

“CURSE AND BLESSING”

As we continue our study of Paul’s letter to the Galatians, we come tonight to a passage in which Paul demonstrates the utter impossibility of justification by the law. Remember, the reason why Paul is spending so much time dealing with the law is because the Judaizers, the false teachers who were troubling the Galatian churches, were telling the believers in those churches that they had to perform certain works of the law, particularly circumcision, in order to find acceptance with God. In other words, they were saying that justification is not by faith alone, but by faith plus works of the law. This is the idea that Paul is confronting in this passage, as he shows that *faith and the law are two utterly incompatible means of obtaining justification.*

The first thing that Paul talks about in this passage is *the curse of the law*. The law pronounces a curse upon everyone who does not keep it perfectly. The Scripture cited in verse 10 is from Deuteronomy 27, the chapter in which the covenant curses were pronounced by six of Israel’s tribes from Mount Ebal. Paul cites the final verse from that chapter, the verse that sums up all of the covenant curses that were pronounced from Mount Ebal. One interesting thing to note about this is that Paul was probably very familiar with Deuteronomy 27. He tells us in 2 Cor. 11:24 that he received the thirty-nine lashes from the Jews on five separate occasions as a punishment for preaching Christ. And we know from the rabbinic writings of the period that the curses of the law, the curses written in Deuteronomy 27, were read out loud whenever a person received this punishment. Paul probably heard these curses read over him while he was being beaten

on those five occasions. The Jews declared Paul to be under the curse of the law because he was preaching Christ. And the great irony to this is that it is only through Christ that anyone can be set free from the curse of the law.

As a way of justification, the law requires absolute conformity to its standards. It demands perfection. It promises a curse upon everyone who fails to keep it perfectly. And this is not something that we see only in the law of Moses. We find the very same thing in the first law that was ever given to man. When God created man and placed him in Eden, he instructed him not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And he also warned Adam that failure to keep this command would place him under the curse of death, which, as we know, is exactly what happened.

The curse of which Paul is speaking here is not something impersonal. It is God's curse. It is his divine wrath against all who transgress the righteous requirements of his law. If we fail to uphold the law of God in any way, even in the smallest detail, then we are under the law's curse. We are objects of the wrath and curse of God. And every single one of us is under this curse, because there is not one of us who can claim to have fully met the righteous requirements of God's law.

Divine wrath is an unpopular subject with people today. And the idea that God requires perfect conformity to his law seems extremely unreasonable to many. Is God really that severe? Are we really all that bad? Such thoughts often stem from the fact that we measure ourselves against other people instead of against God's perfectly holy standard. But even when we measure ourselves against the summary of God's moral law

in the Ten Commandments, we tend to give ourselves a very charitable self-assessment. We are inclined to think that we do not do all that bad in keeping the Ten Commandments. We don't bow down to statues. We try to go to church on the Sabbath. We don't shoplift. But when we really consider all of the things that are required of us in the moral law, we begin to see how far we really do fall short of God's requirements. Consider the way our Westminster Larger Catechism explains what sins are forbidden in the first commandment, the commandment that says, "You shall have no other gods before me." The Catechism interprets this commandment with these words:

"The sins forbidden in the first commandment are, Atheism, in denying, or not having a God; Idolatry, in having or worshipping more gods than one, or any with or instead of the true God; the not having and avouching him for God, and our God; the omission or neglect of any thing due to him, required in this commandment; ignorance, forgetfulness, misapprehensions, false opinions, unworthy and wicked thoughts of him; bold and curious searching into his secrets; all profaneness, hatred of God; self-love, self-seeking, and all other inordinate and immoderate setting of our mind, will, or affections upon other things, and taking them off from him in whole or in part; vain credulity, unbelief, heresy, misbelief, distrust, despair, incorrigibleness and insensibleness under judgments, hardness of heart, pride, presumption, carnal security, tempting of God; using unlawful means, and trusting in unlawful means; carnal delights and joys; corrupt, blind,

and indiscreet zeal; lukewarmness, and deadness in the things of God; estranging ourselves, and apostatizing from God; praying, or giving any religious worship, to saints, angels, or any other creatures; all compacts and consulting with the devil, and hearkening to his suggestions; making men the lords of our faith and conscience; slighting and despising God and his commands; resisting and grieving of his Spirit, discontent and impatience at his dispensations, charging him foolishly for the evils he inflicts on us; and ascribing the praise of any good we either are, have, or can do, to fortune, idols, ourselves, or any other creature.” [Q. 105]

Now I don't know about you, but as I read those words, it is almost as though I can actually feel the burden of the law coming down upon my shoulders and crushing me under its weight. I know that I do not keep the first commandment perfectly. I have transgressed it times without number. Who upon hearing this explanation of what the first commandment requires could possibly claim to have kept it perfectly? And remember, this is just one of ten commandments. There is no doubt about it. If we rely on works of the law as the way of justification, we are under the curse of the law.

The second point that Paul makes in this passage is that *faith and the law are two irreconcilable ways of seeking salvation*. He cites another Old Testament passage, a verse from the prophet Habakkuk, where it says “The righteous shall live by faith.” If this is the case, if faith is the only way to be righteous before God, then it is impossible

for a person to be declared righteous by works of the law. The law requires performance on our part, and it is only satisfied with perfection in our performance. In fact, the law looks for two kinds of perfection of us: perfection of our nature and perfection in our works. We have neither. As the Thomas Boston puts it:

“the law demands of every man purity of nature, as well as purity of life, and both of them in perfection; and since we have neither the one nor the other in ourselves, we must have both by imputation, else we remain under the condemnation of the law.” [Boston’s notes in Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, 183]

By “imputation” Boston is talking about what Paul said in 3:6: “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” We do not have any righteousness of our own, not in our nature nor in our works. The only way we can be declared righteous by God is to have the perfect righteousness of Christ counted as ours. This is the doctrine of imputation. When we trust in Christ for our salvation, our sins are counted against Christ, who bore the curse of the law on the cross, and his righteousness is counted as ours.

We cannot obtain righteousness through works of the law. This is why Paul says “the law is not of faith.” Now, this does not mean that the law has no role in the Christian life. As Paul said in chapter 2, Christians are set free from the law in order that we might live

for God. The law is a rule of life for the Christian. But as far as justification is concerned, faith and the law are diametrically opposed to each other. It is either the one or the other. Either put your faith in God to justify you, or trust in your own works to justify you. You cannot have it both ways. As the Puritan Edward Fisher puts it,

“Christ Jesus will either be a whole Saviour, or no Saviour; he will either save you alone, or not save you at all.” [*The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, 320]

If you rely on your works, even in the slightest degree, to obtain a righteous standing before God, then you are under the curse of the law. Neither you nor your performance will ever measure up. You do not have the righteous nature that the law requires, and your works will never be enough to meet the requirements of the law. But if you rely on Christ for justification, God declares that the righteous requirement of the law has been fulfilled in you.

This brings us to the third point that Paul makes in this passage: *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us*. When he died on the cross, Jesus took the curse that we deserved upon himself. This is the doctrine of penal substitution. Jesus was our substitute on the cross. He endured the penalty that was against us as lawbreakers. He bore the curse on our behalf. Paul quotes another verse from Deuteronomy to demonstrate this: “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.” In the Old Testament, the hanging of an executed criminal’s body on a tree was done in order to

expose the criminal to public shame. It declared that God's curse was against the person because of his breaking of the covenant. This helps us to understand the words that our Lord quoted from Psalm 22 while he hung on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" [Mt. 27:46] Jesus was not only rejected by men; he was rejected by God. How much worse this must have been than the scourging, the thorns, and the nails!

If we trust in Christ for our salvation, there is no curse left for us. He bore the curse for us. And more than that, he also secured God's blessing, the blessing that was promised to Abraham, for us. What is this blessing? It is the blessing of justification by faith alone, the blessing that Paul described in the previous section in these words: "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness...So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith." [Gal. 3:6, 9]

Notice also that Paul says that this blessing comes to us "in Christ." This underscores the centrality of union with Christ for our salvation. As theologian John Murray writes,

"The life of faith is one of living union and communion with the exalted and ever-present Redeemer...Union with Christ is the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation." [*Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 169, 170]

When we place our faith in Christ, all the benefits that are found in him become ours. And this provides us with a strong assurance of our standing before God. Here again is Edward Fisher:

“I am neither godly nor righteous, but yet this I am sure of, that [Christ] is godly and righteous for me.” [*The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, 174]

You may know that the letter to the Galatians played a critical role in the conversion of the great German Reformer Martin Luther. One of his biographers says that Luther’s study of Galatians and Romans “proved to be for Luther the Damascus road.” [*Here I Stand*, 46] It was through his study of these letters that Luther discovered the principle that lies at the heart of the gospel: “The righteous shall live by faith.” Luther’s attempts to obtain righteousness through works of the law only kept him under the curse of the law. But when he saw that Christ became a curse for us, he finally understood how he could be righteous in the sight of a holy God. As he writes in his *Lectures on Galatians*:

God says, “If you wish to placate Me, do not offer Me your works and merits. But believe in Jesus Christ, My only son, who was born, who suffered, who was crucified, and who died for your sins. Then I will accept you and pronounce you righteous.”

This is precisely what Paul means when he says that the law is not of faith.

The law is good; but since the fall

Its holiness condemns us all;

It dooms us for our sin to die

And has no pow'r to justify.

To Jesus we for refuge flee,

Who from the curse has set us free,

And humbly worship at his throne,

Saved by his grace through faith alone.