

# OpenTheo

## May 26th: Deuteronomy 27 & Luke 14:1-24

May 25, 2020



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The curses of the covenant. The table manners of the kingdom.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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## Transcript

Deuteronomy chapter 27. Deuteronomy chapter 28. Then Moses and the Levitical priests said to all Israel, Keep silence and hear, O Israel.

This day you have become the people of the Lord your God. You shall therefore obey the voice of the Lord your God, keeping his commandments and his statutes, which I command you today. That day Moses charged the people, saying, When you have crossed over the Jordan, these shall stand on Mount Gerizim to bless the people, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph, and Benjamin.

And these shall stand on Mount Ebal for the curse, Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan, and Naphtali. And the Levites shall declare to all the men of Israel in a loud voice, 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.

Cursed be anyone who dishonors his father or his mother. And all the people shall say, Amen. Cursed be anyone who moves his neighbor's landmark.

And all the people shall say, Amen. Cursed be anyone who misleads a blind man on the road. And all the people shall say, Amen.

Cursed be anyone who perverts the justice due to the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. And all the people shall say, Amen. 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. Cursed be anyone who lies with any kind of animal. And all the people shall say, Amen.

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. Cursed be anyone who strikes down his neighbor in secret. And all the people shall say, Amen.

Cursed be anyone who takes a bribe to shed innocent blood. And all the people shall say, Amen. Cursed be anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them.

And all the people shall say, Amen. Deuteronomy chapter 27 begins the third speech of the book of Deuteronomy. Within it Moses instructs Israel to perform a ceremony after they enter into the land.

And this corresponds with the end of the great sermon upon the first commandment that begins the central section of Deuteronomy. Consequently framing the intervening chapters 12 to 26. Deuteronomy chapter 11 verses 26 to 32 reads, See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse.

The blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you today. And the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn aside from the way that I am commanding you today, to go after other gods that you have not known. And when the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, you shall set the blessing on Mount Gerizim and the curse on Mount Ebal.

Are they not beyond the Jordan, west of the road, toward the going down of the sun, in the land of the Canaanites, who dwell in the Arabah, opposite Gilgal, beside the Oak of Moreh? For you are to cross over the Jordan to go in to take possession of the land that the Lord your God has given you. And when you possess it and live in it, you shall be careful to do all the statutes and the rules that I am setting before you today. Mount Ebal and Gerizim were in the region of Shechem.

Ebal is associated with the curse, Gerizim with the blessing. And Moses is here joined by the elders for the first part of his instruction concerning the establishment of the stones with the law upon it and the altar. The elders lead and they represent the congregation and so it's fitting that they are involved at this point.

There may also be a theme of succession because the elders will take the place of Moses when he leaves. The stones covered with plaster on which the words of the law are written are a testimony to Israel on Mount Ebal, the mountain associated with the curse. Why are these things placed on the mountain associated with the curse rather than on Gerizim, the mountain associated with the blessing? Partly because as witnesses they would be summoned against Israel in the case of Israel's unfaithfulness.

And oath-taking occurs with reference to curses. They are supposed to build an altar of uncut stones as we've seen described earlier in Exodus 20, verse 25. If you make me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stones, for if you wield your tool on it, you profane it.

The erection of the altar and the sacrifice of burnt offerings and peace offerings is reminiscent of Exodus 24, verses 3-8 and the establishment of the covenant at Sinai. In the second part of the ceremony in Deuteronomy chapter 27, Moses is accompanied by the Levitical priests who represent the Lord. Just as there is a transition from Moses to the elders, there is also a transition from Moses to the Levites.

They will take the place of teaching the people the law. While the elders represent the Israelite people, the Levites represent the Lord to the Israelites. That day was one in which Israel formally ratified the covenant, becoming the people of the Lord, and they are charged to perform a covenant ceremony when they arrive in the land.

The Levites are the ones who will read the curses of the law, to which the congregation must respond, Amen. The tribes are instructed to divide into two groups. The tribes on Gerizim are Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph and Benjamin.

The tribes on Ebal are Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan and Naphtali. The rationale for this division is not entirely clear. It is possibly ordered geographically, with the northern mountain of Ebal associated with the northern and transjordanian tribes, Dan perhaps being included among them as it moved north at a later point.

Gerizim is associated with the southern tribes and with Levi. The tribes are also roughly divided according to the mothers, listed in birth order. Rachel's two sons and the eldest sons of Leah, minus the judge Reuben, are in the Gerizim group.

The other group contains the handmaid's sons with Reuben and Zebulun. This ceremony was actually performed in Joshua 8, verses 30-35. At that time Joshua built an altar to the Lord, the God of Israel, on Mount Ebal, just as Moses the servant of the Lord

commanded the people of Israel, as it is written in the book of the law of Moses, an altar of uncut stones, upon which no man has wielded an iron tool.

And they offered on it burnt offerings to the Lord and sacrificed peace offerings. And there, in the presence of the people of Israel, he wrote on the stones a copy of the law of Moses, which he had written. And all Israel, sojourner as well as native-born, with their elders and officers and their judges, stood on opposite sides of the ark before the Levitical priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, half of them in front of Mount Gerizim and half of them in front of Mount Ebal, just as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded at the first, to bless the people of Israel.

And afterward he read all the words of the law, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the book of the law. There was not a word of all that Moses commanded that Joshua did not read before the assembly of Israel, and the women and the little ones and the sojourners who lived among them. The verses that follow this are a sort of oath-taking on Israel's part.

The blessings are not attended by the amens, but the curses are. Israel is accepting the sanctions of judgment upon themselves should they sin and break the covenant. There are twelve curses stated, and these correspond with the number of the tribes.

The twelve statements particularly focus upon actions that could be done in secret, or which wouldn't be brought before any human court. Where human punishments wouldn't occur, Israel called down divine curses upon the covenant breaker. And the curses involve idolatry, the first one, dishonouring God, dishonouring father or mother, the second one, mistreating neighbours, in the third, the fourth and the fifth, the neighbour's landmark being moved, the blind man being misguided, and the prevention of justice for the vulnerable.

Sexual offences follow in curses six to nine. Lying with your father's wife, with an animal, with your sister, or with your mother-in-law. Next we have two curses concerning murder, secret murder, and also taking a bribe to kill an innocent person.

And then finally, curse number twelve, the failure to confirm the word of the law that has been given. Here as elsewhere, Israel is summoned to hear the voice of the Lord, not just blindly to obey. Jonathan Sacks observes the way that the law operates on two different levels.

On the one hand it speaks to people at a childlike level of understanding, where the aversion to negative consequences, the aversion to the curse, and disobedience is prominent. If you do this particular sin, this bad thing will happen to you. However the law also speaks at a higher level, communicating the truth that its laws are not arbitrary.

The Torah is remarkable in being law that gives a rationale for itself and which seeks to

persuade. Reasons are given for the commands, narrative and law are mutually illuminating. The law is grounded in the order of nature as an expression of natural law, and the law itself is shown to have an inner structure that will yield insight to the one who meditates upon it.

The law then is not just bare divine command, a word from the heavens for people thoughtlessly to obey. No, to those who meditate upon it, it is the unlocking of the world of wisdom. A question to consider, what might the curses reveal about the dependence of the system of the law upon the Lord and his action? Luke chapter 14 verses 1-24 1 Sabbath when he went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, they were watching him carefully.

And behold, there was a man before him who had dropsy. And Jesus responded to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not? But they remained silent. Then he took him and healed him and sent him away.

And he said to them, Which of you having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day will not immediately pull him out? And they could not reply to these things. Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he noticed how they chose the places of honour, saying to them, When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honour, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him. And he who invited you both will come and say to you, Give your place to this person, and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place.

But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, Friend, move up higher. Then you will be honoured in the presence of all who sit at table with you. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

He said also to the man who had invited him, When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, lest they also invite you in return, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just. When one of those who reclined at table with him heard these things, he said to him, Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God.

But he said to him, A man once gave a great banquet and invited many, and at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, Come, for everything is now ready. But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it.

Please have me excused. And another said, I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them. Please have me excused.

And another said, I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come. So the servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house became angry and said to his servant, Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame.

And the servant said, Sir, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room. And the master said to the servant, Go out to the highways and hedges, and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.

Luke chapter 14 is set at the meal table. The kingdom is like a great supper, and the way of the kingdom is seen in its table manners. Jesus heals on the Sabbath again, and we should observe the parallels with chapter 13 verses 10 to 17.

There is a reference here to a sun or an ox, but in other textual versions it's the donkey or the ox. This is referring back to Deuteronomy chapter 5, and the law of the Sabbath in that place. Jesus is the one who is bringing in the Sabbath rest and his feast.

The man is suffering from dropsy, a condition involving fluid retention and a dangerous thirst, and Jesus heals him and thereby addresses his thirst, perhaps something that could be seen as a symbol of longing for deliverance. In his famous work, *The Civilizing Process*, Norbert Elias explores the transformation of manners between the Middle Ages and the 18th century. He observes the way that our animality and things associated with it were gradually removed from public sight through instilling embarrassment, shame, and aversion surrounding contact with other bodies, the display of excessive passions and sexuality, or behaviours that foreground our physicality, things like nose-blowing or spitting, urinating or nudity.

Elias identified a political impulse behind much of this. It had its root in the rise of a new courtly class, and observing the new rigorous etiquette of the court became necessary for inclusion and advancement in polite society, and social jockeying in the realm of the refinement of tastes and manners and civility steadily displaced the martial values of previous ages. Now the meal table was ground zero for this training and expression of this new regime of conduct.

It spread from courtiers to the higher classes of society and beyond, and these new virtues of self-control, dignity, and concealment of and distancing from animality was taught and manifested at meal tables until what originated as a social compulsion became a part of people's very psychology, a second nature. The rise of civility in the West then was a social development of the manners of the meal table that undergirded and spread a new political order, privileging cultivated courtly elites. The political importance of the meal table within this development was manifold.

The meal table was, and remains, a reflection of the relations between people and of

their place within a broader social and material world. Each meal was, and still remains, an opportunity to secure or advance one's place within this social order. What on earth does any of this have to do with Luke chapter 14? Well, as our passage shows, the same was true in Jesus' day.

The meal table and the throwing of banquets were arenas within which people negotiated and competed for social status. It was also a site of intense social scrutiny, and Jesus was being closely examined by the Pharisees, who wanted to see what his table manners would reveal about him. Jesus, however, was engaging in a sort of sociological study of his own.

He perceived and remarked upon some distinguishing features of meal-time behaviour in first-century Jewish honour society. Dinner guests pressing for the best seats, hosts inviting the sort of people from whom they could hope for repayment or improved social status. And Jesus, in these verses, addresses both groups.

He teaches an alternative model of table etiquette. This model of table etiquette is not entirely new. Much of Jesus' teaching in this passage comes from the Old Testament and elsewhere.

In Proverbs 25, verses 6-7, Richard Hayes has remarked, producing a reversal of values and status. Jesus' teaching involves, then, as Hayes recognises, a rehearsal for the manners of the in-breaking kingdom. Rather than trying to curry favour with their rich neighbours and adopting the manners of the regional rulers, the people of God are to cultivate the etiquette of a different kingdom.

They are to behave as prospective members of a different court. Jesus instructs his heroes to act against their apparent social interests in the sure faith that God's order will prevail over all others. The table manners that Jesus called for involved the rejection of the sort of honour culture practised in many first-century Mediterranean societies.

Instead of grasping for honour, Jesus' followers should be characterised by humility and self-effacement. While seating arrangements and dinner invitations were means for social climbers to accrue honour and status in their society, Jesus challenges his disciples to reject the way of honour-seekers and like their master to seek the praise of God over that of man. Abstaining from social jockeying in a society where so much depended upon one's honour and status is a very costly act of faith.

The necessity of a new form of practice grounded in radical faith in the coming kingdom is perhaps even more pronounced in Jesus' challenge to hosts in the later verses of this passage. Rather than inviting people who can be relied upon to give a generous return upon their social investment, Jesus' followers must throw their feasts for people with no power to repay. In a society where the exchange of gifts and invitations to feasts was the basic currency by which you secured your social standing, Jesus' radical practice would

be seen to be reckless.

One's political, legal and social position could become precarious if one was not prepared to throw one's weight into maintaining circles of reciprocal gift. If one did not give gifts and invitations to the right people, one wouldn't receive the return of social honour or any assurance of social security. Consistently giving gifts and invitations to the wrong people might be an even riskier course of action.

It would offend and dissociate you from people with social power. Greco-Roman thinkers who have reflected upon the significance of gifts, such as Cicero, commonly stress the moral importance of giving judiciously. To give freely to the poor, who lack the means to give a worthy return, being regarded not only economically but typically also as morally withoutstanding, might reflect poorly upon the prudence and the character of the giver.

Jesus doesn't utterly reject the underlying logic of the gift society, but rather completely transforms its functioning by revealing that God is the guarantor of all gifts and debts. If we give in faith to the poor and to those without the capacity to repay, we will receive a bountiful reward at the resurrection. Conversely, we need not be placed in others' debt when we receive their gifts, because God has promised to repay them on our behalf.

Jesus tells us to invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind to our suppers, rather than people who can repay us. God is the one who will reward us with a place at his table in the resurrection of the just. And here the connection between Jesus' teaching in these verses and the teaching of the parable of the Great Supper that immediately follows should be recognised.

It is the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind, precisely the same people as his disciples are called to invite to their feasts in verse 13, who are the people who sit at God's Great Supper, while the rich reject their invitation. In associating themselves with those without social status then, the disciples of Christ would be associating themselves with those who would one day sit at the great eschatological banquet. Inviting people to this great banquet, the man finds one guest after another turning down his invitation for various weak excuses.

We should note the similarity of the situation to the one in which Jesus presently finds himself. It's a meal with a ruler of the Pharisees, with presumably many people of high status and social standing in attendance. The feast of the parable proceeds in a typical way.

It begins with invitations being sent out to socially respectful people. But things go awry. They are all too committed to their possessions and relationships to accept the invitation.

As his invitation has been spurned by the well-to-do, the man then turns to the poor, the



crippled, the blind and the lame, and then goes out beyond that still to find even more destitute persons outside of the city. This has often been related to marginal Jews and Gentiles. These people must be compelled into the feast, presumably because they knew that they couldn't offer anything in return, and there was an apparent social gulf between them and their host.

However, their host wasn't playing the old dynamics of a patronage culture anymore. A complete social reordering had occurred for him, and he now cut off association with the original invitees. A question to consider.

How does the celebration of the Eucharist or Lord's Supper provide us with training in the table manners of the kingdom?