

“The Goodness & Mercy of God’s Justice”
Deuteronomy 20:16-18
September 28, 2025
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

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

And we’re in a section of Deuteronomy on how Israel is to conduct war.

As we said last week, there are really two modes of warfare that God describes for Israel here.

One is ordinary warfare. This is the kind of warfare Israel was to conduct ordinarily against those who threatened or attacked them. And God gave Israel fairly strict rules for it: Israel was to begin with an offer of peace. If that was accepted, they could not plunder the land or dispossess the people, but they would enter into a sort of vassal treaty with them. If the enemy nation refused peace, Israel was to besiege them, and after the enemy combatants who had persisted in opposing them had been dealt with, the non-combatants – the women and children – were not to be abused, assaulted, or exploited, but would instead be incorporated into Israel.

That’s ordinary warfare. That’s what we discussed in detail last Sunday. And you can find that sermon on our website.

But there was another form of warfare that God prescribed for Israel under very specific circumstances: what is referred to as *herem* warfare. This was a special kind of warfare that called for the destruction of the people in the land of Canaan.

And that’s the kind of warfare our text describes this morning.

With that said, let’s turn now to our text: Deuteronomy 20:16-18.

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

Moses said to the people:

^{20:16} “But in the cities of these peoples that Yahweh your God is giving you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, ¹⁷ but you shall devote them to complete destruction, the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, as Yahweh your God has commanded, ¹⁸ that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods, and so you sin against Yahweh your God.

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

What we have before us this morning is a difficult text. It's a text where God calls Israel to wage war against a specific group of people, and as they do, to leave alive nothing that breathes.

That command understandably upsets and distresses a lot of modern people. Some, on the basis of passages like these, have rejected the God of the Bible. Others have tried to drive a wedge between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament, while still other Christians have affirmed these verses as the Word of God ... but are still greatly troubled by them.

But digging deeper into this text, gives us, I think, a better understanding of what's really going on here, and a clearer vision of the goodness of God, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever – the same both in the age of the Old Testament and the New Testament.

And as we dig deeper, what I think we see is that when we understand what's actually being described here, and how it played out in redemptive history, then we see in God's judgment his goodness and mercy as he confronts sin.

Let me say that again: When we understand what's actually being described here, and how it played out in redemptive history, then we see in God's judgment his goodness and mercy as he confronts sin.

Let's take that one piece at a time.

What's Actually Being Described Here

First, we need to make sure we accurately understand what's actually being described here, and how it played out in redemptive history.

And scholars Paul Copan [*Is God a Moral Monster?*] and Christopher Wright [*The God I Don't Understand (TGIDU)*] are significant helps as we try to understand the true nature of *herem* warfare. [From Copan 158-208; Wright, *TGIDU*, 87-91]

So ... what's actually going on here?

Well, first, we need to see that this *herem* form of warfare – this unique kind of especially destructive war – was limited to a specific period of redemptive history. It is only invoked in relation to the conquest of Canaan.

While God and the gospel always remain the same, God uses different means in his interactions with humanity at different moments in redemptive history. At one point God used a worldwide flood, but he doesn't plan to do that again. At one point he called his people to slaughter animals in their worship, but that command has ceased. And at one point God called his people to execute *herem* warfare on specific nations he had passed judgment on. But he doesn't call for or allow for his people to do that now, or throughout most of redemptive history.

So to begin, whatever was going on in *herem* warfare in the days of Moses and Joshua, was limited to a specific time that has now passed.

Second, *herem* warfare was limited to a specific people. Israel was not normally allowed to wage *herem*-style warfare – this more destructive form of war. We saw this last week. God had very different rules for ordinary war for Israel, and in any other situation those ordinary rules for warfare applied. *Herem* warfare was only to be applied to those nations whom God specified. That was an important distinction in the Old Testament itself.

Third, the method of *herem*-style warfare was limited to direct divine decisions and commands from God and was in effect an act of God. No human was ever allowed to make the decision that Israel would carry out a *herem* form of attack. Only God was able to make that call, and in those instances it was considered God himself who was bringing judgment on a people. Israel was merely God's instrument.

Fourth, *herem* warfare was typically directed at military installations. We see this especially in the book of Joshua. Given all that we know about Canaan in general, and from archeological evidence in particular, Copan and others conclude that places like Jericho and Ai – locations Israel attacked as part of this *herem* war – those were actually military strongholds, not civilian cities. In fact, there is no archeological evidence of civilian populations at Jericho or Ai. Historical investigation leads us to conclude that the primary focus of *herem* warfare seems to have been directed at military bases.

Now, some will rightly point out that verse 16 seems broad, talking about killing everything “that breathes.” And other passages raise even more questions. Joshua 6:21, speaking of the conquest of Jericho says: “Then they devoted all in the city to destruction, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys, with the edge of the sword.” Why would they say things like that if Jericho was a military base?

And that leads us to a fifth and key point we need to understand about these verses: The language used to describe *herem* warfare in the Bible employs the exaggeration and hyperbole that was common and expected in the war rhetoric of its day.

As our knowledge of Ancient Near-East warfare rhetoric has improved, we've learned that language along the lines of “we killed everyone” was not meant to be taken literally, and that the original audience at that time would have known this. That was simply how people talked about warfare in the Ancient Near-East. It wasn't a lie because everyone knew these phrases weren't meant to be taken literally but were instead meant to describe a complete and decisive defeat of an enemy – not an actual extermination of them.

To get a sense of this, it's helpful to realize that what people in the Ancient Near-East did in their war rhetoric, we still do today in our sports rhetoric. If I say that back in July the Yankees crushed the Mariners, or if I mention that last year both the Giants and the Bills slaughtered the Seahawks

... we all know that I'm not claiming that any professional athletes were actually physically crushed or put to death.

In the same way, when an author in the Ancient Near-East wrote that their side had killed everyone of a conquered nation ... everyone then knew that this wasn't meant to be taken literally.

And so we have many examples of kings in the Ancient Near-East recording how they killed everyone in a certain place ... and we know from other evidence that they had not actually killed everyone. And the truth was that they weren't even claiming to have. It was a generally understood way of talking.

And the Bible employs the same kind of Ancient Near-East war rhetoric. For example, in Joshua 11 we're told that Joshua had "cut off the Anakim from the hill country" and "devoted them to destruction with their cities" so that "There was none of the Anakim left in the land of the people of Israel." But then, just a few chapters later, in the very same book, Caleb mentions that the Anakim are still in the land [Joshua 14-15]. The author didn't lie in chapter 11 and then forget by chapter 14. He expected everyone to know that in chapter 11 he was using the exaggerated language of the day to describe a decisive defeat of the Anakim – not a literal extermination of them.

And this exaggerated language was also at work when the author describes those who had been killed as "both men and women, young and old." These were, Paul Copan explains, stock phrases used to describe all the inhabitants of a location, and were not meant to be literal descriptions of the types of people killed, or even the types of people present there – especially in a military installation like Jericho, where children were not expected to be. It was almost like saying "everyone and their mother was there" even if no one's mother was actually present.

In the context of Ancient Near-East warfare, it was understood that who was in view in these passages is not really women, children, or the elderly, but political leaders and military combatants. [Copan, 175]

It's a helpful reminder that when we read the Bible, we often need to do a bit of work to read it as it was meant to be read – as the original audience would have understood it. And that means understanding the idioms and the rhetorical conventions of the time.

And recognizing this kind of hyperbolic Ancient Near-East war rhetoric for what it is is one of the ways that we do that.

Finally, one other way we need to make sure we understand these texts fully is by putting them alongside other passages that describe the same *herem*-style warfare.

While our text here describes *herem* war in terms of leaving "alive nothing that breaths," with an implied emphasis on killing, other passages, describing the very same *herem* war, describe it primarily as a war of driving people out – not of killing them. In fact, the language of "driving out" or "dispossessing" or "thrusting" the Canaanites "out" of the land is used repeatedly.

So, in Exodus 23, God promises to "drive out the Hivites, the Canaanites, and the Hittites before" Israel. [23:28] We find the same language to describe the conquest, of driving out or casting out, or dispossessing in Exodus 34[:24], and Leviticus 18[:24], and Leviticus 20[:23], and Numbers

21[:32], and Numbers 32[:21], and Deuteronomy chapters 9[:1], and 11[:23], and 18[:14], and 19[:1], and we could go on.

In fact, Paul Copan points out that when the Bible talks about the conquest of Canaan, the descriptions of driving out and expelling the people from the land are “considerably more numerous” than descriptions of destruction or annihilation. [Copan, 181-182]

So, if that’s true ... then we need to ask: If large-scale civilian slaughter is not what’s in view in our text this morning ... then how does this *herem* warfare really differ from the ordinary warfare we considered last week, in verses 10 through 15?

And we find our answer as we look a bit closer.

In ordinary warfare, as much as was in their power, Israel was called to seek to build relationships with their former enemies – whether through peace treaties, or through incorporating noncombatants into the community of Israel. There’s a general movement of enfolding – of drawing their enemies in.

But when it came to *herem* warfare – when it came to the nations of Canaan, because they sat under a special judgment of God, in the absence of radical repentance, they were to be driven away from God’s people, rather than folded in. Combatants who persisted in opposing Israel were to be killed. And non-combatants were to be driven out of the land, rather than folded into Israel’s life in the land.

And there were two main reasons for this difference. First, it was an act of judgment on the nations of Canaan for their long and persistent rebellion and sin against God. But second, as we see in verse 18, this was also to protect Israel – lest they be tempted to follow in the ways of these particularly dark and sinful nations.

So, taken together, what can we say about what actually happened in the conquest – in this *herem* approach to warfare?

In this unique time in redemptive history, God (and God only) had declared judgment on a specific group of people. And he called on Israel to carry that judgment out. The form of the judgment was an attack on the Canaanite’s strongholds, in which their leaders and warriors were to be decisively defeated and killed, while non-combatants were often driven away, out of the land.

Now ... that might seem less distressing than our first impression of these texts. But even so, these texts are still calling for something serious.

We See God’s Judgment

Which brings us to our next point, that when we understand what’s actually being described here, and how it played out in redemptive history, we do see God’s judgment.

This text is about God’s judgment.

What we’ve said so far this morning isn’t meant to deny that. It’s meant to give us a clearer picture of the form that judgment took here. But it’s not meant to deny that this was a judgment from God.

God's judgment described here is real. There was death and destruction. And it was death and destruction, ordered by God. Maybe not everyone was killed, but still, a lot of people were killed. Many others were driven from their homes and faced intense difficulties as they fled to other lands. There was hardship and suffering for those whom this *herem* warfare fell upon. And it was all ordered by God.

The God of the Bible is a God who brings judgment on people. He has a right to judge his creatures. He made them. He has a right to call for their faithfulness and obedience.

And if they rebel against him – if they, in their sin, try to overthrow him as their God, then God, the One who made them, has a right to judge them. He has a right to withdraw the gifts he's given to them – including their homes, their community, their communion with him, and even their life. God can withdraw his gifts in judgment. And that's what he does here.

The God of the Bible is a God who judges sin – both in this life and in the next.

In a sense, *herem* warfare is a small picture of that spiritual truth.

God, at times, brings partial judgment in this life on those who rebel against him.

But much more than that, God has promised to bring his full and thorough judgment in the future. The Bible tells us that the day is coming when each person will stand before God and will face his judgment. On that day, all who have persisted in their sin – who oppose God and his people – will be driven from God's presence forever – driven from the presence of the God who is the source of all goodness. This itself will be a form of eternal death. And then, those who remain – those who are spared God's judgment, will enter the new heavens and the new earth – the eternal promised land – where they will dwell with him forever, in peace and joy.

But first, there is the judgment.

Our God is a God who judges sin. And we see a small picture of that in the concept of *herem* warfare.

But while God's justice is just ... that's not its only trait. It's also merciful and good.

In fact, in God's justice – in his confrontation with sin in *herem* warfare, we also see God's mercy and his goodness playing out. And we need to take a few minutes to consider both of those.

God's Mercy as He Confronts Sin

First, though it may not strike us right away, one important thing we need to see in this concept of *herem* warfare is God's mercy.

When we understand what's actually being described here, and how it played out in redemptive history, then we see in God's justice his mercy as he confronts sin.

And it shows up in a few ways.

We see that first in that God's justice is mercifully patient.

We often forget this, but before God sent Israel into the promised land to wage *herem* war, God gave the Canaanites 500 years to repent. It's true. All the way back in Genesis 15, five centuries earlier, God said he would not yet drive the people out of the promised land, because though they were evil, their "iniquity" was "not yet complete." In other words, he would hold off on bringing his judgment until they had had more time – more time either to repent, or to add to their guilt. God would wait. And he would wait five centuries. Only after 500 years of persisting in their sin did God bring his judgment to bear.

When it comes to our sin ... or the sin of people around us ... or the sin of whole societies ... God is remarkably patient. He waits. In his mercy, he gives us time to repent. [2 Peter 3:9]

And as he gives his creatures time to repent, he also gives his creatures a way to repent and escape judgment.

And we know this because he did that even with the Canaanites. And some of them did, in fact, repent, and escape this judgment.

First, there was Rahab. In Joshua 2 we're told how as she, a Canaanite, received the spies, she also believed in Yahweh, and so she was spared and saved. She said to the spies: "I know that Yahweh has given you the land [...]. For we have heard how Yahweh dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites [...]. And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you, for Yahweh your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath." [Joshua 2:9-11]

That's what she said. That's quite the confession of faith.

And Rahab was not the only Canaanite who repented and believed.

In Joshua 9 there's the Gibeonites, a people in Canaan, who deceived Israel into making peace with them. Now, there's a lot going on in that story, but at the core the Gibeonites, as a group, believed in the power of Yahweh, and sought peace with Israel – even if it meant being Israel's servants. As a result, they were spared, and they were assigned to be servants for the house of God – the tabernacle of Yahweh.

And then there are the Jebusites. These were Canaanites whom Israel was called to attack and drive out, right there in our text this morning – right in verse 17. But Israel had trouble driving them out. The Jebusites held on to Jerusalem and were not dislodged until the days of David [2 Sam 5:6-10].

But even then, Christopher Wright notes, the Jebusites were not destroyed, but they seemed, over time, to have been absorbed into the tribe of Judah and came "to be included within the covenant people."

We see this in the second half of Zechariah 9:7. There the prophet speaks of the Jebusites as having become like a clan in Judah, and he holds out the hope that one day the Philistines too will be brought into Israel, just like the Jebusites were.

As Christopher Wright puts it: “the Jebusites had moved from being on the *herem* list of enemy nations before the conquest to being a clan within Judah living right in the city of David.” And with that, they were seen as a model for what Yahweh might do with other pagan nations. [TGIDU, 102-103]

In all this we see that even as God brought judgment to their door, even after centuries in which these people failed to repent, even at the eleventh hour, God still held open a way to repentance – a path to mercy – and he willingly received those Canaanites who would repent and believe.

Even in God’s justice we see his mercy as he confronts sin.

God’s Goodness as He Confronts Sin

But it’s not just God’s mercy we see in his justice. It’s also his goodness.

When we understand what’s actually being described here, and how it played out in redemptive history, then we see in God’s justice his goodness as he confronts sin.

We can sometimes make the mistake of treating God’s mercy as if it’s the good trait in God – the part of him we like ... and his justice as the more unpleasant part of God. But that’s a serious misunderstanding.

In the Bible, God’s justice is a very good trait, that his people often long to see.

And if we don’t understand that ... then we’re probably living pretty privileged lives.

But most people in the world, and most people throughout history, have not been so privileged.

All around us, injustice reigns. The weak are oppressed. The poor are exploited. The vulnerable are abused while the wicked use power and injustice to further enrich themselves. This is how the world we live in so often works. We may be shielded from it in certain ways. But it’s the common experience of so much of humanity.

And in such a world, the weak, the vulnerable, the innocent, cry out for God’s justice. In such a world, God’s justice is recognized as a good thing. In such a world, the forces of goodness long for God’s justice to roll down like waters, and his righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. [Amos 5:24]

Because it’s God’s justice that brings evil to an end. It punishes the oppressor. It eliminates sin, and it restores the world to being more like it was meant to be – a place that is good and right.

We need God’s justice to be done in this world.

And the judgment God brought on Canaan is a small picture of that coming justice.

The cultures of Canaan had become truly terrible. They were characterized by social oppression, by violence, by sexual immorality, even by things like child sacrifice. [Wright, TGIDU, 93].

It was not a good or pleasant thing to live in these brutal societies. And it was a good thing when God’s justice brought those dark and oppressive societies to an end. It was good not just for the

Israelites who would take their place, but it was good for the nations who lived nearby, and good even in the long run for many of the women and children who fled from the land, and into other surrounding societies that weren't as dark and brutal.

When we understand what's actually being described here, and how it played out in redemptive history, then we see in God's judgment his goodness as he confronts sin.

The God Who Always Confronts Sin

And as we see that, we too should long for God's justice ... we should see that what this world needs is for God himself to set it right. And when he does, part of that will be him bringing justice to all who have rebelled against him – to all who have harmed his creation and his people.

We should want to see God confront sin.

But even as we long for that ... we should recognize that it raises problems for us.

Because we too have sin. We too have done wrong. We too have rebelled against God. We too have harmed others around us.

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” [Romans 3:23]

If God were to drive out all sin – if he were to bring *herem* style judgment on all sinners ... then we too would we judged. We too would be swept away.

But just as he did with the people of Canaan – just as he did with Rahab, and the Gibeonites, and the Jebusites – so too with us, God offers a way out.

If we will turn to him, if we will call on his name, if we will pledge ourselves to him and seek his grace, then God himself will have mercy on us.

But that mercy comes at a cost.

Though it's a cost not to us ... but to God.

God's *herem* justice remains – his justice due to us for our sin cannot simply be cast aside. It has to be carried out.

But in the gospel, instead of pouring that *herem* justice out on us, God takes it onto himself.

On the cross, Jesus Christ takes our sin to himself. He receives the punishment that we deserved, in our place. He received the *herem* justice that was due to us for our sin.

In this way, God drives out and destroys our sin, without driving out or destroying us.

This is the promise of the gospel. This is the hope for all people: That if we call on Christ in faith, then God himself will take on the judgment we deserve.

Brothers and sister, we serve a God who confronts sin with justice.

And in that confrontation we see his goodness and his mercy.

We see that in the conquest of Canaan.

But we see it even more in the cross of Christ.

For there God's justice and mercy meet.

And from it flows our salvation.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

- Alter, Robert. *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary*. New York, NY: Norton, 2004.
- Bell, Daniel M. Jr. *Just War as Christian Discipleship: Recentering the Tradition in the Church Rather Than the State*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009.
- Block, Daniel I. *The NIV Application Commentary: Deuteronomy*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012.
- Brown, Raymond. *The Message of Deuteronomy: Not by Bread Alone*. The Bible Speaks Today. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity: 1993.
- Copan, Paul. *Is God a Moral Monster?: Making Sense of the Old Testament God*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011.
- Craigie, Peter C. *The Book of Deuteronomy*. NICOT. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976.
- 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>
- Webb, William J. and Gordon K. Oest. *Bloody Brutal and Barbaric?: Wrestling with Troubling War Texts*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019.
- Wright, Christopher. *Deuteronomy*. NIBC. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996.
- Wright, Christopher J.H. *The God I Don't Understand: Reflections on Tough Questions of Faith*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008.

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.