

**“Just War & Redemptive Conflict”**  
**Deuteronomy 20:10-15**  
**September 21, 2025**  
**Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service**  
*Pastor Nicoletti*

**The Reading of the Word**

We continue this morning in our series in the Book of Deuteronomy, as Moses instructs the people about how they are to live in the land as God’s people.

With that in mind, let’s turn now to our text: Deuteronomy 20:10-15.

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

Moses said to the people:

<sup>20:10</sup> “When you draw near to a city to fight against it, offer terms of peace to it. <sup>11</sup> And if it responds to you peaceably and it opens to you, then all the people who are found in it shall do forced labor for you and shall serve you. <sup>12</sup> But if it makes no peace with you, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it. <sup>13</sup> And when Yahweh your God gives it into your hand, you shall put all its males to the sword, <sup>14</sup> but the women and the little ones, the livestock, and everything else in the city, all its spoil, you shall take as plunder for yourselves. And you shall enjoy the spoil of your enemies, which Yahweh your God has given you. <sup>15</sup> Thus you shall do to all the cities that are very far from you, which are not cities of the nations here.”

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, give us eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to understand your word to us,  
For our good, and for your glory.  
We ask it in Jesus’s name, Amen.

**Introduction**

In the period following Moses, God gave Israel two modes of warfare.

One was *herem* warfare. This was a special kind of warfare that called for the destruction of the people in the land of Canaan, at a specific moment in history. That kind of *herem* warfare is discussed in the verses that follow our text this morning, and we will discuss them next week.

But outside of that narrow situation, Israel's other mode of warfare was for everyone else, and every other situation. It was the mode which God called them to follow ordinarily when there was military conflict – in every case outside the specific nations of Canaan. And it's that kind of ordinary warfare that's in view here, in our text this morning.

And as we reflect on our text, what we see is that: God gives us rules for military conflicts, and all conflicts, which aim at the redemption of our enemies, rather than their destruction, because that's what God himself is like.

Let me say that again: God gives us rules for military conflicts, and all conflicts, which aim at the redemption of our enemies, rather than their destruction, because that's what God himself is like.

Let's break that down together.

### **Military Conflicts**

First, what we see in our text, and in the Scriptures as a whole, is that God gives us rules for military conflicts which aim at the redemption of our enemies, rather than their destruction.

Now that might not seem obvious at a first glance of our text. But let's take a closer look.

Starting in verse 10: "When you draw near to a city to fight against it..."

What's the occasion for why Israel is drawing near to this city, outside of the Promised Land?

Well, it's not spelled out for sure, but I think a number of factors suggest that what's in view here are defensive wars. Leading up to this passage, the focus is on deliverance. And the promise of success in verse four of this chapter, which seems to be reflected here, in the first half of verse 13, is about the defense of Israel, not any sort of conquest outside the Promised Land.

And so, it's not surprising that a number of commentators agree that what's likely in view here is not wars of conquest, but defensive wars, fought, as Jeff Meyers puts it, "when necessary" – "against enemies who have been aggressive" towards Israel [Meyers, *Theopolis*, 10:00ff]. They were, Gary Millar asserts, wars deemed necessary for national defense [Millar, 133], wars, Raymond Brown argues, carried out against those who "have threatened national security through frequent raids and persistent onslaught [...] wars of necessary defense not of selfish expansion." [Brown, 199-200] [Contra Block, 476]

Either in whole, or at least in part, these rules applied to wars that were defensive – wars that were against those who had harmed Israel – responses to outside aggressors.

So ... what was Israel supposed to do when they came to fight against an outside aggressor who had done them harm?

Verse 10 continues: “When you draw near to a city to fight against it, offer terms of peace to it.”

That’s striking. Even when they’re responding to outside aggression, even when they’ve already been injured by this other nation, even with enemies who have previously done them harm, when Israel went out to fight against a city ... they were required, by God, to start by offering them terms of peace.

We continue in verse 11: “And if it responds to you peaceably and it opens to you, then all the people who are found in it shall do forced labor for you and shall serve you.”

We’re not given a lot of detail here. But at the same time, what’s described here was probably much tamer than we might imagine. What’s prescribed here is likely not the displacement of a people into slavery within Israel, but rather, as Christopher Wright explains, “a vassal treaty in which the city would become subject to Israel.” [Wright, 230] As part of that vassal treaty, Daniel Block argues, they would at times be required, in units, to come to Israel and provide labor on government projects. [Block, 474, 475 n.31] That still may seem severe to us, but as Christopher Wright points out, in the ancient world this would be seen as highly restrained. Israel was not allowed to plunder the people’s goods. They were not allowed to humiliate or brutalize the people – though brutal humiliations were common in the ancient world when one nation conquered another. [Wright, 230] Here, the terms are highly restrained: the city agrees to be a vassal of Israel, submitting to labor on government projects for them. That’s tame for its time, especially if this was a population who had previously threatened or even attacked Israel.

Even when responding to enemies and aggressors, Israel was always to offer terms of peace, and should their enemies accept those terms of peace, the terms were remarkably kind compared to the norms of the ancient world, and the new relationship even included a level of guided repentance, as former raiders and aggressors agreed to serve Israel going forward instead of harming them.

As Israel’s military went out, they were to be aimed at the redemption of their enemies, not their destruction.

But what happens if those enemies refused the offer of peace? We read in verse 12: “But if it makes no peace with you, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it.”

Here military action is taken, the city is surrounded and sealed off, and Israel works to find a way to break through its walls. [Block, 474-475]

What happens then? What happens when Israel wins the battle, when they defeat these enemies?

We read in verse 13: “And when Yahweh your God gives it into your hand, you shall put all its males to the sword.”

Now this can understandably distress us. But here we need to understand what's in view. If this was a defensive war for Israel, we have a people before us who had been attacking and raiding Israel, presenting an ongoing threat to them. Then, when Israel confronted them militarily, they refused to repent and surrender. Then, even in the siege, they fought on, so that Israel had to defeat them by military force.

Enemy combatants who had acted this way couldn't really be trusted to be peaceable and to desist their stubborn aggression. And in the ancient world, every adult man would have been just such an enemy combatant. These cities had no standing army, but every adult male would be part of the military structure. And Israel also did not have a standing army, so they could not leave a force in this city to prevent them from threatening Israel or others again. And so, not just as an act of judgment, but as a necessity for public safety, these military aggressors, if they did not repent and accept terms of peace, or die unrepentant in battle, they were executed.

And though verse 13 may strike us for its bloodshed, many in the ancient world would have been struck again by its restraint, because the contrast between verses 13 and 14 (especially in the Hebrew) very clearly restrict these executions to enemy combatants. Non-combatants – women and children – were to be dealt with differently. [Block, 475; Wright, 230]

We read on, in verse 14: “but the women and the little ones, the livestock, and everything else in the city, all its spoil, you shall take as plunder for yourselves. And you shall enjoy the spoil of your enemies, which Yahweh your God has given you.”

Let's take this one piece at a time.

First, the goods and property could be appropriated by the Israelites and enjoyed by them. They could plunder those goods, absorbing them into the community, to enrich Israel.

The women and children were not to be killed, but they too would be absorbed into Israel and would thus enrich Israel. [Block, 475]

But what exactly is in view here?

We may understandably have concerns – particularly as to whether abuse, assault, or exploitation is in view. But this is one of those cases where we need to be careful to read one portion of the law of Moses with the rest of the laws of Moses. Because as in any wise system of law, each law is meant to be taken in the context of the whole. And as we do that, we find other laws relevant to the fate of these woman and children.

Consider the women.

In the ancient world, assault, abuse, and exploitation for such women taken captive in battle was common and even expected.

Which is why it's striking that in that same ancient setting Israel had specific laws to ensure that that didn't happen among their captives. In fact, in the very next chapter of Deuteronomy, and

elsewhere, Moses lays down strict rules of protection for female captives, preventing assault or quick marriage, guarding their dignity, and explicitly seeking to ensure that a man could not humiliate her, mistreat her [Deuteronomy 21:10-14] or neglect her [Exodus 21:7-11. For a larger discussion of these verses and their application beyond the specifics mentioned in those verses, see Instone-Brewer] In other words, as these women were brought into Israel, the law of Moses clearly forbid assault, abuse, or exploitation of them. This was a remarkably counter-cultural thing in the ancient world. [Wright, 230]

Similarly, the law of God protected children – including foreign children living in Israel. In Exodus 22:21-24 we read: “You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry, and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless.”

A sojourner was a foreigner living among the Israelites, which these captives would have been. And the children among them would have been fatherless. And so the children in verse 14 of our passage were twice covered by the protections of Exodus 22, which forbid the people from oppressing or mistreating them.

The absorption of the women and children, described in verse 14, would enrich and bless Israel, yes – that is made clear in our text.

But the law of Moses also focuses on the care for, and the good of, the captives themselves. Yes, their plight was difficult. Their situation was hard. And yet ... their path, if Israel followed all of God’s commandments, was aimed towards their redemption rather than their destruction.

Because, in the long run, the law that God gives to his people here, is aimed at the help, the healing, and even the salvation of their enemies who were conquered.

This is, in a sense, one more fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham that through his descendants he would ultimately bless all the nations.

But, more specifically, think of these women and children in view here, living in the ancient world, living in a brutal culture.

They would be captured by Israel, a nation that, perhaps, they despised ... and in the ancient world, once captured, they would expect terrible treatment and abuse. But then that terrible treatment and abuse wouldn’t come. Instead, to their shock, even as captives, they would be treated with dignity. They would have safeguards for their welfare. They would be pulled from a dark, brutal, and unbelieving society, and placed in a society that treated human life with dignity and value. And in that society, they would be given an opportunity for spiritual renewal as well – an opportunity to know their Maker, and to enter fully into the community of God’s people – them and their descendants.

Yes, they would have gone through a form of death – social death, financial death, emotional death even. But ... on the other side, they would be offered new life among the people of God.

And so ... if we zoom out and look at this text as a whole, what we see is that even when dealing with enemies who had done them harm – who posed an ongoing threat to them – even as Israel entered into military conflict with them, their efforts were to be aimed at the redemption of their enemies, rather than their destruction.

Despite the battle, despite the bloodshed, the approach to military conflict prescribed here aims, as much as was possible, towards the good, towards the redemption even, of Israel's enemies.

And that orientation has not been limited to God's people in the days of the Old Testament.

From the days of Augustine, in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the Church has sought to apply these biblical principles and others to the ethics of military conflict, leading to the historic Christian just war doctrine, that is often distinct from secular just war theories that are emphasized today. [Here, I am especially drawing from portions of Daniel M. Bell Jr.'s book *Just Was as Christian Discipleship*.]

For one thing, like our text, the Christian just war doctrine held that even in military conflict, we, as God's people, are called to aim for the redemption rather than the destruction of our enemies whenever possible. And this was true for enemy combatants as well as enemy non-combatants.

First, when it came to enemy non-combatants, while secular models of just war theory focus only on how non-combatants should not be intentional military targets, and that foreseeable collateral damage against non-combatants should be proportional, [Bell, 213] Daniel Bell argues that in the historic Christian just war doctrine "it is not enough that just warriors do not intend the death of noncombatants; they have a responsibility to exercise due care in avoiding noncombatant deaths by protecting them from harm." [Bell, 213] This means avoiding activities where unintentional non-combatant casualties are foreseeable and likely [Bell, 218, 215] because one of the goals of a just warrior, according to the Christian just war doctrine, was to seek the good, and even the redemption, of enemy noncombatants caught up in the midst of military conflict.

But even more striking than that, Bell argues that the historic Christian just war doctrine also calls for just warriors to seek the good and the redemption of enemy combatants, as much as is possible.

According to Jesus, Christians are to love their enemies. And, Bell explains, Augustine has argued that "just war creates no exception to this." Bell writes: "It is not as if Christians are called to love their neighbors, except when going to war against them. To the contrary, the commandment to love our enemies holds, even in the midst of war. [...] In Augustine's view, just war is a form of love insofar as it is a sort of 'kind harshness' [...] for the sake of the enemy's repentance and reformation. It is harsh because it is an effort to help one's enemies against their will by punishment. But it is nevertheless a kindness because this punishment is a service to the defeated in the form of restoring justice and peace and depriving persons of the license to act wickedly. In other words, when others do evil, in just war, when we seek to stop them by force – that is not only a mercy to the victims, but also a mercy to the offender as we stop them from further twisting their soul or increasing their guilt with sin. "Thus," Bell continues, "a just war is one waged with mercy as it aims at taming disordered passions and vices. It is in this vein that Augustine exhorts the just

warrior to ‘be a peacemaker, even in war so that by conquering them you bring the benefit of peace even to those you defeat.’” In such wars killing may occur out of necessity, “but,” he writes, killing is “not what a just war aims at. Rather, the aim of a just war is that the unjust enemy will turn from their wicked ways, make amends, and rejoin the community of peace and justice.” [Bell, 31; see also Bell, 158-164]

When it comes to military conflict, even when it comes to our enemies – to those who would threaten us – God gives us rules for military conflicts which aim as far as is possible at the redemption of our enemies, rather than their destruction.

That’s what we see in our text. That’s what we see in the historic Christian just war tradition.

That has direct and weighty implications for those who lead or serve in the military.

The call to have a redemptive intent even towards one’s enemies falls in a special way on those who make the decisions on when, and where, and how their nation will engage in military conflict.

But also in the day-to-day realities of war, right conduct in war – conduct that seeks to protect non-combatants, and works for the good of even non-combatant enemies – this falls in special ways on the military personnel who will carry out the orders that come from above as they navigate conflict, fight hostile enemies, encounter and interact with non-combatants, and seek to carry out their mission faithfully.

Neither of those roles are easy, and I imagine many situations are complex, and often decisions need to be made in an instant – without the benefit of armchair moral reflection. And yet, the moral responsibility of those roles remains. It’s a heavy burden that must be carried by all who bear the sword. It’s one more reason they need our prayer and support as they seek to bear that burden faithfully.

But even for those of us who don’t bear the sword ourselves – for those of us not leading or serving in the military – these principles have implications for how we view, and think, and speak about military conflict at home and around the world.

So often we fall into simplistic ways of doing this. An international conflict breaks out. And we decide one side is the good side, and the other side is the bad side. And often, for most of us, it seems like whomever we’ve deemed the good guys – they can do no bad in our eyes. And whomever we’ve deemed the bad guys – they can do no good.

But the God of the Bible views such things with much more depth and complexity. And he calls us to do the same.

If we take God’s laws for military conflict seriously, and if we believe there is any wisdom in the historic Christian just war tradition, then, when Freedonia and Sylvania go to war, we need to be able to say: “You know, I prefer Freedonia as a country, and I share a lot of values with them... but I also have serious concerns about their intentions towards Sylvania in the war, and what they will do to those people if they win.”

Or, we need to be able to say: “You know, I agree with Freedonia’s goals and their long-term intentions and I think Sylvania’s goals are just evil... but even so, Freedonia’s conduct towards the Sylvanians in this conflict ... the way they’ve treated captured enemies, or their brutality towards the weak, or their indifference towards the suffering of non-combatants – their conduct in those areas is deeply wrong and immoral, even though I agree with their goals.”

As Christians who believe the Bible, we are called to make such moral distinctions. But so often, instead, we parrot the talking points of secular pundits. And we overlook the evil of the nation we favor or even call their evil deed good.

Do you see ways that you may be prone to do that?

Contrary to that, what we see in our text and in the Scriptures is that God gives us rules for military conflicts which aim at the redemption of our enemies, rather than their destruction.

### **All Conflicts**

And, striking for many of us, that dynamic – that call of God – extends beyond the battlefields of military conflict ... into all conflicts.

Because when we take the Bible as a whole, what we see is that God gives us rules for all conflicts, which aim towards the redemption of our enemies and opponents, rather than their destruction.

Because if these callings to seek the redemption of our enemies apply even in military conflict, as we see in our text, and as the Church has historically insisted that it does ... then surely it also applies to every other area of our lives as well – to every conflict we face in the Christian life.

And we each have a good bit of conflict in our lives. We have family conflicts and workplace conflicts ... interpersonal conflicts and political conflicts ... spiritual conflicts and church conflicts. We have conflicts in every area of our lives. And an implication of our text is that our focus, our goal, our intention, for others – even for our opponents or enemies – when we engage in these conflicts is to be aimed at their good ... at their redemption, rather than at their destruction. And the way we conduct ourselves in these conflicts: what we say, what we do, how we talk, towards others – even towards our opponents or enemies – that too is to be aimed at the redemption of our enemies, rather than their destruction.

That’s how Christians are supposed to engage in conflict in each area of life – not just for their own good, or their own gain ... but for the good and even the redemption of their opponents and even their enemies.

And at the moment, that’s really counter cultural.

Because we live in a culture where there's a lot of disagreement on who our enemies should be ... but a high level of agreement that true enemies should be destroyed – not redeemed. And far too often, we, as Christians, fall into that way of thinking too.

Where do you see that tendency in your life? Where do you lean into destructive rather than redemptive patterns of conflict? Where do you find yourself speaking to someone in ways not designed to increase understanding, but to cut them down and humiliate them? Where do you find yourself talking to others about someone else in ways not aimed at getting that person help, but hurting their reputation? Where do you find yourself thinking about someone not just with frustration, or perplexity, or even just anger ... but ill will and even hate? Where do you find yourself planning how you'll approach a conflict, not primarily to resolve it – to offer terms of peace – but to hurt someone back who's done something that hurt you? Where do you find yourself more focused on bringing retribution or punishment on someone, rather than bringing redemption and healing? Where, right now, are you failing to love your enemies? Maybe it's in your personal life, or maybe it's in your workplace. Maybe it's in your family. Maybe it's in your politics, or maybe it's in the church. But we all struggle with this. Where does it show up for you?

God calls us to love our enemies. God calls us to seek the redemption of others – even those who would rather see us destroyed. The unbelieving world scoffs at such a redemptive approach, but the gospel requires it. Where in your life do you need to take that requirement more seriously?

God gives us rules for all conflicts, which call us to aim at the redemption of our enemies and opponents, rather than their destruction.

### **God's Conflict with Us**

Finally ... *the reason* we are called to engage in conflict this way – the reason we are called to engage with our enemies this way is because that's what God himself is like.

More specifically: That's what God himself has done for us.

Because we all have been enemies of God. No matter who you are, you are, by natural birth, a rebel. You are, from conception, a son or a daughter – an ally – of the rebel leader who defied God, and who declared humanity's war against its Maker.

And with your own sin and selfishness, you repeat this rebellion.

And so God ... by his rights and by his abilities ... could have destroyed you. He could have entered into conflict with you in a way that would have brought about your eternal destruction.

And yet ... instead ... he came to you, and he offered you terms of peace. And then ... even when you still resisted him, he besieged your heart. And when he conquered it, he did not destroy you and just start over ... but he sought to redeem you – to make new what was good in you, while destroying what was set against him.

You are a Christian because God engaged in redemptive warfare with your soul.

And even now, as you seek to follow him, he continues to engage in redemptive warfare with every part of your heart that holds on to sin and rebellion. He is besieging and conquering you, redeeming and transforming you, every day, bit by bit, through his redemptive conflict with your soul.

Though we had defied and rebelled against our Maker ... in response ... God did not hate us. He did not destroy us. He did not abandon us. But he engaged in redemptive conflict with us, besieging us not for our destruction but for our good. And the result was our redemption. The result was our eternal life.

And if God has done that for us ... how can we do otherwise when it comes to the people around us?

Whoever your enemy or opponent may be ... however wrong they maybe are ... however foolish or arrogant or frustrating or sinful they may be... if God, when we were his enemies, engaged in redemptive conflict with us, rather than destructive conflict ... well, then how can we not do the same thing for our opponents and enemies?

Shouldn't we be like our God and Father – like our Lord and Savior ... who sought, so sacrificially, our redemption, even when we were his enemies [Romans 5:10] ... who takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that he turn from his way and live? [Ezekiel 33:11]

Whether on a military battlefield, or a cultural battlefield ... whether we're on an interpersonal battlefield, or a spiritual battlefield ... we are called to engage in redemptive conflict even with our enemies.

Because that's how God has engaged in conflict with us.

And we owe him our eternal gratitude that he did.

Amen.

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**This sermon draws on material from:**

- Alter, Robert. *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary*. New York, NY: Norton, 2004.
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- Instone-Brewer, David. *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002.
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- Millar, J. Gary. *Now Choose Life: Theology and Ethics in Deuteronomy*. Downers Grove, IL: Apollos, 1998.
- 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>
- Wright, Christopher. *Deuteronomy*. NIBC. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996.

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.