

Homiletics Analysis: Deuteronomy 27

Content & Intent

Broader Unit — Component of a Larger Unit: Deuteronomy 27 belongs to the covenant renewal section spanning chapters 27–30, which itself sits within the broader frame of Moses’ second and third addresses to Israel on the plains of Moab (Deuteronomy 4–30). The movement of chapters 27–30 is covenantal: the covenant is rehearsed, its blessings and curses are proclaimed, and Israel is pressed toward decision and commitment. Chapter 27 functions as the *liturgical hinge* of this section — the ceremony it prescribes is the enacted declaration that covenant obligation is now in force in Canaan. The blessings (chapter 28) and the great call to life or death (chapters 29–30) both presuppose the solemn installation of the covenant terms that chapter 27 establishes. Understanding chapters 28–30 requires understanding chapter 27’s function: what happens at Shechem is not merely a memory exercise but the formal, irreversible ratification of covenant accountability before God.

This Text — Content: Deuteronomy 27 has two interlocking movements. The first (vv. 1–8) prescribes the construction of plastered stones inscribed with the law and an altar of unhewn stones at Mount Ebal, both to be completed immediately upon crossing the Jordan — the covenantal “day one” of Canaan occupation. The second movement (vv. 9–26) assigns tribal positions on Mounts Gerizim and Ebal for a covenant ceremony of blessings and curses, then delivers a catalogue of twelve curses — each targeting a sin committed in concealment, each met with the congregation’s solemn “Amen.” The curses move through violations against God (vv. 15–16), violations against neighbor in hidden ways (vv. 17–19), sexual violations (vv. 20–23), secret violence (vv. 24–25), and conclude with the sweeping comprehensive curse of verse 26: “Cursed is everyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them.”

This Text — Intent: God is using chapter 27 to accomplish two things simultaneously: first, to make Israel’s covenant obligation *inescapably visible and publicly binding* — the law written in stone, read aloud, confirmed by congregational voice, cannot later be claimed as unknown; and second, to press every Israelite to confront the fact that *God sees what men hide*. The twelve curses are overwhelmingly targeted at secret sins — sins where no human witness is present. The intent is not primarily to enumerate punishable acts but to strip away the assumption that hiddenness confers safety. God is confronting Israel — and through Israel, every reader — with the reality that the covenant extends to the hidden life. The “Amen” is not merely liturgical; it is an act of moral self-awareness: “I know I am capable of this. I confirm that this curse is just. I acknowledge that God sees.” The chapter culminates in verse 26 with a curse so comprehensive it indicts everyone without exception — Paul will deploy this text in Galatians 3:10 as the hinge of his argument that no one stands before God on the basis of legal performance. The intent of chapter 27 is not to

produce self-confident law-keepers but to produce people who know they are undone — and who therefore need a Redeemer.

Subject Sentence: Israel formally ratifies covenant accountability at Canaan's threshold — including for sins no human witness ever sees.

Primary Claim: God is confronting every person who hears this text with the inescapable reach of covenant obligation — extending even into hidden sins — so that the only honest response is not self-confidence but the recognition of personal guilt and the desperate need of a Redeemer who bears the curse in our place.

Interpretive Evaluation

The function of the twelve curses — hidden sin as the governing theme: The most significant interpretive question in chapter 27 is why the curses are so heavily weighted toward concealed transgressions. Of the twelve, only a few (boundary stones, dishonoring parents) could be easily witnessed; the majority — secret idolatry, sexual violations with the vulnerable, bribery, covert murder — are sins where concealment is structurally possible. Most commentators acknowledge this feature; the Reformed reading presses harder on its significance. The curses are not a random sample of covenant violations. They are specifically selected to teach that *divine accountability is not coextensive with human observability*. God sees in the dark. The covenant reaches the hidden life. This is not merely a theological observation — it is the governing rhetorical purpose of the chapter. Lutherans rightly emphasize the Law's accusatory function here (its *usus elencticus*) but sometimes stop at conviction without moving to the covenantal structures that point forward to resolution. The Reformed reading holds both: conviction is the immediate intent; the covenant's redemptive provision (dimly present in Deuteronomy, fully visible in Galatians 3) is the ultimate horizon.

The comprehensive curse of verse 26 — scope and function: Verse 26 is the most contested verse in the chapter. It functions as a catch-all: "Cursed is everyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them." Three readings compete. (1) *Partial-obedience sufficiency*: Some in Second Temple Judaism read this as demanding *sincere* or *substantial* effort, not perfect compliance — reading "confirm" as "take seriously" rather than "perform without exception." (2) *Ceremonial/moral distinction*: Some dispensational and Baptist readings limit the curse's scope to ceremonial or civil aspects of Mosaic law, relieving the moral pressure of perfect legal demand. (3) *Comprehensive demand*: The Reformed reading, following Paul's use in Galatians 3:10, takes the text at face value as demanding *full and unbroken* compliance with "all the words of this law." The first reading cannot be sustained grammatically — the Hebrew *qum* ("confirm, uphold") with the

following infinitive of doing is not a mere attitudinal term but requires actual performance. The second reading imports a later canonical distinction the original context does not recognize. Paul's deployment of verse 26 is exegetically sound: he reads it as Moses intended it — as a comprehensive demand that no sinful human being can meet, which is precisely why Christ becoming a curse for us (Galatians 3:13) is the only resolution. The Reformed reading should be preferred not because it is theologically convenient but because the text itself, read in its own context and in its canonical trajectory, demands it.

Mount Ebal as the site of the altar: A puzzling feature is that the altar of unhewn stones (vv. 5–6) is placed specifically on Mount Ebal — the mountain of curses, not Mount Gerizim (the mountain of blessings). Various traditions explain this away or treat it as a scribal error. The Samaritan Pentateuch actually emends the text to read “Gerizim.” The Reformed and mainstream critical consensus accepts the received text and reads the placement theologically: the altar — the site of sacrificial atonement — belongs on the mountain of curses precisely because sacrifice addresses the curse. Blessing does not emerge by denying the curse but by dealing with it through atoning blood. This is a microcosm of the gospel: the altar stands on Ebal, not Gerizim, because the blood of the sacrifice is offered where the curse falls. Preaching should not skip this detail.

No significant divergence on the ceremonial prescription itself (vv. 1–8): The mechanics of the plaster-inscribed stones and the altar construction are not significantly disputed across traditions. Historians and archaeologists note the practice of victory inscriptions and covenant documents on plaster was common in the ancient Near East (cf. the Deir Alla inscription). This establishes both the historical plausibility of the prescription and its public, permanent character — this is not a whispered agreement but a visible, durable public declaration.

Key Canonical Support

- **Galatians 3:10–13** — Paul quotes Deuteronomy 27:26 directly as the foundation of his argument that all who rely on works of the law are under a curse, and that Christ redeemed us by becoming a curse for us (citing Deuteronomy 21:23). This is the most critical canonical link: chapter 27's curse-structure finds its redemptive resolution only in Christ's substitutionary bearing of the curse. The New Testament does not abandon chapter 27 — it completes it.
- **Joshua 8:30–35** — Joshua carries out precisely what Moses prescribed in Deuteronomy 27, inscribing the law on stones, building the altar on Ebal, reading the blessings and curses before the assembly at Shechem. This confirms the chapter was not dead letter but enacted covenant reality; it also shows that the Mosaic covenant framework was intentionally installed as Israel's constitutional foundation in the land.

- **Romans 3:19–20** — “Whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.” The Deuteronomy 27 catalogue of curses is precisely the kind of text Paul has in mind — the law’s function is not to produce justification but to produce accountability, and through accountability, the knowledge of sin and the silence of self-justification.
- **Psalms 19:12** — “Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults.” David’s prayer reflects exactly the theological pressure of Deuteronomy 27’s hidden-sin curses — the godly person knows that accountability before God extends to what the self cannot even fully see, let alone what others cannot observe.
- **Matthew 5:21–28** — Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (“You have heard it said... but I say to you”) extends legal accountability to the inward and hidden life in a way that directly parallels Deuteronomy 27’s emphasis on concealed transgression. Jesus is not innovating against Moses; he is pressing the interior logic that Deuteronomy 27 already contains — the covenant has always reached the hidden life.

Aim: To bring every hearer to the recognition that their hidden life is fully visible to God, that the comprehensive curse of verse 26 lands on them personally, and that the only hope is not improved performance but the Christ who bore the curse in their place.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–2	Moses and the elders command Israel: on the day they cross the Jordan, they are to set up large stones and coat them with plaster	“On the day” — the urgency is immediate; covenant installation is day-one business, not deferred
3	They are to write on these stones “all the words of this law” when they cross over into the land the LORD is giving them	The written law is permanent, public, and comprehensive — “all the words”
4	Specifically, the stones are to be set up on Mount Ebal	Mount Ebal — the curse mountain; not Gerizim; the altar follows on the same mountain (see v. 5)
5–6a	They are to build an altar of	The altar must be unworked,

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	<i>unhewn</i> stones — no iron tool shall be used on them	natural stone; iron tools represent human shaping, which would profane the altar
6b–7	They are to offer burnt offerings and peace offerings on the altar, eat, and rejoice before the LORD	The altar on the curse mountain produces both sacrifice (addressing sin) and fellowship/joy — atonement leads to peace
8	They are to write on the stones “all the words of this law, very plainly”	“Very plainly” (<i>ba’er hetev</i>) — clarity is covenantal; the law must be legible and unambiguous
9–10	Moses and the Levitical priests address all 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”	The covenant identity (“you are his people”) precedes and grounds the covenant obligation (“therefore obey”) — indicative before imperative
11–13	Moses commands the tribes to stand on Mount Gerizim for the blessing: Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph, Benjamin. On Mount Ebal for the curse: Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan, Naphtali	Six tribes on each mountain; Levites pronounce from the valley between; blessing and curse are spatially enacted
14	The Levites are to speak to all the men of Israel with a loud voice	Loud voice — this is public, heard by all; no one can claim ignorance
15	Curse on the one who makes an idol and sets it up in secret	First curse — idolatry specifically “in secret” (<i>ba-sater</i>); God sees the hidden shrine
16	Curse on the one who dishonors his father or mother	Covenant community is built on ordered authority; contempt for parents fractures the social

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
		covenant
17	Curse on the one who moves his neighbor's landmark	Property theft by boundary manipulation; characteristically hidden and deniable
18	Curse on the one who misleads a blind man on the road	Exploitation of the vulnerable who cannot see the deception — a hidden cruelty
19	Curse on the one who perverts justice for the sojourner, orphan, or widow	Hidden injustice against those with no advocate; they cannot see the corruption that ruins them
20	Curse on the one who lies with his father's wife	Sexual violation involving a family member; often concealed by both parties
21	Curse on the one who lies with any animal	Concealment is inherent; an abomination committed where no witness is present
22	Curse on the one who lies with his sister	Incest within the family — sustained concealment over time
23	Curse on the one who lies with his mother-in-law	Sexual violation exploiting familial access and trust
24	Curse on the one who strikes down his neighbor in secret	Covert murder — no human witness, but God sees
25	Curse on the one who takes a bribe to shed innocent blood	Legal corruption — public appearance of justice concealing private murder-for-hire
26	"Cursed be everyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them. And all the people shall say, 'Amen.'"	The comprehensive, catch-all curse; Paul quotes this in Galatians 3:10 as proof that all law-reliant persons are under a curse

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–8	The Covenant Installed in Stone: The Command to Inscribe and Offer
2	9–10	The Covenant Identity Declared: You Are His People — Therefore Obey
3	11–13	The Covenant Geography Assigned: Blessing and Curse Given Spatial Form
4	14–26	The Covenant Curses Pronounced: Twelve Public Amens to Hidden Accountability

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Israel formally ratifies covenant accountability at Canaan’s threshold — including for sins no human witness ever sees.

Primary Claim: God is confronting every person who hears this text with the inescapable reach of covenant obligation — extending even into hidden sins — so that the only honest response is not self-confidence but the recognition of personal guilt and the desperate need of a Redeemer who bears the curse in our place.

Applications (Five)

1. (Mind/Belief) — Reframe the hidden life as fully visible to God. The twelve curses of Deuteronomy 27 are not addressed to criminals caught in the act. They are addressed to the person who sins precisely because no one is watching — the secret shrine, the quietly moved boundary stone, the bribe slipped in private, the violence done where no witness stands. The text is forcing a cognitive reorientation: God’s covenant jurisdiction does not shrink to match the range of human observation. Whatever you have done, thought, browsed, nursed, or concealed in the belief that “no one will know” — the LORD’s covenant already addressed it, already named it, already declared its status. The hidden life is not a safe harbor. It is the first domain of covenantal accountability.

2. (Affections/Worship) — Let the “Amen” of verse 26 break the pretense of self-confidence before God. Every Israelite said “Amen” to each of the twelve curses. They were not saying “I would never do that.” They were saying “I know I am capable of this —

and if I do it, I confirm that God's curse on it is just." The Amen is an act of self-knowledge and moral honesty, not merely a liturgical response. Verse 26 gathers all of it into a single, unavoidable conclusion: no one can say "Amen" to twelve specific curses and then claim exemption from the comprehensive curse of verse 26. The honest worshiper does not bring confidence to God's covenant — they bring an Amen that has broken them. Worship that does not make room for this kind of honest self-confrontation has not yet made room for the gospel.

3. (Will/Behavior) — Stop calculating which sins are safe because they are hidden.

Deuteronomy 27's curses identify a category of transgression defined by the *method* of concealment, not just the act. Moving a boundary stone is wrong; but the chapter specifically targets the one who moves it in secret, banking on deniability. The application is not merely "don't do bad things." It is: stop structuring your life around what you can conceal. The person who is faithful in public but maintains a private exception — in finances, in sexual behavior, in the way they treat the vulnerable when no peer is watching — has not merely committed isolated sins. They have built a theology of hidden safety that Deuteronomy 27 directly dismantles. The call is not just to stop specific acts but to abandon the entire architecture of "no one will know."

4. (Affections/Worship) — Receive the altar on Ebal as a picture of where grace must go — into the curse, not around it. The altar in this chapter is not on Mount Gerizim — the mountain of blessing. It is on Mount Ebal — the mountain of curses. This is not a scribal accident. Sacrifice stands where the curse falls. Peace offerings and rejoicing follow *because* atonement has been made on the curse mountain, not because the curse has been avoided or minimized. This is the emotional and worshipful core of the chapter: grace does not bypass the curse, it enters it. The God who commands the altar on Ebal is the God who will, in the fullness of time, place his own Son under the curse (Galatians 3:13; Deuteronomy 21:23) so that blessing might come through the curse mountain, not instead of it. Worship that understands this does not treat grace as a loophole but as a costly, blood-purchased rescue.

5. (Mind/Belief) — Hear verse 26 as the verse that ends all self-justification and opens the only door that remains. Paul quotes Deuteronomy 27:26 in Galatians 3:10 not to add a proof-text to an argument but because this verse is the hinge on which the entire case turns. "Cursed is everyone who does not *confirm all the words of this law by doing them*" — not most of them, not the ones others can observe, not the ones on the easy side of the ledger. The comprehensive demand of verse 26 is not a counsel of despair; it is the verse that kills every alternative before presenting the one that remains. If the curse is real, and if no one can meet the standard of verse 26 (Romans 3:20), then the only remaining door is the one Paul opens in Galatians 3:13: Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. Deuteronomy 27 does not end at verse 26. It ends at the cross.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Deuteronomy 27 teaches that God's covenant jurisdiction is absolute — it extends to every dimension of human life including the hidden, the private, and the inward. The chapter refuses the comfortable compartmentalization that assigns public behavior to God's sight and private behavior to human freedom. The twelve curses are not a random sampling of Israel's legal code; they are a deliberate selection that targets the domain where human accountability ends and divine accountability does not. This reveals something essential about the character of the God who speaks here: He is not a God who monitors visible compliance while remaining indifferent to the concealed heart. He is the God who sees in darkness as in light (Psalm 139:11–12), and whose covenant claims reach precisely where human observation cannot. The comprehensive curse of verse 26 seals this theology: the standard of covenant faithfulness is not partial, negotiable, or proportional to human capacity — it is total. This is not cruelty; it is the truthfulness of a holy God about the actual scope of His character and claim.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Deuteronomy 27 is a foundational text for the Reformed understanding of the Law's three uses, particularly its *second use* (*usus elencticus* or *pedagogical use*): the law as the instrument that reveals sin, stops every mouth, and drives the sinner to Christ. The chapter functions exactly as Paul says the law functions in Galatians 3 and Romans 3 — not to produce righteous persons through legal performance, but to produce self-knowledge and silence before God. The Reformed reading of verse 26 as a comprehensive and unsatisfiable demand (apart from grace) is not a pessimistic imposition on the text — it is the text's own logic, confirmed by Paul's exegesis and by the placement of the atoning altar on the curse mountain rather than the blessing mountain. The altar on Ebal is the gospel in seed form: the covenant does not resolve the curse by lowering its standard but by providing a sacrifice that absorbs it. Reformed theology insists that this structure — law revealing the full weight of sin, grace bearing it substitutionally — runs from Sinai to Golgotha and is not a Pauline innovation. Deuteronomy 27 is evidence that it was always so.

Main Takeaway

Your hidden life is not hidden from God — the covenant has always reached there. And the twelve “Amen” of this chapter accumulate into one unavoidable conclusion: every person who hears Deuteronomy 27:26 honestly must acknowledge they are under its curse. But the altar stood on the curse mountain, not the blessing mountain — because grace does not route around the curse, it absorbs it. Christ became a curse for us (Galatians 3:13) so that the Amen you owe to verse 26 becomes the ground on which you receive, not

condemnation, but the blessing of Abraham. Stop hiding. Stop calculating. Come to the altar on Ebal.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating the curses as a behavior checklist rather than a theological claim about divine omniscience.** The most common mishandling of this passage is to work through the twelve curses as a catalogue of sins to avoid, producing a moralistic sermon that misses the chapter's governing point. The curses are not primarily a list; they are a theological argument. Their shared feature — concealment — is the point. The sermon that gets this right names the hidden-sin structure early and lets it govern the application of every subsequent curse. The sermon that misses it produces a list of sins and a call to do better, which is precisely what the comprehensive curse of verse 26 forecloses.
- **Skipping the altar on Ebal or treating its placement as insignificant.** The placement of the altar on the curse mountain is one of the most theologically loaded details in the chapter and one of the most frequently passed over. Preachers who note the tribal assignments (vv. 11–13) and then move immediately to the curses (vv. 15–26) miss the altar that stands between chapter 27 and its canonical resolution. The altar on Ebal is the gospel's address in the Old Testament: sacrifice stands where the curse falls. This detail is not decoration — it is the chapter's built-in pointer to Christ.
- **Treating verse 26 as hyperbole or a motivational standard rather than a comprehensive legal demand.** The “Amen” to verse 26 is the most uncomfortable moment in the chapter for both preacher and congregation. The temptation is to soften it — to read “confirm” as “take seriously,” to suggest that sincere effort suffices, or to limit the scope of “all the words of this law” to ceremonial requirements. Paul's exegesis in Galatians 3:10 forecloses all of these moves. The preacher who softens verse 26 produces a congregation that concludes the curse is probably manageable — which is the precise opposite of the text's intent. The verse should be read at full strength, precisely so that Galatians 3:13 can be received at full relief.
- **Failing to make the canonical connection to Galatians 3:10–13 explicit.** This is not a case where the New Testament fulfillment is optional or tangential. Paul explicitly quotes Deuteronomy 27:26 as the foundation of the argument that climaxes in Christ becoming a curse for us. A sermon on Deuteronomy 27 that does not reach Galatians 3 has proclaimed the law without proclaiming the gospel to which this text points. The law's curse is not the final word — but the preacher must not leave the congregation at the curse. The altar on Ebal and Paul's argument in Galatians 3 both demand the same resolution: Christ on the curse mountain, bearing what verse 26 declares.

- **The moralistic reduction — “be more honest in your private life.”** The chapter calls for hidden-sin accountability, and a preacher may correctly identify this theme but then land the application as “be more consistent in private.” This is not wrong, but it is insufficient and, standing alone, produces Pelagianism. The chapter does not conclude with a call to improved private behavior — it concludes with the Amen to verse 26, which is an acknowledgment of guilt, not a resolution plan. The proper application of the hidden-sin theme is not “do better in private” but “acknowledge that you cannot, and come to the altar.” Behavior change, where it follows, follows from gospel transformation, not from the law’s demand alone.
- **Ignoring the positive covenantal framing of verses 9–10.** Moses’ statement in verse 9 — “This day you have become the people of the LORD your God” — is the indicative that precedes the imperative of obedience. The chapter does not begin with curses; it begins with covenant identity. A sermon that jumps to the curses without establishing the grace-grounded identity of verses 9–10 inverts the chapter’s own sequence. Israel is not cursed into covenant membership — they are first declared to be God’s people, and the curses then establish the seriousness of living contrary to that identity. The Reformed preacher must maintain this order: grace-grounded identity first, the law’s seriousness second.