

Calvin Speaks



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THE CURSE AND JUSTIFICATION*

(Part 1)

*Titles not in original edition.

Sermon 152.9 March 1556. Deuteronomy 27:24-26.

24. *Cursed be he who smites his neighbor secretly. And all the people shall say, Amen.*

25. *Cursed be he who takes a gift to strike down the blood of a guiltless soul. And all the people shall say, Amen.*

26. *Cursed be he who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them. And all the people shall say, Amen.*

We understand from this text that what we spoke of earlier is very true, namely that God intended to teach the people of olden time that it was not enough for them to discharge themselves before men, or to escape blame or punishment here, but that they must look up higher and consider that there is a judgment seat in heaven before which we must one day answer and make our account. That is what we must keep in mind if we are to discharge our duty properly. We may well trick men by putting on a fair countenance, and we may even so order our lives that no man can find any fault in us concerning our outward deeds, and yet all the while, if our hearts are full of wicked lusts, if it grieves us to be held in awe, if we grate our teeth against God, what obedience is that?

Assault

Therefore let us note that when this text says, *Cursed be he who smites his neighbor secretly*, God is not only condemning the faults that come to knowledge before men, but also condemning the crimes that lie hidden. And so, if a man has lived in such away that he cannot be rebuked by the world, but is rather praised and commended, he must not use that as an occasion to fall asleep, but must continually examine his heart, and consider well whether there be any hidden nook or cranny therein. For if such a man is thoughtless and does evil, though men do not perceive it, yet God will always perform the office of Judge. And if our hearts reprove us (as St. John says in I John 3:20), God sees us even more clearly.

1. This is probably a reference to public worship — editor,

So then, this text serves well to humble us. And indeed, we ought to remember one other sentence of St. John, where it is said that whoever hates his brother secretly, even if he conceal his hatred so that it is not perceived, and rather makes a show of love, that man will not fail to be condemned by God (I John 3:15). And so you see in effect what we have to bear in mind.

Let us not busy our heads about men's reports. Even if a man is well reported of here in this world, yet let him not flatter himself on account of it. Rather let him summon himself before God and consider whether he beat fault in his heart. Let not men bring before God their own opinions and fancies, for all such things shall be refused; they will serve no purpose. And therefore let us walk with unfeigned heart before God. For we know that He does not regard the outward appearance, as it is said in I Sam. 16:7, but He requires the heart and truth, as it is said in Jer. 5:3.

And look at what is said here concerning murders and fighting — the same must we extend to all other crimes. For if God calls to account those who have done any outrage to their neighbors, even though these are not known to the world, do we think that robberies, treasons, frauds, railings, slanders, and such like will pass by unnoticed? So then, let us learn that we cannot by any means avoid the hand of God, nor escape *I-is vengeance*, if we foster vices in our hearts, though these be not visible to men.

And so that we may get more benefit for ourselves from this doctrine, let everyone of us examine himself properly in his heart when he comes to hear the word of God. For it is proper for us to be reprov'd inwardly, as St. Paul said in 1 Cor. 14:25. Every man, I say, must search his own thoughts and affections to the very bottom? Also, it is the peculiar office of God's word to be a sharp sword, and to divide asunder our thoughts from all our affections and

2. Calvin ought not to be taken in a perfectionistic sense here, as if he believed that men could actually understand themselves exhaustively. Rather, in the context of Calvin's thought on sanctification, we should understand him to mean that we should examine ourselves as carefully as we are able. For a discussion of this general topic, obtain Ronald Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, available from Geneva Divinity School Press, 708 Hamvasy, Tyler, TX 75701. List price \$13.95. *Calvin Speaks* readers may order direct for \$11.00, postpaid.

preferences, and to enter even into the marrow of the bones, leaving nothing undiscovered (Heb. 4:12). Seeing this is so, let us prevent God's judgment, and not tarry until He curses us and bans us for the innocent blood which cries out against us, but let every one of us condemn himself as soon as he has offended, and let him be sorry in his heart and beseech God of His infinite goodness and mercy to deliver us from the curse which is denounced against all such as have so misbehaved themselves in secret, and have not been convicted thereof before men.

Taking Bribes

Next we read: "Cursed be he who takes a gift to strike down the blood of a guiltless soul." Thus Moses speaks word for word. Nevertheless, the word *soul* means *life*. And because the blood is the proper seat of life, it is therefore said "the blood of a guiltless soul." Certainly, even if a man is sinful, yet it is not lawful to buy and sell his life. But as I have mentioned to you already, God here has set before us those crimes that are most detestable, so that we might wake up, because we are not sufficiently moved when He speaks of ordinary faults. Such things slip past us, and we think to ourselves that it is not difficult to obtain forgiveness for them.

Now since there is so much laxity in men, therefore in this place God has chosen some offenses which even by nature we ought to abhor. For if the life of an innocent person is bought and sold, it is a horrible matter. Virtually anybody you talk to will grant that such a wicked design ought not to be allowed. Thus we can now see God's meaning. But even though this thing is commonly and sufficiently condemned with full mouth, yet men do not cease to put it to far too much use. And for proof of this, look at the practices which are used commonly to oppress the poor and the simple sort. It is true that they are not generally in danger of having their throats cut; but when men harm them in their persons and in their properties, they are still guilty of a form of murder in the eyes of God. And when it comes to the seeking of methods to wrest justice from the innocent, and the practicing of devices against those whoseeto live in peace and concord, we find that it is all too common a thing. And therefore this law is no more than necessary.

Now it is true enough, as we mentioned before, that at first blush we can say well enough that there is no reason why we should continue in so great and excessive wickedness, and everyone is willing enough to admit that such is against nature; but yet the common practice and custom is the clean contrary. And therefore let us note well the teaching here set down, namely that God cannot allow so great a crime to be unpunished, such as the disappointing of the right, whereby the party that has not offended is oppressed, against all right and reason.

And truly God speaks here also of judges who

have been corrupted to oppress a poor man, just as much as He speaks of those who have sold themselves or have set themselves out for hire to murder, beat, or strike men, such as these belligerent ruffians who seek employment as bully boys;³ all such as these God utterly condemns in this text. And so under one particular example He embraces all like crimes.

So what we have to gather from all this is that covetousness must not lead us to harm any man at all. We see now that this doctrine extends itself very far. For what is the reason why so many frauds, oppressions, outrages, and injuries are committed, if it is not the seeking of illicit profit? Men think, "I must give some pleasure to the man who is in authority, because he is able to requite me again for it. So, if necessary, I for his sake will oppress one, and torment another. And afterward, if that is not enough, I must move on to other ways of dealings," so that the matter grows out of all measure. So much the more, then, is it needful for us to mark well this teaching: "Cursed shall he be who takes a reward to do men wrong."

The fifteenth Psalm says the same thing; namely that if we want to be people of God's household and dwell in His church, we must beware of taking bribes to hurt the innocent. If God banishes all such out of His kingdom and from the company of the faithful, punishing those who have gone about to misbehave themselves after that fashion by setting themselves to sale and to hire through their covetousness, what remains for them but utter cursedness? For once God has disclaimed us, and no longer acknowledges us any longer as His, we must be accursed.

Where does all our happiness lie? Just where the fifteenth Psalm says: happy are those people whose God is the Lord. The way, then, for us to be happy is to be taken by God into His flock. And if He casts us out, then of necessity all kinds of mischief must come upon our heads. Since this is so, let us learn so much the more to restrain ourselves, and let every one of us be contented with what he has, and let us not advance ourselves by unlawful means lest the profit which we have gotten to ourselves become cudgels or stabs of the knife to the poor, whom we shall have wounded by raking so to ourselves by hook and crook. Therefore, let us learn to have both our hearts and our hands clean from all evil and misdealing, if we wish to be blessed by God and to be numbered among the faithful. Thus you see in effect what this sentence means.

The Law is One

Now, for a conclusion is said, "Cursed be he who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them." Here we see even better something I have set before you already, namely that God here meant

3. Street gangs commonly were hired to harass the Reformers in Geneva by the opponents of the Reform.

to seal His whole law in general, not omitting any point of it, even though He has set down only some particular examples of it. The point of this solemnity on Mounts Ebal and Gerizim is that the people might know that this law is the rule of all perfection, and that God, the Author thereof, is not to be dallied with; but rather this law is to be received with all reverence. Yea, and every man ought to protest with his mouth that 'there is good reason for God to be obeyed, and that all transgressors of His will should condemn themselves, without making any excuses, and willingly acknowledge themselves worthy of death and all misfortune, should they not submit themselves obediently to the service of God.

For this cause, therefore, it is said, "Cursed be he who does not confirm the words of this law." He is not here speaking of one or two commandments, or of some part of them, but of the whole law, every part and parcel thereof without exception. And indeed, we ought to think of how St. James says that He who has forbidden to steal, has also forbidden to commit adultery; and that He who has forbidden murder has also forbidden false witnessing. We must not rend God's justice in pieces. In whatever way we offend, we violate God's law, and despise His majesty. But He will be acknowledged in His law throughout in all points, and not just in part, as I have told you before.

Seeing it is so, let us mark that God has knit His commandments together to show us that it is not for man to put them asunder, as we see many do who covenant with God to abstain from some one sin, and think to themselves that they are discharged when they can say, "Well, at least I have not offended at all points. I have indeed committed some sins, but in all the rest I have obeyed God." The thief will boast that he is no whoremonger. The murderer will say that he is not a swearer. The whorehunter will likewise have his excuse, that he does not transgress in other things, that he is not cruel, and such like. But what is all this? As I said before, God will not have His law to be cut up after that fashion into pieces and fragments. It is a righteousness which consists of ten commandments knit together in one bond. God therefore must be hearkened unto, both in the first word and in the last, as well in the fourth as in the second.

Since this is so, let us remember what is said here, that God will have us confirm the words contained in His law. So, it is not enough for a man to have discharged himself of some piece of it. God will not content Himself with that. Neither will He take such service for payment, but He will have men to give themselves wholly unto Him. And with what condition? Lord, seeing that Your will is contained in Your law, let our lives be conformed thereunto. For we do not have the liberty to part them asunder. Also, as I have declared before, it is too gross a folly to think that we can fool God into thinking that we have a good will to honor Him, and in the meantime despise Him in one thing or another.

Active Obedience

And it is said here, "to confirm the words of this law by doing them." Here Moses shows us the way we are to accept the doctrine delivered to us in the name of God. It is not in the hearing of the ear or in the confessing of the mouth. Though that is true and right, it is not enough. For all is but hypocrisy if our lives are repugnant to it, and it will fall out according to this saying of St. Paul, that while we confess with our mouths that we believe in God, we deny Him in our lives. For this reason let us mark well that the true trial of our faith and obedience is to have our lives answerable to His law, and to show by our doings that we have not been taught in vain. That is what we have to note from Moses words, that we must confirm the words of this law by doing them, yet by performing them not only by affirming that they are good and right (for that is but a small matter), but also by straining ourselves to serve God by applying our whole endeavor in that way, and by fashioning all our works according to His will. That is the good confirmation. That is the way for us to affirm that God is righteous and that He has given us a good, sure, and infallible rule, such as we ought to observe.

Now we see in effect the contents of this sentence, from which we must understand that God has not enjoined on us a chopped up obedience, but He will have us to receive His law to the uttermost in all points without exception. We see likewise that it is not enough for us to say that God has not commanded anything which is not righteous, but that we must also show an accord and consent thereto in our lives, by framing them after all His commandments.

The Curse Extends to All Men

Moreover, it is well for us now to see what condition we should be in if this curse were to be visited upon us. Certain it is that here all men are denounced accursed. And this curse means the same thing as if it were said that all are damned, all are lost, or all are forsaken. Take, for example, the most righteous persons that ever have lived in the world, and by this sentence they deserve to be cast away. Neither Abraham nor any of the patriarchs, neither David nor all the prophets, can be exempted from this condemnation. God by His prophet (Ezk. 14:16) declares Job, Daniel, and Samuel as righteous, and in a manner unblamable, and yet even they also must fall under this curse.

And as for David, he confesses it with his own mouth, saying (Ps. 143:2), "Lord, do not enter into judgment with Your servant, for no man living shall be justified in Your sight." There David is speaking not of the common people only, but is putting himself in the same category. It is true that in other places he declares that it was his whole desire to serve God, and that his heart tended that way. All

the same, he acknowledged that he came far short of discharging himself, or of having such perfections as were requisite. If he admitted himself guilty as much as other men, what shall we do?

But here is a dreadful sentence, and such a one as ought to make the hairs stand stiff on our heads: "Cursed shall he be who does not perform all the words of this law." Who says this? It is God Himself. It is, then, a definitive sentence, such as admits of no appeal beyond itself. God will have all men confess it so, yea He will have every man confess it with his own mouth. What, then, remains for us to do? Where is the hope of salvation? From this we see that if we had only the ten commandments of the law we should be utterly undone and perish. It is necessary for us to have recourse to His mercy, which outstrips His justice, as St. James says (Jas. 2:13). God's goodness, then, must be manifest towards us to deliver us from the damnation all of us would experience if this curse should stand and there be no grace to overcome it.

And certainly St. Paul in Galatians 3:10 proves by this text that we cannot become righteous by our works, but that it is needful for us to be made righteous by faith alone (that is to say, by the mere grace of God), because every one of us stands condemned if God enters into account with us. Why? "Cursed shall he be who does not perform all the words of the law." Suppose a man replies, "Yes, but if a man does perform them, why should he not become righteous thereby? And why should he not be paid his hire by God, according to his deserts?" But St. Paul presupposes that no such man has

ever been found, and none can possibly be found who performs all the words of the law and everything God has commanded.

Indeed, it is a common saying: "God's law is not impossible to fulfill." At this present day, when the Papists argue against us, this statement is regarded as an invincible argument to prove freewill. Why should God have commanded us to love Him with all our hearts, if we are not able to do it? It is repugnant to think that God would exact more of men than they are capable of, for in so doing He would be unjust and cruel. In this way do the Papists reason. But St. Paul says to the contrary, "Cursed shall he be who does not perform all the commandments." And he presupposes, as I said before, that no man does perform them, and that it is impossible to find any such man. From this he draws his conclusion: all mankind is undone if they enter into examination of their works, so that men must be punished according to their deserts; it is necessary for God to cast them off and utterly to damn them.

And so we have an excellent lesson in this text. It is just as if God had struck down all the children of Adam with one blow of a club, and had thundered down upon them to fling them into a dungeon of damnation, that they might perceive that in themselves they are all damned and perishing. But we need not tarry here. For once God has humbled us, He goes on to give us the means fit for deliverance from condemnation, as we shall see more clearly later on.

(to be continued)

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