

Lifting the Curse

Galatians 3:10-13 (NIV84)

¹⁰ All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law." ¹¹ Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, "The righteous will live by faith." ¹² The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, "The man who does these things will live by them." ¹³ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree."

We learn from a very young age that cursing is bad. We are not allowed to curse, at least, not until you grow up, move out of the house, and hear your parents say the curse word in your hearing first. It's kind of a shocking thing really – to hear your parents curse. They told you for so long that you were never to do that and here they are doing what was forbidden. There's a part of you that knows it's just wrong to curse.

In Catechism class, there is always an awkward moment when we cover the Second Commandment: "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God. What does this mean? We should fear and love God that we do not use his name to curse, swear, lie or deceive, or use witchcraft, but call upon God's name in every trouble, pray, praise, and give thanks." And I ask my students what cursing is. You get that look for a moment when you know it's churning through their minds whether or not they should say a naughty curse word to their pastor.

It's a bit of a revelation with them when they find out that cursing is not so much about forbidden words as it is about wishing evil upon others. The most common way it's used today is to "damn" something. Damn is a shorted form of the word condemn meaning to declare something evil, convict it of its guilt and the fact that it should be sent to hell. In short, to curse someone or something is to declare that God should send it to hell.

For the Galatian Christians, they were worried about being cursed, of being condemned to hell by God. A religious group called the Judaizers believed that to avoid being cursed to hell one had to participate in certain Jewish faith traditions. Males were called to be circumcised as the Judaizers taught that those who were not circumcised would not be saved. To the Galatian Christians, this logic seemed sound. I mean, God instituted circumcision. Why should it ever be stopped?

The Galatian Christians were conflicted. On the one hand, Jews had kept doing this custom of circumcision for some 2000 years, inherited from Father Abraham. Now the Apostle Paul is telling them that they don't have to be circumcised. Paul cited the fact that God declared Abraham righteous before being circumcised as evidence of this truth. This fact meant that uncircumcised people were saved too. By insisting upon it, the Judaizers had turned circumcision into something you do to make God save you, a law that they could do to make their salvation certain.

Here's the problem with a law like this. If you start saying that there are things that you must do for God in order for him to accept you and save you, to keep you from becoming cursed to hell, you can't stop at just one thing or even several things. Paul quotes the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy to prove this point: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law." (verse 10) If you want to avoid the curse of condemnation, avoid being tossed into hell, by what you do, with this circumcision deal, then you are going to have to continually do everything written in the Book of the Law. Every single one of God's laws must be obeyed at all times. There are no weekends from it, no holidays, no mulligans, no do-overs. You must do all of God's laws all the time, from the time your life begins in the womb of your mother until you die. As Jesus said, "Be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect." (Matthew 5:48) Not become perfect. Not work towards perfection. Be perfect. Actively live in that state at all times without every wavering. That's true for the Galatian Christians. That's true for us.

So, how have you done? Have you continued to do all of God's laws every second of every hour of every day of every year of your entire life? Have you done this since you were a baby in the womb? Have you ever missed a beat, ever failed to do a good deed, ever said a naughty word, ever spouted insults at someone, ever lied, ever slacked off at work, homework, ever even entertained the thought of doing any of these things? Have you ever gone out to see a movie when you know you should have been doing chores at home or helping a friend? Even just sleeping in on a Saturday morning when you know there is work to be done, that's wasteful. That's sinful.

That means when I take a break from always continually doing God's laws, even if for a moment, even if just to sleep in a little more, then I fail in continuing to always do everything written in the Book of the Law. This is why Paul says, "Clearly no one is justified before God by the law... All who rely on observing the law are under a curse." (verses 11 & 10)

If we try to achieve perfection before God by what we do, we will never succeed. We are not capable of continuing to do everything written in the Book of the Law at all times throughout our entire lives. It's impossible for us to be perfect by our efforts. Because of this imperfection, because we do not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law, then you and me, we are under a curse. You are a curse word to God. God's judgment stands against you. By trying to live by the law, you will be cursed to condemnation.

This is where Christ, God's Son, God himself, steps in. Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree." (verse 13) Jesus bought us back from the curse of the law. How? By taking our place. He knew that none of us, even the most pious, the most holy of rollers, could continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law. This is why Jesus, being God, perfectly did everything written in the Book of the Law. He did it for his whole life on earth – from the moment he was conceived in Mary until he gave up his spirit. He kept the law, and then he took our cursed judgment upon himself.

Jesus hung on a cross, a tree, to take our curse upon himself. The cross is an instrument of death. Criminals, the worst of the worst, were punished on it. If you hung on a cross, you were considered cursed, that you got what you deserved. Those who hung on a cross were wicked and evil and they met a fitting end on a tree. Jesus hung on a tree and so became a curse, a curse word to God. He took this on to himself so that the curse would be satisfied. That he would feel the scourge of God, that he would feel and experience the everlasting torments of hell, of condemnation. Jesus endured that curse, endured hell, as he called out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

By hanging on a tree Christ lifted the curse from us. When Jesus called out, "It is finished," it was the moment we knew that our curse had been lifted. We are no longer a curse word to God. Condemnation was carried out on Jesus, not us. Because Jesus hung on a tree, God says "Blessed is the one who transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered." (Psalm 32:1) That's us. The curse has been lifted from us.

This is why we do not put our hope in our own efforts, in our trying to continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law. That way of living leaves us cursed. We live by faith, not by the law. We live, looking at that cross, and thanking God that he became a curse for us and so lifted the curse from us. That cross now means life. That is what we believe in. That is our faith, and the righteous will live by faith. Faith in what Jesus did on the cross is the truth that we live by on Good Friday and every day. Amen.