

Unity And Division: The Blessing And The Curse (Part Four)

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Forerunner, "Ready Answer," March-July 2019

“And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful.” — Colossians 3:15

Part Four: The Twelve Curses

The twelve curses recorded in Deuteronomy 27:15-26—those that were to be uttered from Mount Ebal by the Israelites when they entered the Promised Land—bear reviewing:¹

Curse 1:

“Cursed be the man who makes a carved or cast metal image, an abomination to the Lord, a thing made by the hands of a craftsman, and *sets it up in secret*.” And all the people shall answer and say, “Amen.”² (verse 15; emphasis ours throughout)

The first-mentioned source of curses is not public or institutionalized idolatry, as practiced by the world’s religions, but *hidden* idolatry, that clandestine—maybe subliminal—elevation of anything before the true God. The reference is to the breaking of the first and second commandments (Exodus 20:2-6). 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.

Curse 2:

“Cursed be anyone who *dishonors* his father or his mother.” And all the people shall say, “Amen.” (verse 16)

The second curse revolves around the fifth commandment (Exodus 20:12). Exodus 21:17 mandates death for any person cursing either of his parents. It is noteworthy that *disobedience* to parents is usually not secret, but overt, often blatant. The word here, though, is not “disobey” but “dishonor.”³ Dishonor can be a disguised response to parents. The hypocrite can feign honor to parents, all the while secretly loathing them.⁴

Along this line, Mark 7:1-13, where hypocrisy is a significant theme, becomes instructive. Some scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem traveled north to 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 to the Pharisees, Jesus calls His inquisitors hypocrites, honoring God with their lips while their hearts are far from Him.⁵ They worship God in vain, He avers, since they have abandoned “the commandment of God [holding in its place] the tradition of men” (Mark 7:8). The sin of the

Jewish leadership is hidden—not obvious to the populous, which frequently considered the Pharisees and scribes to be pious. Nevertheless, their sin remains one of grave consequence. Christ concludes in verse 13: “Thus [you make] void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down.”

Significant here is the fact that Christ cites the fifth commandment as His example in this discussion (verses 10-12), 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 doing so is hypocritical and tantamount to dishonoring parents and to violating God’s law.

Curse 3:

“Cursed be anyone who moves his neighbor’s landmark.” And all the people shall say, “Amen.” (verse 17)

Landmarks are usually nocturnal creatures. When they move, they frequently do so at night, secretly.⁶

The ongoing use of land obtained by the subterfuge of clandestinely moving landmarks is a superb image of “doing a lie”⁷—that is, living a lie. As such, it is an image of hypocrisy. Those who make use of land not theirs by falsifying boundaries might well benefit from the theft for generations. (For more details, see Deuteronomy 19:14.)

Curse 4:

“Cursed be anyone who misleads a blind man on the road.” And all the people shall say, “Amen.” (verse 18)

See Leviticus 19:14 for 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? Secularly, the phenomenon of “confidence-men” defrauding the elderly of their savings is a manifestation of this sort of thing.

Curse 5:

“Cursed be anyone who perverts the justice due to the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow.” And all the people shall say, “Amen.” (verse 19)

For details, see Deuteronomy 24:17.

Curse 6:

“Cursed be anyone who lies with his father’s wife, because he has uncovered his father’s nakedness.” And all the people shall say, “Amen.” (verse 20)

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

Curse 7:

“Cursed be anyone who lies with any kind of animal.” And all the people shall say, “Amen.” (verse 21)

This is probably a catch-all reference pointing to all types of sexual deviancy. In today’s world, such sexual misconduct may be quite overt, “in your face,” as it were. These days, people actually put such conduct on parade. In the context of God’s people, such practices remain highly “in the closet.” (For more details, see Exodus 22:19; Leviticus 18:23; 20:15.)

Curses 8 and 9:

“Cursed be anyone who lies with his sister, whether the daughter of his father or the daughter of his mother.” And all the people shall say, “Amen.” “Cursed be anyone who lies with his mother-in-law.” And all the people shall say, “Amen.” (verses 22-23)

These two curses, the third and fourth curses relative to sexual deportment, are related. The fact that God dedicates a third of the Ebal curses to such matters—usually perpetrated surreptitiously—may indicate the stress He places on sexual purity (see also Leviticus 18:9, 17; 20:14).

Curse 10:

“Cursed be anyone who strikes down his neighbor in secret.” And all the people shall say, “Amen.” (verse 24)

In view here is furtively lying in wait (indicating “malice aforethought”) with the intent to commit murder. See the sixth commandment in Exodus 20:13, as well as the prohibition of this specific kind of murder in Exodus 21:12. (For more details about murder, see Numbers 35:16-34.)

Curse 11:

“Cursed be anyone who takes a bribe to shed innocent blood.” And all the people shall say, “Amen.” (verse 25)

The reference is to taking bribes that lead to the death of the innocent, most often in a judicial context. Such bribes are by nature “under the counter,” since the cornerstone of any properly functioning jurisprudence is impartiality (Leviticus 19:15; Deuteronomy 10:17-18, I Timothy 5:21; James 2:1, 9). Judges are to be unimpeachably honest, disinterested. 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).

Curse 12:

“Cursed be anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them.” And all the people shall say, “Amen.” (verse 26)

This last is a clincher, more expansive in scope by far 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 fact, the curse will come to any person who violates any of

the precepts of God's law. There is no room for hypocrisy. The apostle Paul may have had the twelfth curse in mind when he wrote to God's people in Rome: "For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified" (Romans 2:13).

Confirmation of the law does not take place through word but through works, works of overt obedience. As a second witness, consider God's own orders to His prophet Jeremiah:

The Lord said to me, "Listen to the terms of the covenant. Tell the people of Judah and of Jerusalem that I, the Lord God of Israel, have placed a curse on everyone who does not obey the terms of this covenant. It is the covenant I made with their ancestors when I brought them out of Egypt, the land that was like a blazing furnace to them. I told them to obey Me and to do everything that I had commanded. I told them that if they obeyed, they would be My people and I would be their God. Then I would keep the promise I made to their ancestors that I would give them the rich and fertile land which they now have." (Jeremiah 11:1-5, *Good News Translation* ⁸)

Through the same prophet, God tells us that appearances do not fool God. He sees through the mask, recognizing reality clearly: "For My eyes are on all their ways. They are not hidden from Me, nor is their iniquity concealed from My eyes" (Jeremiah 16:17).⁹

In the last part of this series, we shall bring the Ebal/Gerizim division home, as it were, looking at its implications for the people of God's church.

Endnotes

¹ Verse 14 provides important information as well: "And the Levites shall declare to all the men of Israel in a loud voice." Commentators agree that it was probably only the men above twenty who actually took their places on the mountains. After each curse, all the men—not just their elders—answered, "Amen," thereby transferring the curses listed in Deuteronomy 28 to the Israelites in the Promised Land. For more about the use of the word "amen," used to ratify a vow, see Numbers 5:22.

² Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptural quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*®, ESV® Text Edition: 2016. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

³ The Hebrew verb is *qalah* (*Strong's* #7034), which appears only six times in the Old Testament, the first time in Deuteronomy 25:3. The translators of the King James Version have rendered it as "seem ile" (once), "shall be condemned" (once), "lightly esteemed" (once), "despised" (once), "base" (once), and "sets light" (once).

⁴ The Parable of the Two Sons (Matthew 21:28-32) may be applicable here. The son who answered his father that he would go to work in the field but did not follow through was hypocritical.

⁵ Christ is quoting Isaiah 29:13:

“And the Lord said: “Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men.”

⁶ The protection of boundary markers provided by God’s law bespeaks the propriety of the private ownership of property. When wandering in the wilderness, the Israelites owned no land. Boundaries had no real significance to them, aside from the boundary of the camp at large. Now, coming into inheritance of the Promised Land, and its concomitant subdivision among the tribes, the sanctity of boundary markers becomes vital to the efficient and peaceful functioning of society.

⁷ See Revelation 22:15, *Young’s Literal Translation*.

⁸ *Good News Translation*® (Today’s English Version, Second Edition) Copyright © 1992 American Bible Society. All rights reserved.

⁹ See Psalm 90:8. The light of God’s presence displays secret sin: “You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence.”