

“The Command to Enjoy”
Deuteronomy 20:1-9 (Pt 2)
September 14, 2025
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

We return to our series in the Book of Deuteronomy, and we come once more to Deuteronomy 20:1-9.

Last week we looked at these verses and we focused on the theme that dominates verses 1-4: the promise that even when our enemies are stronger than we are, the most important battles we face are not won by our strength, but by the Lord’s strength, and he is with us.

That lesson will continue to be important, as we focus today on verses 5-7, and the reason why Moses commands certain men to be excluded from battle.

With that in mind let’s turn now to our text: Deuteronomy 20:1-9.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this morning.

Moses said to the people:

^{20:1} “When you go out to war against your enemies, and see horses and chariots and an army larger than your own, you shall not be afraid of them, for the LORD your God [Yahweh your God] is with you, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. ² And when you draw near to the battle, the priest shall come forward and speak to the people ³ and shall say to them, ‘Hear, O Israel, today you are drawing near for battle against your enemies: let not your heart faint. Do not fear or panic or be in dread of them, ⁴ for Yahweh your God is he who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies, to give you the victory.’ ⁵ Then the officers shall speak to the people, saying, ‘Is there any man who has built a new house and has not dedicated it? Let him go back to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man dedicate it. ⁶ And is there any man who has planted a vineyard and has not enjoyed its fruit? Let him go back to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man enjoy its fruit. ⁷ And is there any man who has betrothed a wife and has not taken her? Let him go back to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man take her.’ ⁸ And the officers shall speak further to the people, and say, ‘Is there any man who is fearful and fainthearted? Let him go back to his house, lest he make the heart of his fellows melt like his own.’ ⁹ And when the officers have finished speaking to the people, then commanders shall be appointed at the head of the people.”

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, as we come to your Word,
we ask you to teach us the way of your statutes,
that we might keep it to the end.
Give us understanding, that we may follow your word
and observe it with our whole hearts.
Incline our hearts to your testimonies,
and give us life through your word.
Grant this for Jesus' sake. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:33-34, 36-37]

Introduction

As I said, our focus this morning is on verses five through seven. And specifically, what I want to ask is: Why does Moses use these criteria to exclude certain men from the battle, rather than others?

Now, for some context, the situation in view is not one of a standing professional army, but a citizen's army. Those gathered in this passage are ordinary Israelite men. [Block, 469; Brown, 199]

And in that context, I want to focus this morning on the first three criteria for why men were exempt from battle – since the text itself seems to set those three apart.

The first reason given in verse five is that the officer shall say: “Is there any man who has built a new house and has not dedicated it? Let him go back to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man dedicate it.”

Now, there isn't a house-dedication ceremony in the Law of Moses, and so what's in view here is probably not a ritual, but the opportunity for a man to establish residence in and to enjoy the blessing of the house he has built and received. [Block, 471-472]

Second, in verse six, the officers were to ask: “is there any man who has planted a vineyard and has not enjoyed its fruit? Let him go back to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man enjoy its fruit.”

Again, we have a situation where a man has received something good – he has labored to plant a vineyard – but he has not yet enjoyed the fruit from it. And once again, Moses says that the man should be sent home from battle, so that he has time to enjoy the blessings of the vineyard he has received.

Finally, the officers are to ask: “Is there any man who has betrothed a wife and has not taken her? Let him go back to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man take her.” Here the situation is one where a marriage is all set – a couple is engaged, details of the betrothal are confirmed ... but the couple has not yet gotten married. And once more, Moses says that the man should be sent home from battle, so that he has time to enjoy the blessings of the spouse he has received.

The context is battle and conflict. And it's striking that it's in that context – it's as the people struggle with fear, and panic, and dread, as verse three notes ... that God is focused on making sure his people enjoy the gifts he has given them.

As we take a closer look at our text, what we see is that: If everything depends on us, then fear and anxiety will always keep us from enjoyment. But because God is with us as our strong and loving Father, he calls us to enjoy the gifts he's given to us.

Let me say that again: If everything depends on us, then fear and anxiety will always keep us from enjoyment. But because God is with us as our strong and loving Father, he calls us to enjoy the gifts he's given to us.

Let's break that down, together.

If Everything Depends on Us, then Fear and Anxiety Will Always Keep Us from Enjoyment

First, we are reminded in this passage that if everything depends on us, then fear and anxiety will always keep us from enjoyment.

And that truth extends well beyond the military battlefield. That may be the immediate context of our passage, but there are lessons here for all of us, because we all face the same underlying dynamic that's in view here: which is situations of fear, anxiety, and facing challenges that appear to be stronger than we are.

Think of it like this: What would keep Israel from obeying this command? What would prevent Israel from sending those men home, as called for in verses five through seven?

The obvious answer, highlighted in verse three, is fear and anxiety. Fear and anxiety say: "Now is not the time to enjoy God's gifts. Things are too dire. This is not the time for enjoyment. This is the time to set such things aside, put our heads down, and strive in the challenge set before us."

Now, of course, God does call his people to strive and to battle. He doesn't send everyone home.

But even so, in this particular moment, God stops everything, and reminds his people that even in such a tense and stressful situation as a battle with a foe who is bigger, stronger, and better equipped than you are – even in such moments, for his people – for God's people – for us ... the intentional enjoyment of God's blessings is still supposed to be a priority. Even in the face of serious challenges, God wants us to make the enjoyment of his good gifts to us a very real priority.

And many of us are uncomfortable with that. It seems soft. It seems like a concession for other people – for weaker people. But that's not how it's presented here. Rather, God issues it here as a command for all his people. Anyone who fit the criteria of verses five through seven – whether they were strong or weak, whatever their sense of duty – every one of them was called to – was commanded to – go home and enjoy the gifts God had given them, rather than enter the battle – even a battle in which Israel was already outnumbered, as verse 1 states.

And that makes many of us uncomfortable.

But at the heart of our discomfort, I think ... at the heart of that gap between our perception of the situation and God's ... is an unspoken assumption we often take up in difficult situations: the assumption that everything depends on us.

Success ... or failure ... it depends on us.

If the outcome of the battle was simply up to Israel, in and of themselves, then enjoyment would need to be set aside. Pleasure has no place. Fear and anxiety are actually the right emotions to have in the situation our text describes.

If it all depends on us, then the only right responses are stern duty and fearful dread ... enjoyment has no place.

And here the word "enjoyment" and what we mean by it is especially important. Because there are plenty of people who are driven by fear of failure – who are driven by anxiety over success and achievement, who believe everything really does depend on them ... and who still seek out pleasure in all sorts of ways. But it's not the kind of enjoyment that's in view here.

Because escapism and self-medication are not the same thing as true enjoyment. Various pleasures can be grasped at in a frantic attempt to momentarily escape the dread and the fear that's always just below the surface for someone who feels that the outcome of their lives (and maybe even the outcome the lives of those they love) is all up to them. Various momentary comforts can be clung to to ease the anxieties of those who believe they must be self-sufficient.

But that's not what Moses is talking about here. Moses is calling for something much deeper. He's calling for true enjoyment. It's not a pleasure to be indulged in for a weekend so that one can work even harder once Monday comes. Moses here describes an enjoyment that, humanly speaking, actually decreases one's earthly capability to meet the challenges before them.

And that becomes clear when we consider our text, and how long some of these men were being sent away for.

The command to enjoy one's house, in verse five, doesn't give a timeframe. But the command to the engaged, to go and get married, would have kept a man from the battlefield for at least a year.

Verse seven is not a man being sent away for the weekend, to run home, have a quick ceremony, enjoy the wedding night, and then get back to the battlefield, energized and ready to fight. No. Because a little later, in Deuteronomy 24:5, we're told that a man was to be exempt from military service for the entire first year of his marriage. It says: "When a man is newly married, he shall not go out with the army or be liable for any other public duty. He shall be free at home one year to be happy with his wife whom he has taken."

And verse six has a similarly longer timeline. Depending on how one interprets Leviticus 19:23-24, it may have been not just one, but multiple years before a man could enjoy the fruit from a vineyard after he had planted it. [see Alter, 977; Brown, 198; contra Block, 472]

Which tells us a few things.

First, what's in view here is not merely utilitarian pleasure. This isn't a burst of pleasure someone indulges in so that they can get that out of their system and then be even more focused on the task before them the next day. This isn't pleasure as a means to a more utilitarian and productive end.

Second, what's described here is, instead, a deep and sustained enjoyment. A year to be happy at home with your new spouse. A season (or more!) to enjoy the wine of the vineyard you have planted. Time to establish yourself and enjoy the house you have built. These are not hedonistic outbursts; they are deep and sustained enjoyments of good things that God has given to his people.

Third, prioritizing this deep enjoyment, as Moses calls for in these verses ... will, humanly speaking, put us at a serious strategic disadvantage in the challenges of life.

And that last one is what I think often gets us.

It seems so impractical. In the face of a difficult battle ... you send away so many your young men – men of marrying age, men who have just established their home and their vineyards – send those men home from the battlefield, of all men? And not just for a week's leave – but for months or even years?

It's just wrong, isn't it? It's irresponsible. It's foolish. It's immature. It's insane ... right?

Well ... only if everything is up to us. Only if everything depends on us.

And, in fact, if everything depends on us ... there's almost never really a time for this true and deep kind of enjoyment ... is there?

Because no matter what we accomplish ... no matter what battles we win ... there's always a next battle, right? There's always the next threat. There's always the next need.

And that's not just true when it comes to military threats in the ancient world. It's also true today in so many areas of life, whether it's politics, or our career, or our finances, or raising our children – in every area, there's always the next need, the next challenge, the next crisis.

And with each challenge comes the fear and the anxiety ... and also the need we feel to set aside enjoyment of God's gifts.

If everything depends on us, then fear and anxiety will always keep us from enjoyment.

That's the issue underlying our text.

But it's not where our text stops.

God Is with Us as Our Strong & Loving Father

Because our text goes on to remind us that everything is not up to us. Everything does not depend on us. Because God is with us, as our strong and loving Father.

Now, this is what we focused on last week. The Bible tells us, not just here, in verse 4, but over and over again, that we are not in charge, we are not on our own, it's not all up to us.

But, God, our heavenly Father, is with us. And he is so strong that he's able to rule over the universe as a whole ... and at the very same time he's able to rule over the minute details of our own individual lives. And he's so loving that we can trust him with both of those things and everything in between.

Things may sometimes look dire. As in our text, we may face challenges that are stronger than we are and more numerous than we ourselves can handle. But even then, God is with us as our strong and loving Father. We are called to do our part – to work, to labor, to fight the good fight. But if he is there with us, then we need not think for a moment that the final outcome is all up to us. He is able to do all things. We must be faithful. But he is in control. And we can leave the outcome to him.

As T.S. Eliot put it: “For us there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.” [East Coker, V.189]

And the reason it's not our business is because it's God's.

And so, while duty and responsibility remain real ... they're not all-consuming. Because if God is with us, then everything's not up to us. So, we need not fear. We need not be consumed with anxiety. We need not panic. We need not be filled with dread.

If everything depends on us, then fear and anxiety will always keep us from enjoyment. But God is with us, and he is our strong and loving Father.

God Calls Us to Enjoy the Gifts He's Given to Us

And that has a number of implications. But the implication that Moses highlights here in verses five through seven is that because of this biblical truth, God calls us to enjoy the gifts he's given to us.

If everything depends on us, then fear and anxiety will always keep us from enjoyment. But because God is with us as our strong and loving Father, he calls us to enjoy the gifts he's given us.

And “calls” is probably too weak of a word. It's probably more fitting to say “commands.” God commands us to enjoy the gifts he's given us.

After all, verses five through seven are not technical exemptions reluctantly granted ... they're orders: orders to leave the fight in order to go and enjoy God's blessings.

And that command is given not because God has a low view of duty ... but instead because God tells us that we have more duties than one.

Yes, there is often a duty to strive, and to work, and even to fight.

But also, we see here, there is a duty to enjoy – a joyful duty, but a duty nonetheless, to enjoy the gifts God gives us in this life. That too is a duty.

And it comes up elsewhere in Scripture.

Ecclesiastes 9:7-9 says to us:

⁷ Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do.

⁸ Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head.

⁹ Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vaporous life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life.

We are called on to enjoy God's good gifts. It's not just an option ... but a duty. In fact, David Gibson, in his wonderful book on Ecclesiastes, argues that just a couple chapters later in Ecclesiastes, we are warned that God will judge us if we fail to enjoy the good gifts he's given us. [Gibson, 136]

Because if God really is our loving Father, and if we really are his beloved children ... then life – true life – in this world is not about grasping at what we need or what we want – it's not about figuring out how to gain more for ourselves ... but life is fundamentally about gifts ... gifts our heavenly Father gives to us. And true spiritual maturity is largely about learning how to receive those gifts well. [Gibson, 37]

And part of rightly receiving a gift is enjoying it.

Think again of the vineyard in verse 6. God's concern there should cause us to pause and consider his priorities.

God doesn't speak here of food and drink as merely fuel for our bodies – as a means to getting things done. He calls us instead to stop and see the gift of food and drink ... and then to pause and truly enjoy it. [Gibson, 45]

There's a lesson in that.

As Robert Capon has put it, somewhat poetically: "Food is the daily sacrament of unnecessary goodness, ordained for a continual remembrance that the world will always be more delicious than it is useful." [Capon, 40]

God has given us a world ... that will always be more delicious than it is useful – more designed for enjoyment than for mere utility.

God gives us the gift of food and drink multiple times throughout the day ... and often we fail to enjoy it ... because we're too focused on what's next, too utilitarian ... too anxious and fearful.

The same can be true with our homes. The Lord has given most of us homes: a place to live, a space that, at least for a time, is ours. It's a blessing to be enjoyed. And yet, again, so often we fail to enjoy that blessing. We fail to let ourselves delight in the place that is home for us. We instead treat our home as merely the setting for our work, or the place we sleep between bouts striving out in the world ... but the Lord has also called us to simply enjoy the gift he's given us in our homes – not to think about what they could be if we got up and worked a bit more ... but to delight in what our home already is. Do you do that?

Third, and most tragically, the same oversight can be made when it comes to our spouse or our family. Far too often we treat those closest to us as merely a supporting cast in our lives ... or a set of responsibilities we have to manage, or hurdles that keep us from what we might otherwise achieve.

But the Bible tells us that as much as there is responsibility, and work, and sacrifice in married life and family life ... there's also supposed to be enjoyment.

A wife, a husband, is a blessing, a gift from God. Children are a gift from the Lord. The Bible is clear about those things.

And gifts are meant to be enjoyed.

Ecclesiastes 9:9 commands us to enjoy life with your spouse, whom you love.

“If you're married,” David Gibson writes, “don't downplay this [verse]. We are not told: live with your wife, or put up with your wife, but, rather, enjoy life with your wife. If you are too busy to enjoy the life you have together, then you are too busy. End of story.” [Gibson, 113]

Marriage is a gift. Your spouse, if you have one, is a gift. Children, if you have them, are a gift. Each is a gift from God.

Yes, each also involves responsibility, and duty, and work, and sacrifice – that is certainly true. But the Bible doesn't speak about husbands and wives and children and family as only responsibilities to be fulfilled. The Bible speaks of each of these people in our lives as gifts from God. A spouse is a gift from God. Children are a gift from God. A family is a gift from God.

Are you being intentional about enjoying those gifts?

Are you making time to enjoy those gifts?

If you have so crowded your life ... if you have so loaded up your tasks and responsibilities in life ... that you're too busy to enjoy your wife, or your husband, or your children, or your family – if you are too busy to enjoy those gifts God has given you ... then you're probably doing life wrong.

And don't respond to that by saying that you're going to enjoy such things later, when life “calms down” – once you get through this particular challenge you find yourself in. Because, first of all, we all know that when one challenge ends, another almost always comes up right afterwards to take its place.

But even more than that, don't tell me you'll do it later, because our text this morning reminds us that it's right in the middle of such challenges – even challenges that may seem to us overwhelming – that we need to be reminded then and there, to prioritize the enjoyment of God's gifts – and especially the gift of a spouse, or children, or a family, if the Lord has blessed us with such things.

The call of our text is to stop now ... and enjoy God's gifts now. Because while we are called to work ... God is in control. And he calls us not just to work ... but also to enjoy. He calls us to let go of our faithless fears and anxieties ... and trust that he is with us ... and he will win the battle for us ... and so we can enjoy his good gifts not just at some imaginary future date ... but right now ... today. [Gibson, 72]

Gibson puts it like this – he writes: “When the child does not enjoy the gift the parent has lavished on him, it is an affront to the parent's love [...]. No parent is glad that Buzz Lightyear sits pristinely in the box rather than being lovingly bashed and bumped in daily adventures. Real relationship involves seeing another person take pleasure in gifts given; delight is what we ask of others as we freely give to them.” [Gibson, 136] “The only right way to respond to God's good gifts, and to his pleasure in giving us the gifts of food and wine and family, is to go and enjoy them.” [Gibson, 113] “Failure to enjoy is an offense, not merely an oversight.” [Gibson, 136]

And, of course, the list of gifts God gives us – and therefore the list of things we are called on to go and enjoy – is much larger than the three categories given in verses five through seven. It extends to the beauty of creation, the joy of physical exertion in sports and recreation, the gifts of music, and literature – of stories and songs – of cinema and games, of friendship and fellowship in many different forms, and on and on.

If everything depends on us ... then for the responsible adult, there's really is little time for, and little sense in, any of those things.

But if God is with us as our loving Father ... and if we really are his children ... and if he loves to give good gifts to his children ... then the enjoyment of those gifts from him is one of the primary reasons we were created.

Our text this morning is a call to not forget that.

If everything depends on us, then fear and anxiety will always keep us from enjoyment. But because God is with us, as our strong and loving Father ... he invites us, he calls us, he commands us even ... to enjoy the good gifts he's given to us.

Conclusion

God showers gifts upon us every day. And so often we don't even notice. Because we're too busy striving or grasping ... fearing or fretting.

Brothers and sisters, God, our loving Father, is in control. Cease your fretting. Cease your fearing. Cease your dread. Cease your panic. Stop and look around yourself. And see the gifts all around you. See the gifts your heavenly Father has given you right here and right now. And then take time to enjoy them, to delight in them, and to give thanks for them.

Do that today. Do it this very afternoon. Do it again tomorrow. And again the day after that. Seek to do it every day.

Your delight in those gifts gives your Father in heaven pleasure. Your sincere thankfulness is a joy to him.

He is a loving heavenly Father.

And he delights to give good gifts to you and see you enjoy them.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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- Theopolis Podcast*. "Episode 685: Wars and Just Wars (Deuteronomy 20)" November 15, 2023.
<https://soundcloud.com/user-812874628/episode-685-wars-and-just-wars-deuteronomy-20>
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Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of "Reformed Catholicity"), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.

