

“The Curse of the Law”

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In the book of Galatians, Paul writes that “Christ has redeemed us from the **curse** of the law” (Gal. 3: 13). Many people construe this to mean that the law itself is a curse... or that you are under a curse if you try to keep God’s law. They reason that because *Christ* kept the law, we don’t *need* to keep it... nor should we *try* to keep it!

Yet, is that what Paul is actually saying?

What the Verse Does NOT Say

First, let’s notice what the scripture in question does **not** say.

(1) It does *not* say that if you keep the law, you’ll be under a curse. To the contrary, Jesus Christ Himself showed that just the *opposite* is the case! In Matt. 13: 40, Christ was speaking of the end-time —“the end of this age.” He said that at that time, angels “will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and **those who practice lawlessness**, and will cast them **into the furnace of fire**”! (verses 41-42). Therefore, how could keeping God’s law bring a “curse”?! It is the law-**breakers** who will end up in the lake of fire! (Also see Matt. 7: 21-23; 19:16-19; Rev. 14:12.)

(2) Notice what else the scripture in question does *not* say: It does *not* say that we don’t need to keep God’s law! “Yet,” some might ask, “didn’t Paul teach elsewhere *against* the law?”

What About Paul’s Teachings?

Actually, Paul’s teachings are very much in *support* of the keeping of God’s law! In Romans chapter 7, Paul said this: “**the law is holy**, and the commandment **holy and just and good**” (verse 12). A couple verses later, Paul stated that “the law is **spiritual**”! (verse 14). It was also Paul who said, “the **doers** of the law will be justified”—not “cursed,” but “justified”! (Romans 2:13).

And what about John, who was the *last* of all the New Testament apostles to die? It was many years *after* Christ’s crucifixion that John wrote the following: “For this **IS** the love of God, that we **keep His commandments**”! (I John 5:3).

With all this evidence—and more—why is it that so many people teach that Paul was saying that the law is a “curse”? Paul himself answers that question: “Because the carnal [natural] mind *is* enmity against [hostile to] God; for it is **not subject to the law** of God, nor indeed **can be**” (Rom. 8:7). Furthermore, the Apostle Peter warned of “**false teachers**” who would “bring in

destructive **heresies**” (II Peter 2:1). Paul said that such teachers would transform “themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For **Satan himself** transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore *it is* no great thing if **his ministers** also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness...” (II Cor. 11:13-15).

Yes, Satan is the arch-*deceiver* (Rev. 12:9), and he inspires *deceived ministers* into teaching erroneous and harmful ideas to their listeners. And, this teaching that God’s law is a “curse” (or that you’re cursed if you try to keep God’s law) is a prime example of that! Yes, Satan would *love* to have people believe that God’s holy and righteous law is a curse!

What Paul Was Actually Referring To

Having seen proof of what Paul was *not* referring to when he spoke of “the curse of the law,” let’s now see what he actually was referring to.

Simply put, “the curse of the law” refers to the **penalty incurred** for *breaking* the law. And what is that penalty? Death!

God’s word says, “the wages of sin *is* death” (Rom. 6:23; cf. Ezek. 18:4). “Wages” are what you earn. So you *earn death* whenever you sin. And what is “sin”? “Sin **IS** the transgression of the **law**” (I John 3:4, *KJV*). Therefore, whenever a person transgresses God’s law, he earns the death penalty. And so, it is the “death penalty” that Paul is referring to as “the curse of the law”!

Whenever we sin—whenever we transgress God’s law—we earn death; and death could certainly be considered “a curse”—a curse **OF** the law—a curse incurred as result of *breaking* God’s law!

Now notice something else about the scripture in question. It says, “Christ redeemed **us** from the curse of the law.” (Whenever the writers of the New Testament refer to “us” or “we,” they are referring to converted Christians; whereas the unconverted are referred to as “them” or “they.”) So, the sacrifice of Christ has redeemed *those who are converted*, **from** the death penalty. It redeems those who are *now* converted... and, in the future, it will also redeem those who *become* converted.

Jesus Christ took our place and died in our *stead*. He voluntarily took upon Himself the *curse* that you and I incurred. And that’s why it says that Christ *became* “a curse **for** us” (Gal. 3:13).

Now notice the last part of verse 13, which is in parenthesis: “(for it is **written**, ‘**Cursed is** everyone who hangs on a tree’).” Where is that “written”? It is written in Deut. chapter 21: “If a man has committed a sin worthy of death, and he is put to death, and you hang him on a **tree**, his body shall not remain overnight on the tree...” (verse 22-23).

“Hanging” was not the normal means of execution in ancient Israel. But for those who had committed some particularly heinous sin, after they were executed—normally by stoning—*then*, according to God’s word, their corpse could thereafter be hung on a tree, in full view of the people, as a form of ultimate public *disgrace*.

Now, was *Jesus Christ* subjected to a disgraceful death like this? Yes! He was hung on either a stake, or, more probably, a tree with a horizontal beam attached to the tree. He was put

to death as if He were a common criminal... and scripture speaks of the **shame** He endured on the cross (Heb. 12:2).

Yes, Christ died a criminal's death, *in or stead!* He *became* a curse, **for** us. He took upon Himself the *curse* which you and I earned!

Finally, consider that *common sense* tells us that we are not "cursed" for keeping God's spiritual law. To the contrary, keeping God's spiritual law—as summarized by the Ten Commandments—actually brings us blessings! We are *blessed* for loving our fellowman, instead of murdering him (or having the spirit of murder toward him). We are *blessed* for not stealing, for not committing adultery, for having no other gods before the true God.

You can read in the 5th chapter of Deuteronomy where God says that if His people would *keep* His commandments, then it would go *well* with them (verse 29). Also, we are told in the book of Psalms that there is great *reward* in keeping God's commandments! (Ps.19:10-11).

Conclusion

When Paul spoke of "the curse of the law," he was referring to *the death penalty*. The keeping of God's law does *not* bring us a curse. Remember, it was Paul himself who said that the law is *spiritual*—that it is *holy, just, and good!* (See the article "Did Paul Do Away With God's Law?")

References:

Vince Szymkowiak, "Just What Is 'the Curse of the Law'?" *Good News* magazine, Jan. 1986