

# Calvin Speaks



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## THE CURSE AND JUSTIFICATION\*

### (Part 2)

*\*Title not in the original*

Sermon 152. 9 March 1556. Deuteronomy 27:24-26.

#### Summary of the First Part

Verses 24 and 25 are dealt with completely in the section of the sermon in *Calvin Speaks* 3:7 (last month's issue). Concerning verse 26, Calvin points out first of all that it implies that the law is one, so that to transgress in one point is to break the whole law. Men pharisaically tend to think that if they are seemingly righteous in one area, that excuses sin in some other area. Moreover, this curse states that men must not only agree that the law is good, but put it into practice, if they will avoid God's judgment. Of course, since no one, save Jesus Christ, has ever kept the law perfectly, the curse of verse 26 extends to all men. Thus, the law drives us to Christ.

#### The Errors of Rome

But before we proceed farther, let us consider how the Papists deceive themselves. They see well enough that no man performs the law of God, and even though they come up with the fantastic arguments I have already mentioned [in the first of the sermon], saying that God has not ordered anything which is not in the power of men to perform, yet they are convicted even by their own experiences that all men are sinners, that all men have done amiss (as the Holy Scripture also tells us), that there is not any man living upon the earth (as Solomon says) who does not sin, and that all men have need of the grace of God. The Papists then, although they see this clearly, still wrangle about it, saying that this is true only before we are regenerated by God's spirit. Nevertheless, if they be pressed, they must confess in the second place that even the holiest of people are still not perfect, and that there is some frailty in them. And even if they will not confess it, yet the Holy Scripture shows it, and every man feels it in himself.

Now then, why do the Papists so firmly insist on the righteousness of works, and maintain that we well deserve to be recompensed, that we earn or purchase the kingdom of heaven? How does it come to pass that they are so brutish and so beastly? It is because they imagine that even if we do not perform the whole law, yet nevertheless we still can earn merit or desert, and this they term 'a righteousness in part.' They say that all men do indeed sin, true enough, and that in such respect they are at fault before God, and well deserve to be condemned if God is rigorous; nevertheless, they also maintain that when they have the 'righteousness in part,' that is to say when they do partly obey the law, such doing is worthy of acceptance, and to be put into the account and reckoning. And this is what they glory in so much. After that manner, then, there are deservings in men, though they may not perform the whole law. This is one point.

Again, they have another devilish imagination, which is that when they have erred, they can make amends to God by their own satisfactions, and can ransom themselves so that they go scot-free, at least in their own minds. They will well admit, in a word, "we are in danger, but it does not follow that we have no means of escape, and of making God accept in exchange whatever we bring to Him." On this they have founded all their 'good devotions,' as they term them, such as pilgrimages, masses, and yermindes,<sup>4</sup> with all their freewill devotions, such as fastings and diverse other things, going so far as even to put their shrift<sup>5</sup> among their works of satisfaction. Again the prattling of some paternosters,<sup>6</sup> the babbling before a puppet,<sup>7</sup> the

4. "Year's minds", annual commemorative requiem masses said for the dead.

5. Works done as penance for sin, under the direction of the priest.

6. Latin for "Our Father," a reference to multiple repetitions of the Lord's Prayer.

7. That is, an iconic statue of Christ, Mary, or a saint. Calvin uses "puppet" as a term of ridicule.

chanting of some mass, the setting up of some tapers,<sup>8</sup> and such other things, are all of them regarded as recompenses that will cause God to regard them as faultless. And because they see themselves as overstocked with such things, they forge petty inventions with which to play with God.<sup>9</sup>

And therefore they have invented venial sins,<sup>10</sup> so that if a man is tempted to wicked deeds, yet he is not regarded as having offended God until he becomes willing and perfectly contented to the performance thereof. If a man is tempted in himself, moved to do evil, all this is no deadly sin, say the Papists. It is but venial sin, and one sprinkle of holy water is enough to wash it clean away. But to the contrary, we see that it is said, "O Israel, what is it that thy God requires of thee, but that thou shouldst love Him with all thy heart" (Deut. 10:12). Here you see what the righteousness of the law is: that a man love God with all his heart. But he that has offended is accursed. And all of us offend. So then, are not all of us in danger of death? There is no man upon whom God does not pronounce this curse.

Now, when men have thought evil, so that they have been provoked to do wickedly, it is no sin (say the Papists), they are righteous still for all that. See how the Papists do wholly mock God, in that they think by some fond ceremony, or by a *mea culpa*,<sup>11</sup> they are discharged of their sins, and thus make of them as of a thing of nothing. These are the loopholes they use to mock God as they would a young babe, which is a dreadful thing. Yet, it is put to use in all their schools.

We on our part dare not think after this fashion, but rather we must keep in mind what the apostle says, that "it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31). Therefore, we must not in this case break the bonds and yoke which He has laid on our necks; we must not act like wild beasts; we must not think of beguiling Him by some hypocritical show of obedience, having all the while no real purity of intention to serve Him at all. For in the end He will show that His vengeance will light upon all such as have lived as hypocrites and doubleminded deceivers before His face.

What shall we do, then? We must straightforwardly reject this pretense of 'righteousness in part,' which the Papists have invented. It is a device of Satan. Indeed, even they themselves will admit that we cannot merit by any inward worthiness which is in our works. They say that all the worth of our works comes only from this, that God is acquainted with us, so that when men have done all that is possible, yet there will always be some fault that can be found with their works when they come before God. Not that all Papists are of this mind; there is not one in a thousand that thinks this way. But there is here a far finer

8. Wax candles, burned for devotional purposes. Lighting one of these, to burn in the church, was believed (and is today believed) to be a good work, which merits grace.

9. A reference to indulgences. The church had stored up so much merit, that it could manipulate God by bribing Him with it.

10. In Roman theology, if a man dies with a "mortal" sin upon his soul, which has not been sacramentally removed through Holy Eucharist or Extreme Unction, he will go to hell. If, however, he dies with little sins, called "venial" sins, on his soul, he will go to purgatory, where these will be purged away.

11. An ancient prayer of repentance, characterized by the phrase "through my fault, through my fault, through my own most grievous fault." *Mea culpa* = Latin for "through my fault."

and more subtle doctrine of Popery, which is that works are not worthy of themselves, but because of the promise of the law.<sup>12</sup>

But what is this promise? Let us come to that point. Behold, God offers Himself to all men, and says that whoever performs the law shall be blessed, and on the other hand they shall be cursed who step away from it. Thus you see that the perfect righteousness is the performing of the law. But as I have told you already, no man performs it, and therefore God is quit of His promise towards us. Seeing that we, on our side, fail in the condition, He for His part owes us nothing. After the same manner also speaks St. Paul, saying, "If righteousness depends on the works of the law, then is the promise null and void" (Rom. 4:14). St. Paul in this place touches the matter to the quick. After all, who is it that has so performed the law that he can say, "I have attained unto perfect righteousness in my works"? There is no such man to be found. Then, he is saying, there is no efficacy in the promises of the law, and so consequently we shall all be damned, if we will ground ourselves upon our works. After that manner he speaks here (Rom. 4), and also to the Galatians (Gal. 3).

And so let us mark that God denounces all of us to condemnation when He says, "Cursed be he who does not perform all the things contained in the book of My law." As for this carrying on which the Papists call 'satisfactions,' they are but mockeries. God wishes to be served by true obedience. Moreover, the releasing of our sins is freely bestowed, as the Holy Scripture teaches. And as for all the 'satisfactions' (as they term them) which men have come up with, they serve no purpose, nor does God accept any of them. When we start coming up with our own ideas out of our own brains, He refuses every bit of it. Therefore, let us hold to the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, knowing that we are washed and cleansed by His blood, and that this is the only remedy that God sets forth for us.

### Salvation in Christ Alone

Thus we have two things to mark. The one is that if we should be judged by the law of God, there would not be needed anything more than this one sentence to damn us all, yea even the holiest man that ever lived. For no man has ever satisfied God's law, and therefore are we all condemned. For if the holy fathers, who had an angelic holiness in this world, were all the same at fault before God, what shall become of us? Let us now make a comparison between us and them. How far removed are we from the holiness of Abraham, the purity of David, the rectitude of Job, and the perfection of Daniel? When these stand condemned, where do we stand? Let us, then, learn to pull in our horns, and let every one of us keep his mouth shut, as St. Paul says (Rom. 3:19) when he brings us to the righteousness of faith and to the mercy of God.

12. Calvin seems to be objecting to the view that God condescends to accept our good works, unworthy though they be, as meritorious. Elsewhere Calvin strongly insists on the necessity of good works for salvation, but as necessary accompaniments of faith, not as meritorious. There is a fine discussion of this in Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Tyler, TX: Geneva Divinity School Press, [1959] 1982); available through your local bookstore, or directly from the publisher (708 Hamvasy Rd., Tyler, TX 75701; \$13.95).

What we need to keep in mind, then, is that God has removed all self-righteousness from us, to rid us of all presumption and pride, so that we should no longer pretend to come to account with Him to bind Him to us, but that we should willingly condemn ourselves. That is the first thing.

Now from this we have to consider the remedy which God has left, which is that we can be righteous by means of our Lord Jesus Christ. For He has delivered us from the curse which was due against us, and for that reason He was hanged upon a tree, as St. Paul says (Gal. 3:13). We have seen already in this series, in the 21st chapter, that as many as were hanged upon a tree were all accursed. Now when God made that law, did He not know what He had already ordained concerning His only Son, Who was to be hanged upon a tree? Surely it was an unchangeable decree, made even before the foundation of the world. Seeing this is so, we are redeemed from the curse by our Lord Jesus Christ.

And we must now match this sentence with the other which we saw in the 21st chapter. It is said here, "Cursed shall be the man who does not perform all these sayings," and you see clearly that when we do not perform them we are condemned and as good as damned. But we must embrace, with this, our Lord Jesus Christ, Who was cursed for our sakes, so that if this curse is not in vain, we must now be set free. What a thing it would be if the Son of God should be cursed without cause, and yet no benefit redound to us; that He Who is the fountain of all blessedness should be accursed, and yet we not know why except that it is worthless? Now then, seeing that the curse which Jesus Christ suffered in His own person is not vain and purposeless, let us realize that by the same means we are delivered before God. And so you see how we ought to make these two texts agree.

Furthermore, we know that He became subject to the law (Gal. 4:4), so that He might perform all manner of obedience to the full, as it were in our own persons. And the righteousness which He has in Himself, is at this day credited to us, as if every one of us had discharged himself before God. The way, then, for us to be delivered from our cursedness is this: After we have been ashamed and as it were plunged in despair, we may take heart again, being assured of our salvation, and offer ourselves before the majesty of our God, with full assurance that He will accept us as His children, and also like us well; and moreover that seeing our Lord Jesus Christ has fulfilled the law, and not failed in any one point of jot thereof, now we are clothed again with His righteousness, and the same is credited to us as our own.

And therefore let us go boldly before God, and call upon Him as our Father. Let us not ascribe purity to our own works, nor imagine that God owes us anything, nor pretend to bring any desert or merit of our own; but, being utterly empty, let us call upon God to vouchsafe, not only to fill up that which is partially lacking in us, by means of our Lord Jesus Christ, but to give us that righteousness of which we are utterly destitute and unfurnished.

And let us mark further, that when we are once thus received into favor, then shall our works also be accepted. The way for us, then, to serve God to His liking is that being justified by faith, that is to say, having obtained forgiveness of our sins, and having obtained it because daily and

all the time of our lives we have need of it, and also having recourse to God's reconciliation with us of His own free goodness by means of the death, suffering, and sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ offered up to Him — having these things, the way to serve God to His liking is to do so with this attitude of faith. For then shall we do well, and then will He accept the service which we yield to Him. And apart from this we have no faith in Jesus Christ.

But when we endeavor to serve God, even though there may be things wrong, and our affections turn us now one way and now another, yet God does not take our lives. Why? because our sins are not imputed to us. It is true that this curse will stand in force in full rigor, but behold! Christ is our ransom, and pays for us, delivering us from our cursedness, and making satisfaction to God His Father. For we know that His death and suffering are accepted as the price and ransom of our salvation, that by such means we should be reconciled to God.

You see then, that on the one hand it behooves us to feel our own cursedness, that we may be afraid of God's judgments, and that on the other hand we must take courage, not doubting, but seeing that since our Lord Jesus Christ answers for us, we shall be received for His sake, and God will accept us together with our works, even though they are not as good as they should be but have some blots and blemishes in them, so that they deserve to be condemned and utterly rejected. To be short, the faithful, being justified by the grace of God, have along with it this benefit and privilege, that God accepts their works, and charges them not with this curse which they have deserved. That is how we ought to put this text into practice.

### **Mourning and Rejoicing**

But I have told you that on the one side we must mourn and be afraid at the sight of our cursedness before God, and that on the other side we must trust in the grace which Jesus Christ offers us. For if we should become careless because God has forgiven our sins, what a thing that would be! We would wind up in the same mess men get into when they think to discharge themselves towards God in part. Now then, it is needful for us to be sorry for all our sins, and if we detect any vice in us, we must not permit it to reign.

It is true that we come short. I say not in one part only, but in all. There is not any point in the law wherein we do not fail. That man who thinks himself free of envy, and to be a despiser of worldly goods, surely he still has some other affection in his heart which holds him back in the world. He that is chaste and honest in his body, still has some vanities that will carry him away. He who does not foster any hatred or rancor in his heart, is not so clear of all wicked affection that he lives as perfectly as he ought. To be short, we shall be found guilty, not in one or two points only, [but in all] so that there is not any part or piece of the law, from which God might not condemn us.

And therefore, as I said, seeing we perceive such imperfection in ourselves, we must not stand in our own conceits, but mourn before God. And having mourned, we must endeavor to give ourselves over to Him, praying Him to increase in us the power and grace of His Holy Spirit, that we may manfully fight against our sins, so as to

subdue them, overcome them, and get the upper hand of them, to triumph over them once we are clean rid of them. Thus you see how we ought to proceed in this affair.

And this ought to make the faithful rejoice, that although they perceive their own imperfections, yet they must not cease on that account to embrace God's promises with gladness, assuring themselves that they shall not be disappointed. And why? because they have the enjoying of all things in our Lord Jesus Christ, by Whom and by Whose means the curse that was due to them is done away. You see then that on the one side it is needful for the faithful to be cast down utterly, and yet on the other side that they be lifted up again in our Lord Jesus Christ, because they know that if they look for what they do not have in themselves, they will find it if they seek it at the place God sends them.

And therefore let us not beguile ourselves any longer with the fancies of Satan, which reign in Popedom, which lead us to offer our own merits to God, and to covenant with Him as if we had performed His law. Let us assure ourselves that on our part, all the covenants which are made in the law are utterly vain, and that all the promises which import any condition of well-doing and of holy behavior will be unavailable to us and never come to effect, unless we resort to this free promise, "Whoever believes that Jesus Christ died for our sins, and that God by His power has raised Him again to make us righteous, believing the same in his heart and confessing it with his mouth, shall be saved."

This statement is, of course, what St. Paul brings us to in Romans 10:9, which is the passage which will give us

the understanding of this place. The righteousness of the law shows us that we are all accursed, and that there is not any way to save us as long as we remain there. What are we to do then, that we may have access to God? Let us with our hearts believe unto righteousness, and with our mouths confess unto salvation, that we put our whole trust in Him Who has acquitted us towards God His father. And let us embrace the righteous obedience which He has yielded unto God, and likewise His sustaining of the curse which was due to us, so that He might free us from it.

### Prayer

Now let us fall down before the majesty of our good God with acknowledgement of our sins, praying Him to make us feel them better than we have done before, that we may be more and more touched with the true repentance which mortifies all our fleshly affections. May He draw us from the delights of this world, and lift us up into a true desire of giving ourselves wholly to His law, so that we may daily profit thereby, knowing that the true perfection of all faithful folk is to know how far they are from perfection. May He do this to the end that all mouths may be stopped, and none acknowledged as righteous except God. May it be that when Christ's righteousness once shines upon us, we shall not be bereft of it, assuring ourselves that therein lies all our perfection. May it please Him to grant this grace, not only to us, but also to all people and nations of the earth. Etc.

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