds of crimes which ordinarily would never come to the attention of the magistrate, and to assure the people that God Himself would avenge these crimes, no matter how well concealed they might be. Sexual sins such as these are not likely to be found out for several reasons: (1) In the nature of the case the actions are private. (2) Three of these are capital crimes, and therefore (incest with a sister) requires excommunication (Lev. 20). (3) Persons who are the victims of sexual abuse frequently feel an irrational sense of moral shame and embarrassment, and thus do not report the matter to the authorities.

Calvin does not deal with the phrase in v. 20, "for he uncovers the skirt [corner, wing] of his father's garment." In his *Commentaries* at Deut. 22:30, which says the same thing, Calvin points out that this phrase generally denotes exposing the father to shame and humiliation. We may go farther, and note that the four tassels which hung down from the edges of a man's garment are called "corners," and represent cornerstones or pillars, so that the man's general appearance may be seen as a house standing on four pillars. When a man spreads this corner over his wife, he is taking her into his house (Ruth 3:9; Ezk. 16:8). "Uncovering the corner," then, is equivalent to undermining the father's house and honor.

that He should set before us the examples that are most detestable, even such as are calculated to make the hairs of our heads stand on end when we hear them named, even if we clench our teeth against His Word. This is so that no man should beguile himself with fond flattery, but every man be careful to hold himself under the obedience of God.

Here then we see two things. The one is that God has condemned all unchastity and all manner of lechery. The other is that He has purposely chosen the things that are most ugly, such as incest and uncleanness against kind, and such as bestiality. And why? So that men should have occasion to set their minds the better, and not do as they are commonly accustomed, which is to listen to what is said and yet ignore it, as if to say, "All this is very true," and yet make no account of it, acting like people who have been dazed, as if a man had knocked them on the head with a sledge hammer. So much for the first point.

Incest

And we see how God is much concerned about incest, when He says, "Cursed be he who lies with his mother-in-law, the wife of his father, or with the daughter of his father or mother, or with his own daughter-in-law," and such other degrees.⁵ And why? Because we see that men in all ages have overshot themselves in this manner. God is well skilled in applying remedies according to men's specific diseases. Therefore, it is not for nothing that he insists so strongly on such things. And why? Because He saw that men needed to be held in check, and that such kinds of wickedness would have reigned if He had not set Himself stoutly against them and cast barriers in their way, as if He had said, "Stop there, and don't play the loose colt." If He had not ordered beforehand that men were not to rush forth into such vices, surely all would have dissolved into chaos. And if this wickedness existed in those days, we may be sure that we are not exempted from it nowadays.

And therefore, let us understand that since our Lord uses so much earnestness in this manner, He is warning us to occupy ourselves in minding these things, so that we think on them day and night, early and late, so that we may walk in such chastity and sobriety that our lives may not break forth into such beastly sins, but that we may be given to God to serve Him purely. That, I weigh, is the thing which we have to gather from this place.

And let us not flatter ourselves. For God knows well what is needful for us, or else He would not here have spoken of things that are so shameful that we are embarrassed even to name them. And what about that, then? Was not God aware of our sensibilities in this area? Yes, of course; but He knew that the heart of man is a dreadful dungeon, and that we must be restrained as it were by force, or else He would never be able to hem us in. So then, let this provoke us the more to look closely at ourselves, so that we do not overshoot ourselves in one way or another, but be vigilant to dedicate ourselves to the service of God with all purity, as I said before.

And moreover let us understand that lechery is in itself so loathsome before God, that even if men make no account of the punishing of it, this will be of no help to us when we stand before the heavenly throne. For it is no

5. Calvin is summarizing Leviticus 18 and 20 here.

small thing that God banishes all whoremongers and lechers out of His kingdom, as it is said both in 1 Cor. 6:9 (as we have seen recently), and also in Hebrew 13:4.

That is what we have to bear in mind: namely, that God will not have men to give rein to their fleshly lusts, by accompanying together like brute beasts, but that every man should live chastely in marriage, and be so honest in that regard that nature not be forgotten, as it is when the son-in-law companies with his stepmother, or the father with his own daughter or with his daughter-in-law, or when the brother marries his sister. Rather, these degrees of consanguinity should be observed.⁶ For without such order, what would become of things? How would we differ from bulls and asses?⁷ Thus you see what we have to gather concerning the first point we made earlier, which is that our Lord here condemns all manner of unchaste dealings, and will not have men to behave themselves lawlessly in such cases, but to dedicate themselves unto Him and consider that their bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit, and members of our Lord Jesus Christ, and therefore that they must repress their wicked affections. Keep that in mind as the first point.

Coming, then, to the second point mentioned earlier, God has here set down such examples before our eyes as ought to make us afraid, in that He speaks of those who, against nature, company with their own mothers, stepmothers, or sisters. He speaks expressly of them, so that from the one we should come to the other, as we see he does in all His law. We have declared this more at length earlier. When He wants to condemn hatred, He speaks of murder. Why? Because if a man tells us that no man ought to hate his brother, we easily grant it to be sin, but yet we make no conscience to do it. But when God says that He who hates his brother is a murderer, then we are the more abashed and restrained.

Likewise in this text. When scorers jest at whoredom they show that they believe God ought not to call them to account for it. And this vice did not just arise yesterday; we have seen it in all ages, as Moses reports here. And therefore, God names the most detestable kinds of lechery, so that we should conclude from it that if we do not live chastely, we shall fall from one evil to another until we are fallen into such a bottomless pit as would be horrible to think about. That is what we have to keep in mind on this text.

So, we ought to take a benefit from this warning, considering our blockishness. We think of ourselves as sharp and quick-witted, yet we understand nothing of the teaching of God. We are so dull that He finds it needful to

use shocking speech with us,⁸ or else we would not be moved by the matter. To be short, we have less wit and reason than young babes have. Let men commend themselves as much as they like, and let them glory in the opinion that they are very able, it is still the case that they are so dull that they would be just like brute beasts if our Lord did not speak in a shocking way to us.

And why is this? Clearly it is because we are so possessed by our fleshly desires. None is so deaf as he who will not hear, as they say. Since we see this, let us take better heed, and when menspeakin a shocking manner to us, let us not think they do us wrong, as some do who are so nice that if a man uses a rough style with them, "Oh," they say, "I could have understood all this just as well if you had been nice about it. I am just like a little baby." To be short about it, they are upset if a man speaks sharply to them, for they fondly presume in their own imaginations that they know all that is necessary after the first sentence spoken to them.

But notice that God here speaks in another style and language. Why does He do so? Because He sees that there is need. So then, let us allow ourselves to be taught according to our capacity. And seeing we are slow, if our Lord wakes us up, let us receive it meekly and learn to do ourselves good by it. And so you see what we have to gather from all these texts.

Assault

Moving onto verse 24, which says, "Cursed be he who strikes his neighbor in secret," we find that this is spoken against all hatred and rancor, and may serve for a conclusion [for today's lecture]. A man might demand here how it comes to pass that God here is cursing those whose whole offense is in things of which no mention is made in His Law; for I have told you before that it is enough for a man to observe the things contained in the Ten Commandments, and that the whole perfection of our life is set down there. But no mention is made there concerning the blind [as in v. 18 here]. So then, how does it happen that God here denounces vengeance against something not forbidden in His law? Well, we see from this, as I have mentioned at other times before, that our Lord in His law requires all things that concern charity, such as that we should aid one another, and that there should be such a common bond among us that every man should spend himself in helping his neighbor. Whatever, then, is contrary to this is forbidden and condemned by the law of God.

And that is why it is said here, "Cursed be he who strikes his neighbor in secret." Under this saying, our Lord has comprehended all the misusages which we can offer to our neighbor, so that if we give him only a quarter⁸ it is a kind of murdering of him. And when we see how a man who only grinds his teeth at his brother is condemned to hellfire (Matt. 5:22), what shall become of him who lifts up his fist? Surely, even to stir up a man's tongue against his neighbor is a sin worthy of grievous punishment. If we so much as go "hmpf" in a scornful or disdainful way, it is forbidden. How much more, then, shall be we blamed if we go about trying to outrage them in some way. Let us

⁶ Those who maintain that Old Covenant ethics is no longer binding in the New have a problem here, for the degrees of consanguinity, and the prohibition of bestiality, are not fully and explicitly repeated in the New Testament. The Church catholic and Reformed, however, has always reasoned from 1 Cor. 5:1, and from the general principle of the continuity of covenantal ethics, that the relationships prohibited in the Old Covenant are also prohibited in the New.

⁷ Against what Calvin says here, it must be noted that Seth and the other antediluvian patriarchs married their sisters, as did Abraham, without becoming like brute beasts in the process. Inbreeding was not a problem for these early men, for each person carried a much larger portion of the overall human gene pool, since the human race had not become very diversified. Later on, when the situation changed, the basic moral law was specified to exclude harmful marriages. We might also note that the motivation for inbreeding is almost always to preserve a familistic autonomy, and so the laws of Lev. 18&20 can be seen as aimed, in part, at the destruction of a hyper-familistic, clannish type of society.

⁸ The old English has "insomuch that if we giue him but a phillip, it is a kind of furthering before him." A phillip was a common gold coin of the time. I take it that Calvin's point is that a man needs much, and we give him a mere token.

therefore mark that here, under one particular, God generally comprehends all outrage, violence, and misdeeds which we can do toward our neighbors.

And He says expressly, "in secret," or "privately," so that we should keep in mind something I have mentioned to you before, namely that in this case the matter is not determined by a yielding of account before men. Suppose we have broken all the commandments, and yet no man challenges us for it, and the public authority approves of our doings, and when we are accused of it we are acquitted so that no man dares to complain about the disorders we have committed; suppose that were the case, still we know that God speaks otherwise, saying that if we have done our neighbor any harm privately, his blood will cry out against us for vengeance, when we think we have escaped.

And we see what is said of Abel. Even though no man gave information against Cain, and no process of law went against him, yet the blood of the murdered man spoke. God does not say, "I have heard a report about this," but rather, "The blood of thy brother cries to Me against thee." Here, then, we see that God is not threatening us with some punishment to be suffered at the hands of men, but rather is telling us that we must walk before Him and in His presence. And even though we do not fear any earthly justice, yet we ought not to forbear to restrain ourselves. For when God exercises His office, then the vengeance He has spoken of here must be executed upon all such as have escaped by favor, or concealed their crimes, or offended so cunningly that no man could ever find it out.

Seeing that this is so, let us look to it that we enter into our own consciences, and have God's law written there. Let us not be so much concerned with what men think, saying, "I have not been blamed or reprov'd." Rather, let us consider that our God watches over us, and understand the office of His Word to be such as is written in the epistle to the Hebrews (4:12), that when it is preached to us, then all things must come to trial, and it must enter in, even to the most secret thoughts of our hearts. Now if God's Word has such power, let us assure ourselves that much more it has the office which is attributed to it. For this reason let us be restrained by this means, and when we have served God with our hearts, let our lives be so answerable thereunto that when we shall come before our Lord Jesus Christ we may show that we were truly minded to serve Him, and not to please mortal men.

Prayer

Now let us all fall down before the majesty of our good God, with acknowledgement of our faults, praying Him to vouchsafe to give us true repentance of them. And moreover, that He would bear with us until He has rid us quite clean of all our sins, and of all our spots. And that He would make us so to profit by the things which we hear, that we may learn more and more to renounce ourselves, and to repress our wicked lusts, until He has clothed us again with the purity of that righteousness to which He has called us. And so let us all say, "Almighty God, our heavenly Father, etc."

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