

## Lessons From Mount Ebal And Mount Gerizim

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Unity—associated with the fellowship we have with the Father and with Jesus Christ—is a centerpiece of our faith. Around it clusters a whole plethora of counterparts, all of them singularities basic to God’s truth. As if to illustrate the importance of unity, Paul catalogs seven such singularities in his concluding remarks to God’s people in Ephesus.

**Ephesians 4:1-6** I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.

Yes, we are sure that there remains one body, a unity in faith and Spirit to which many other scriptures attest. But, sadly, not everyone lives a life equally committed to that common faith. So it is that, at particular points in His plan, God judges His people, placing them in one or the other of two groups.

I want to focus on this sort of division—cutting into two parts. I will approach the topic by almost racing through enough examples to permit us to extract a few commonalities. Then, with that background, we will focus on an extremely important example in the Old Testament. Let us get started so you can see about what I am speaking.

**Matthew 24:40-41** Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and the other left.

These two back-to-back examples squarely fit into the judgment-resulting-in-division model. God judges and then divides.

Continuing in verse 45, two individuals are God's servants; God finds one to be wicked, the other wise—one blessed, the other cursed.

**Matthew 24:45-51** Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing. Assuredly, I say to you he will make him over all his goods. But if that evil servant says in his heart, 'My master is delaying his coming,' and begins to beat his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him and at an hour that he is not aware of, and will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites.

Hang on to that word, "hypocrite." Interestingly, the Greek for, "cut in pieces," is, *dichotome*, which literally means, "divide in two." English gets its word dichotomy from this Greek word.

Here Christ's teachings segue nicely into Matthew 25, where the central theme is the reality of God's judgment, and how that reality should affect our thinking and action. I will not read the Parable of the Ten Virgins, as you know it so well.

In this case, we are dealing with God's people, virgins awaiting the coming of the bridegroom, with a 50-50 division between them, five wise, who are blessed, and five foolish, of whom Christ says, "I do not know you."

Again, I will not read the Parable of the Talents, as you know it well, recorded at verses 14-30. There too, we see a division of God's people into two groups, one made up of those who grow their talents, whether they be five or ten, and the other group made up of those who do not grow their talents. Their destinies differ significantly.

For a quick look at an Old Testament example, please turn to Jeremiah 24. The vision of the two baskets of figs provides an excellent illustration of God's judgment-resulting-in-division. While we cannot be sure of a fifty-fifty split here, it is absolutely clear that God is apportioning His people between two groups, judging both in diametrically opposite ways.

**Jeremiah 24:1** The Lord showed me, and there were two baskets of figs set before the temple of the Lord. . . .

These two baskets represent two groups of people. Both stand before God, claiming to serve Him. They are subsets of a larger group, that is, Judah.

**Jeremiah 24:2** One basket had very good figs, like the figs that are first ripe; and the other basket had very bad figs which could not be eaten, they were so bad.

**Jeremiah 24:5-6** "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: 'Like these good figs, so will I acknowledge [that is, judge] those who are carried away captive to Judah, whom I have sent out of this place for their own good, into the land of the Chaldeans. For I will set My eyes on them for good, and I will bring them back to this land.'"

Skipping to verse 8, where God judges the bad figs quite differently:

**Jeremiah 24:8-10** 'And as the bad figs which cannot be eaten, they are so bad'—surely thus says the Lord—'so will I give up Zedekiah the king of Judah, his princes, the residue of Jerusalem who remain in this land, and those who dwell in the land of Egypt. I will deliver them to trouble into all the kingdoms of the earth, for their harm, to be a reproach and a byword, a taunt and a curse, in all the places where I shall drive them. And I will send sword, the famine, and the pestilence upon them.'"

Again, two groups, in a clear example of God's judgment.

To get broader perspective, let us generalize from these various examples. In all these cases, we see God's judgment, usually in an end-time context, resulting in a division of a whole (that is, virgins, field-hands, grinders, servants, Judahites). God divides that whole into two parts—sometimes overtly a 50-50 split. I reiterate: God initiates this division, carrying it out as part of His judgment. One part is blessed, the other cursed.

The Scriptures bear no salient indication of a period of church unity at the end. All this is consistent with Paul's comments:

**I Corinthians 11:19** For there must also be factions among you, that those who are approved may be recognized among you.

Also, God's judgment often involves an element of surprise, even bewilderment. The lines of division are not what we might expect! The wicked servant did not expect the master to return. The five foolish virgins did not expect to run low on oil. The blessed were those who were carried out of Jerusalem as captives, not those who remained there.

We will look at this facet of the model in my concluding comments.

With this territory behind us, I want to focus on an example which is singularly relevant to us in God's church.

**Deuteronomy 27:11-13** And Moses commanded the people on the same day, saying, "These shall stand on Mount Gerizim to bless the people, when you have crossed over the Jordan: Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph, and Benjamin; and these shall stand on Mount Ebal for the curse: Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan, and Naphtali.

The six tribes selected to stand on Ebal receive the curses, and we will take a look shortly at what those curses were all about, what they had in common. The other six tribes, those on Gerizim, receive the blessings.

It is fascinating to me that one interpretation of the meaning of the word, "Gerizim" is, "cut in two." What we see in this Ebal/Gerizim division is a dichotomy—that of blessings, caused by obedience; and curses, caused by

disobedience. The blessings and curses are just as much polar opposites as are their respective causes—obedience and disobedience. They are mutually exclusive. Try as you may, you cannot obey and disobey the same rule simultaneously.

But there is something really intriguing about the way God divides His people in this instance.

**Deuteronomy 27:1-8** Now Moses, and the elders of Israel, commanded the people, saying, “Keep all the commandments that I command you today. And it shall be, on the day when you cross over the Jordan to the land that the Lord your God is giving you, that you shall set up for yourselves large stones, and whitewash them with lime. You shall write on them all the words of this law, when you have crossed over, that you may enter the land which the Lord your God is giving you, ‘a land flowing with milk and honey,’ just as the Lord God of your fathers promised you. Therefore it shall be, when you have crossed over the Jordan, that on Mount Ebal you shall set up these stones, which I command you today, and you shall whitewash them with lime. And there you shall build an altar to the Lord your God, an altar of stones; you shall not use an iron tool on them. You shall build with whole stones the altar of the Lord your God, and you shall offer burnt offerings on it to the Lord your God. You shall offer peace offerings, and shall eat there, and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God. And you shall write very plainly on the stones all the words of this law.”

All this is perplexing for at least three reasons.

First of all, why did God command the building of the altar on Ebal, the mount of cursing?

Second, why were the stones on which were written the law to go there and not on the mountain of blessing, on Gerizim?

And third, why did God limit the type of sacrifices to be offered on that altar to only burnt and peace (fellowship) sacrifices? Why no sin offerings? After

all, in the symbology, Ebal is related to disobedience, the cause of the curse. Symbolically, Ebal relates to rebellion and sin. But there was no sin offering there.

In considering this puzzle, notice Matthew 25:12 where Christ tells the five unwise virgins, “I do not know you.” We are back to the Ten Virgins again. The five unwise ones were running out of oil—short of God’s Holy Spirit.

In I Corinthians 2, Paul comments that individuals lacking God’s Spirit are unable to “discern spiritual things.” Devout individuals lacking God’s Spirit may be able to keep the law, to some degree, at least in its letter—that is, written on stones—but not in its deeper intent, not its spirit—written as it is on hearts as God puts it at Jeremiah 31:33.

Symbolically, those on Mount Ebal are cousins to the unwise virgins, lacking the oil necessary to get them to the marriage feast, as Christ put it in Matthew 25:10. Unable to discern spiritual things, those on Mount Ebal have access only to the law written on stones. In His gracious providence, God supplied them the stones on Ebal inscribed with the law.

On the other hand, those standing on Mount Gerizim represent those who have God’s laws written on their hearts. There are no stones on Gerizim. There does not need to be.

Let us also consider this: The people on Gerizim represent those in God’s church who are fully at peace with God, enjoying fellowship with Him. For them, there is no need for a further peace offering. They need not offer peace offerings on an altar. As well, Christ’s comment in Luke 14 pertains to them. There, Christ says,

**Luke 14:33** “So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple.”

Those on Gerizim represent Christ’s disciples, being truly repentant, fully committed to God, living sacrifices in His service. They have held back nothing.

The burnt offering represents such a life, one lived in total dedication to God. Those on Gerizim need not offer burnt offerings anew. They do not need a stone altar, for they have already committed their lives to God. That is why there is no altar on Gerizim. There is no need of one.

Conversely, those standing on Mount Ebal, not at peace with God, not committed fully to His service, need an altar. That is why God provided one for them—if they would make use of it.

In sum, there is, symbolically, a vast difference between those standing on Mount Ebal, and those standing on Mount Gerizim.

With that said, it is time to look at the twelve curses. They do have great significance to us today. To see why, let us consider one overarching generalization about them: All the curses, possibly with the exception of the last one, focus on secret sins—hidden ones; ones committed under cover of darkness, under the counter.

Revelation 7:5-8 makes this commonality important to us because it indicates that God links the designation of the twelve tribes (that is, their names) to the 144,000 sealed saints, 12,000 per tribe, less Dan. This linkage, which is spiritual, is germane to the division of tribes on Gerizim and Ebal. Let us see how.

Christ warns His disciples—and us—to stay away from hypocrisy:

**Luke 12:1** “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.”

Saying one thing, doing another. Playing church, all the while harboring unrepented sins, and secret sins. The hypocrite leads a double life—a mock life—appearing to be blessed, though all the while under a curse. Why? Because he has not renounced “all he has” and followed Christ without reservation.

Aware of this underlying nature of the Ebal-curses, that they deal with hidden sin, we may conclude that the six tribes on Ebal represent those

church members in whom God finds unrepented sin—sheep in wolves' clothing—individuals living a secret, closeted life—hypocrites.

Conversely, we may conclude that the residents of Gerizim symbolize those people in God's church exhibiting sincerity and wholeness of heart, unwavering commitment to keeping the Feast of Unleavened Bread—and, by extension, living their entire lives—"not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (as Paul puts it at I Corinthians 5:8). They have fully committed to abandoning all sin, no matter how stubbornly closeted it may have been at one point in their lives; no matter how tenacious its addiction; no matter how alluring.

On Gerizim stand, symbolically, those of God's people who, recognizing the damnation of the charade, have firmly rejected living a double life, who shun sham and who find no pleasure at all in the mask.

Please, turn to Deuteronomy 27 as we review the curses themselves.

**Deuteronomy 27:15** 'Cursed is the one who makes a carved or molded image, an abomination to the LORD, the work of the hands of the craftsman, and sets it up in secret.' "And all the people shall answer and say, 'Amen!'

Idolatry—specifically the hidden (not the overt), worship of false gods, is the first-mentioned source of curses—the second commandment, recorded at Exodus 20:4-6. In a modern context, such covert idolatry would include placing career, family, pleasure, or even more subtly, social status in the church, above the worship of the true God.

**Deuteronomy 27:16** 'Cursed is the one who treats his father or his mother with contempt.' "And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'

This second of the twelve curses revolves around the fifth commandment (Exodus 20:12).



Exodus 21:17 specifies that the person cursing either of his parents was to be executed. Disobedience is usually not secret, but overt, often blatant, in the open.

The word here is dishonor, however, not disobey. Dishonor can be a disguised response to parents, a secret one. The hypocrite can feign love to parents, while in fact loathing them.

Along this line, notice Mark 7:1-13. Some scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem ask Christ why His disciples do not follow the oral tradition. They are referring to the halakha, which Peter, addressing the apostles at the Jerusalem Council years later, calls “a yoke that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear” (Acts 15:10).

In His response, Christ calls the Pharisees and scribes hypocrites, honoring God with their lips, while their hearts are far from Him. They worship God in vain, He avers, since they have abandoned “the commandment of God [holding in its place] the tradition of men.” The sin of the Jewish leadership is hidden—not obvious to Joe Israelite, who probably considered the Pharisees to be pious. Nevertheless, their sin was deadly. Christ concludes:

**Mark 7:13** “Making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down.”

To my point: It is noteworthy that Christ cites the fifth commandment as His example in this discussion, namely, the tradition that a man is released from the obligation of caring for his aged parents if he dedicates the funds to the Temple. Christ says that is hypocrisy. To do that is to dishonor parents and to disobey God’s law.

**Deuteronomy 27:17** 'Cursed is the one who moves his neighbor's landmark.' "And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'

Biologically, landmarks tend to be nocturnal animals. When they move, they usually do so at night, secretly. (see Deuteronomy 19:14)

**Deuteronomy 27:18** 'Cursed is the one who makes the blind to wander off the road.' "And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'

Leviticus 19:14 has more information about this deceitful act—one of trickery. Over the centuries, how many seemingly sincere teachers have misled uninformed and unsuspecting members of God's church? Such teachers are in fact con men.

**Deuteronomy 27:19** 'Cursed is the one who perverts the justice due the stranger, the fatherless, and widow.' "And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'

See Deuteronomy 24:17. I will not say much more about this one.

**Deuteronomy 27:20** 'Cursed is the one who lies with his father's wife, because he has uncovered his father's bed.' "And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'

This is the first of four curses which pertain to sexual misbehavior. The example here is that of (usually) covert, incestuous relationships. (see Leviticus 18:8 and Leviticus 20:11)

**Deuteronomy 27:21** 'Cursed is the one who lies with any kind of animal.' "And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'

This is probably a catch-all reference pointing to all types of sexual deviancy. While today such sexual misconduct may be quite overt, “in your face” as it were—they even have parades about it. In the context of God's people, even today, it remains highly “in the closet,” very much so. (see Leviticus 18:23, Exodus 22:19, and Leviticus 20:15)

**Deuteronomy 27:22** 'Cursed is the one who lies with his sister, the daughter of his father or the daughter of his mother.' "And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'

**Deuteronomy 27:23** 'Cursed is the one who lies with his mother-in-law.' "And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'

Curses 8 and 9 are related. The fact that God dedicates four of the twelve curses to matters of sexual behavior—usually covert matters—may indicate the stress He places on sexual purity. (see Leviticus 18:9, Leviticus 18:17 and Leviticus 20:14)

**Deuteronomy 27:24** 'Cursed is the one who attacks his neighbor secretly.' "And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'

In view here is furtively lying in wait (indicating “malice aforethought”) with the intent to commit murder. See the sixth commandment at Exodus 20:13, Exodus 21:12 and, more specifically, Numbers 35:16-34.

**Deuteronomy 27:25** 'Cursed is the one who takes a bribe to slay an innocent person.' "And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'

The reference is to taking bribes which lead to the death of the innocent, probably in a judicial context. Such bribes are of course “under the counter,” secret. This is of course in reference to the ninth commandment, forbidding bearing false witness. (see Exodus 20:16 and, more specifically, Exodus 23:7-8)

**Deuteronomy 27:26** 'Cursed is the one who does not confirm all the words of this law by observing them.' "And all the people shall say, 'Amen!' "

This last is a clincher—more expansive in scope than the other curses. By its substance as well as its position, it serves to point out that the previous eleven curses serve in aggregate as an encapsulation of all the laws of God. In point of fact, the curse will come to any person who violates any of the precepts of God’s law. There is no room for hypocrisy. Confirmation of the law does not take place through word but through works of obedience.

I conclude with one other observation. I mentioned this before. When God judges His people, dividing them into two groups, the line of division can be quite special. By special, I mean abnormal or extraordinary, atypical,

different, and, by those tokens, surprising. The line of division is not where we would expect it to be. In the case of the Gerizim/Ebal division, God arranges the tribes differently than He did earlier.

Notice: The mapping of the tribes in Numbers 2, which describes their spatial arrangement in camp, does not at all match the arrangement of the tribes on the mountains. Likewise, the mapping of the tribes in Numbers 10, which describes the order of march in the wilderness, the way they walked every day, does not at all match the arrangement of the tribes on the mountains. Numbers 2 and 10, you see, describe a secular, everyday arrangement—normalcy—a profane arrangement, if you will.

However, Deuteronomy 27 describes an arrangement germane to the renewal of the Covenant.

Special.

And, as I have pointed out, the Gerizim/Ebal arrangement has profound spiritual meaning for us in God's church. It is everything but profane! Very special.

This thought gives the lie to a claim, floated by some in God's church, that God will divide His people into two groups—one to go to the place of safety, the other to go through the rigors of Jacob's Trouble—along corporate lines, familiar lines, every day lines, the lines that we recognize so commonly today.

The example of Deuteronomy 27 suggests otherwise. In the final run-up to Christ's return, expect the unexpected—the unfamiliar. Yes, God is even now watching us; judging; separating. We need to be wise, like five of the virgins, so that, no matter into what congregation God has placed us today, we will end up tomorrow on God's mountain—Mount Zion.