

**“Unsolved Murders, Part 2: Our Corporate Responsibility”**

**Deuteronomy 21:1-9**

**October 19, 2025**

**Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service**

*Pastor Nicoletti*

**The Reading of the Word**

We return this morning to the Book of Deuteronomy, and we’re coming back to the same passage we looked at last week: Deuteronomy 21:1-9.

As we hear from it now, please do listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

Moses said to the people:

<sup>21:1</sup> “If in the land that Yahweh your God is giving you to possess someone is found slain, lying in the open country, and it is not known who killed him, <sup>2</sup> then your elders and your judges shall come out, and they shall measure the distance to the surrounding cities. <sup>3</sup> And the elders of the city that is nearest to the slain man shall take a heifer that has never been worked and that has not pulled in a yoke. <sup>4</sup> And the elders of that city shall bring the heifer down to a valley with running water, which is neither plowed nor sown, and shall break the heifer's neck there in the valley. <sup>5</sup> Then the priests, the sons of Levi, shall come forward, for Yahweh your God has chosen them to minister to him and to bless in the name of Yahweh, and by their word every dispute and every assault shall be settled. <sup>6</sup> And all the elders of that city nearest to the slain man shall wash their hands over the heifer whose neck was broken in the valley, <sup>7</sup> and they shall testify, ‘Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see it shed. <sup>8</sup> Accept atonement, O Yahweh, for your people Israel, whom you have redeemed, and do not set the guilt of innocent blood in the midst of your people Israel, so that their blood guilt be atoned for.’ <sup>9</sup> So you shall purge the guilt of innocent blood from your midst, when you do what is right in the sight of Yahweh.

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 & Exegesis**

So, we looked at this passage last week, and when we did, we dug into many of the details of the ritual we find here. I'm not going to repeat all of that this morning – you can find that sermon on our website – but let's summarize what we find in this passage: Someone is found slain in the countryside. And after an investigation, the murderer is not known – the case remains unsolved. And when that happens, the civic, judicial, and spiritual leaders of the city closest to the murder – the elders, judges, and priests – would all go out to a desolate place in the countryside, to carry out this ritual together.

And while there's some discussion and debate about the meaning of the details of the ceremony, two core concepts emerge at the heart of this ritual.

The first is the sacred value of human life.

That was our focus last week: the striking fact that all the leaders of the city were supposed to stop what they were doing, go out to the crime scene together, and then carry out this ritual, all in response to the loss of a single human life – whether they knew the victim or not. Whether he was from their city or not. Whether he was even an Israelite or not. Still they were to stop regular life and carry out this ritual.

That command here is a striking reminder of how much God values the life of every human being – and how much he calls on us to value the life of every human being ... because every human being bears his image – every human life has sacred value.

But along with that, there's also a second core concept at the heart of this text. The second thing we see here is the biblical concept that we have a corporate – or a community-based – responsibility for our neighbors.

Now to be clear, by “corporate” I simply mean, as the dictionary puts it, “a unified body of individuals.” I'm not talking about corporations, but rather communities in which we are united to other individuals: in families, church congregations, cities, nations, and other such groups. And as members of those communities, we have certain responsibilities towards other people in them, and even a moral solidarity with them.

And we see this concept taught here in our text this morning, because while the elders, and the residents of the city, and the citizens of Israel did not themselves commit the murder in question ... they still acknowledged that they have a real level of corporate responsibility for what has happened.

And that becomes even more clear in verses six through nine.

Take a look at those verses now. Several things happen there.

First, in verse seven, the elders, acting as representatives of the people, are clear that they did not carry out the crime against this man – and that they don't know who did. They have not committed this crime nor obstructed justice.

And yet, in verses eight and nine, they call on God to atone for them. They ask for God to remove the guilt of this terrible crime from them – from them as elders, from them as a city, even from them as a nation, in verse eight.

Moses then adds, in verse nine, that this prayer and this ritual, are intended to “purge the guilt of innocent blood” from the community and from the nation. The implication is that the guilt of that innocent blood is upon the community and upon the nation until this ritual is performed.

The whole ritual assumes that some form of guilt rests upon the people ... even though they did not personally commit this crime or carry out this sin.

And so, what we see in this ritual, and in other parts of the Scripture, is that the Bible clearly affirms corporate responsibility as a real moral reality, which God has embedded into creation, and which should shape both how we live and where we find our hope.

Let me say that again: What we see is that the Bible clearly affirms corporate responsibility as a real moral reality, which God has embedded into creation, and which should shape both how we live and where we find our hope.

Let’s take that one piece at a time.

### **The Bible Clearly Affirms Corporate Responsibility as a Real Moral Reality, which God Has Embedded into Creation**

First, the Bible clearly affirms corporate responsibility – or what we might call corporate solidarity – as a real moral reality which God has embedded into creation.

Now, to begin, corporate responsibility is not the same thing as personal responsibility. Both are real moral categories. But they are distinct.

The Bible clearly teaches that every individual is responsible for their own sin, and that’s come up multiple times in the book of Deuteronomy. And ordinarily, when a murder occurred, and the murderer was convicted, his personal responsibility would be at the forefront.

The Bible is clear that every human being is personally responsible for the wrongs they have done, both before God, and before other people. That’s a moral reality in the Bible.

But there is also another moral reality that the Bible teaches. It also teaches that corporate solidarity is a moral reality, and that as a result, we do, in a real sense, have a kind of responsibility for sins done by our communities or members of them.

Now, again, personal responsibility and corporate responsibility are distinct.

After all, in our passage this morning, though the elders, and with them the city, recognize a level of corporate responsibility for this murder, and guilt that would come with it, they are not then executed for that guilt, as they would be if they were personally guilty of the murder. Similarly, we read Deuteronomy 24:16: “Fathers shall not be put to death because of their children, nor shall

children be put to death because of their fathers. Each one shall be put to death for his own sin.”  
[Deuteronomy 24:16]

Personal guilt and corporate guilt are distinct, and call for different responses. And yet, according to the Bible, both categories are still real.

Our text clearly teaches a concept of corporate responsibility and moral solidarity. But in our culture, we struggle with that.

And yet we see it taught throughout the Scriptures.

We see it in Joshau 7 as Israel as a whole, and individuals within it, are held morally responsible by God for the sinful actions of one of its members: Achan.

We see it in 2 Samuel 21 when God punishes Israel as a whole because King Saul, their leader, broke Israel’s covenant with the Gibeonites.

We see it in 1 Samuel 15 when God punishes the Amalekites for the sins of their nation centuries earlier. We see in Deuteronomy 23, we see it in Amos 1-2, we see it in Micah 3, and lest we think this was just an Old Testament thing, we see it also in Acts 2 when Peter holds the city of Jerusalem and the people within it at the time responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus, even though it’s clear that not every individual in the city had a part to play in that terrible act. [Keller, “Justice in the Bible]

Behind these passages, and more, is the Biblical concept that while we are truly individuals, we are not truly autonomous. We live our life in a web of relationships – in communities of families, and congregations, social organizations, and neighborhoods, and cities, and nations. And within each of those webs we can often share a level of moral solidarity and responsibility for what those different communities, which we are a part of, do.

In each of those communities, to some extent, the moral actions of the whole morally affects the individuals within it. And, in a sense, the moral acts of individuals within the community also affect the whole. That’s the dynamic we see displayed in our text.

Now, sometimes that dynamic can be for good – a member of a community does good, and it brings blessing on the community as a whole. Other times it can be for ill: a member of the community does evil, and it brings negative consequences on the community as a whole.

The result of this solidarity is a corporate responsibility. Members of a community both have a proactive responsibility to prevent evil from occurring within the community, and also a level of responsibility when evil does occur in their midst. They share in some sense of corporate guilt, even if they didn’t commit that sin themselves.

Now, we live in the most individualistic culture in the history of the world. So we struggle with this reality.

But Herman Bavinck points out that we accept and even affirm this dynamic more often than we might think.

Specifically, he notes, we accept and affirm this concept of corporate solidarity when it works out for our good.

And so, Bavinck notes, when a parent or a relative dies and leaves an inheritance, we are quick to come and receive that inheritance as our right – to stress our connection with the deceased, and to believe it rightfully belongs to us ... though we did not work for it or earn it ourselves. They worked for it, they earned it. But we think it right that we have a share in it because we have a corporate bond with them.

And this attitude of assumed entitlement to the benefits of corporate solidarity is not limited to families. It extends to society, where we assume we should receive and benefit from the technological and economic and cultural advances of those who came before us, rather than having to start over from scratch ourselves each generation. And so, we happily receive infrastructure and institutions and legal structures which none of us helped build, but those who came before us in our society labored to build. And we believe these things are rightly ours to receive because we are members of the same country, the same city, the same society.

When corporate solidarity benefits us, we all affirm and even assume it.

But when such corporate solidarity would cost us ... then we deny our responsibility and quickly become radical individualists. We are indignant that we might have to pay for the mistakes and blunders of those who came before us in our society. And if our parents mismanage their money, we are just as quick to deny our responsibility to help them as we would be quick to claim our right to an inheritance if they had been wise with their money.

In our hypocrisy, Bavinck argues, we reveal that we know deep down that this dynamic of corporate solidarity is real. [Bavinck, WWG, 225-226]

Our text is a reminder to Israel that corporate solidarity cuts both ways. We can't just take the benefits. We have to acknowledge the liabilities. When an unsolved murder happens, the community – the city – has a corporate responsibility for what happened.

And we do actually acknowledge this still today. When a crime happens in our community, we say that we owe the victim justice. And we pay taxes to hire police officers and detectives and prosecutors and judges and jailers all because we as a community owe justice to those who have been wronged. It's not the community two towns over that owes the victim justice. It's us, because it happened here. And we bear a corporate responsibility for what has happened. Even though we ourselves did not personally commit that crime. Even so, we owe something because it happened in our community.

We know this is true on a deep level.

We like to think of ourselves as separate and autonomous individuals. But we are far more connected with other people than we tend to think.

C.S. Lewis puts it like this – he writes: “If you could see humanity spread out in time, as God sees it, it would not look like a lot of separate things dotted about. It would look like one single growing thing – rather like a very complicated tree. Every individual would appear connected with every other.” [Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 157]

This is how God has made humanity. It is a fact of who we are as human beings. God has embedded corporate solidarity – and with it corporate responsibility – deeply into creation.

That’s what we see in the Bible. That’s what we see in our text.

But what then are we supposed to do with that?

[For a more detailed argument on this concept and its presence in the Bible, see my July 11, 2021 evening sermon “Biblical Justice: Part 3” on Micah 3: <https://www.faithtacoma.org/micah-nicoletti/biblical-justice-part-3-micah-3>]

### **Corporate Solidarity Should Shape How We Live**

Well, first, it should shape how we live.

To begin, it means that we own the results that come from the communities, and societies, and social systems that we are a part of.

That’s essentially what’s highlighted in this text: some community – likely the city in view – has produced an individual, or a quarrel, or a dynamic that led to this murder. And while the city and its members are not personally responsible for that murder, they have a share in the corporate responsibility. And they own that here.

Such ownership means we willingly receive not just the benefits of the good done by the communities and the social systems we’re a part of. It means we also willingly own the responsibility for the evil done by those same communities and social systems.

That’s what’s explicit in the text.

But I think there’s another implicit aspect of this too.

Because I think that when a city had an unsolved murder in their region, and they had to go out and perform this ritual, I think it would impress on them a sense of duty to do what they could to make sure this didn’t happen again. I think it would remind them that they have a responsibility to keep their countryside safe, to step in and mediate when they see a conflict between their neighbors escalating, to intervene in the lives of those who seem to be heading down a dark or a violent path.

Those who witnessed this ritual, who participated in it, who were reminded of the sacred value of human life and their own corporate responsibility for their neighbors, would likely feel a sense that they must be more proactive to intervene in the lives of others if they seem to be on a trajectory towards a similar tragedy.

And that same responsibility falls on us as well, in the various communities our lives are embedded in.

It plays out in our families, where parents have deep responsibilities towards their children: for how they are raised, how they develop, how they are disciplined. Of course, a parent's influence is not absolute. But it is a significant and major aspect of their corporate responsibility in the family.

But corporate responsibility is not limited to parents. Children, you have a special kind of responsibility towards your siblings – your brothers and sisters. You're called on to care for them and love them and help them grow and mature into godly men and women. As God implied to Cain, you are, in fact, your brother's or your sister's keeper. [Genesis 9:9]

And this corporate family responsibility extends back as well to our parents as they age, as the Apostle Paul makes clear. They perhaps may have made mistakes leaving them in need. But you are called on to take on their needs as your own responsibility. [1 Timothy 5:4-8]

In a range of ways, the dynamics of corporate solidarity and responsibility are at work in our families.

But it's not limited to our families.

It's also at work in God's family – in the church, in our local congregation.

The local church is not supposed to be a place where you come just to receive. But it's also where you have real corporate responsibilities towards the other people in this congregation.

We acknowledge one aspect of that at every baptism here, where we take vows acknowledging our corporate responsibility towards the child who is formally joining our congregation.

That same corporate responsibility extends to those in our church who are struggling, who need support, or comfort, or assistance, or help in some way from us – help not only from the pastors or the elders or the deacons – but from us. Because each of us have a part in that responsibility.

And that corporate responsibility extends to those who may not need support ... but who need loving correction ... who are, perhaps, harboring more and more sin in their lives ... and we see something is wrong ... and we know they need help – they need someone to lovingly correct them ... but we tell ourselves that's not our problem ... “Someone else will deal with it, right? Am I my brother's keeper?”

In a range of ways, from supporting those in need, to correcting those in sin, to sowing peace where conflict may be brewing, to giving of our finances, we have a corporate responsibility to our church family – our congregation.

But again, such responsibilities are not limited to our families and our churches. It extends also to our community and our city.

Our lives are woven into our local community, which means that we have a responsibility to the city we live in – and not just to our little cloistered enclave within the city. That means we are to engage in local politics for the common good – not just for our own good. And it means we are to serve, as we're able, in our neighborhoods and in our city.

When we see deep needs in our city, like the needs of the homeless, it's easy to shrug it off, to turn away, to assume it's someone else's problem. To ask: "Am I my brother's keeper?"

And so like the priest and like the Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan, we pass by on the other side, and we go about our business.

But Jesus calls us to acknowledge that the man in the street really is our neighbor and to find a way to live out our responsibility to him. Maybe it's by serving at Tacoma Rescue Mission. Maybe it's by giving to their search and rescue ministry. Maybe it's by getting involved with the Good Neighbor Village that's going up. But we consider some way to take corporate responsibility for our neighbors, and the outcome of their lives.

And when things go wrong in our city ... and problems emerge, when people are hurt or neglected ... rather than looking for a scapegoat ... we are called to be people who ask: "What has my contribution been to all this? In what way am I part of a culture that produces these kinds of problems? What is my responsibility?"

And a similar set of corporate responsibilities extends beyond our city and to our nation, and from our nation even to the world, as we take responsibility for the larger communities we live in, for the wrongs those communities have done, and for the weak and the vulnerable within them.

And if we are tempted to shirk that responsibility by asking "But who, really, is my neighbor?" ... then, like the lawyer in Luke 10, we may not like Jesus's answer, as he reminds us that even our international enemies are, on some level, our neighbors.

Now that's a lot ... from our family to our church to our city to our nation to our world. And we can't do it all ourselves.

But again, that's part of the point. These are corporate responsibilities – not just individual and personal ones. We meet these responsibilities when everyone does their part, when everyone plays a role, when everyone seeks to sacrificially serve their neighbors, both near and far.

And yet ... even as we consider that ... we cannot help but wonder: If we all did our part, if we all did our best, would we be enough, on our own, to fix, to repair, to save our families ... and our churches ... and our cities ... and our nation ... and our world?

And the answer so obviously comes back as "No." On our own we are not enough. The years of sin and folly pile up, and even as we seek to take responsibility and make things right, even as we earnestly do that, at the same time we keep adding our own sin and folly to our families, and our churches, and our cities, and our nation, and our world, and it feels like on our own we cannot address the sin and folly at a rate sufficient to make any progress in light of all the sin and folly we keep adding to the pile.

We cannot, on our own, handle the corporate responsibility we see before us.

## Corporate Solidarity Will Shape Where We Find Our Hope

But God ... in his mercy ... has not left us on our own.

He's come alongside us. And he's joined us in our corporate solidarity. And that's where we find our hope.

Though we, his creatures, have rebelled against him, not just as individuals, but as a corporate whole, God, when he saw our great burden, did not abandon us. Far from that, he became one of us, so that he might share in our corporate responsibility, and make humanity new.

Remember what we heard from C.S. Lewis earlier – Lewis says: “If you could see humanity spread out in time, as God sees it, it would not look like a lot of separate things dotted about. It would look like one single growing thing – rather like a very complicated tree. Every individual would appear connected with every other.” [Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 157]

Humanity ... in a sense ... is like a very complicated tree. We each are a part of that tree – a branch, a twig. We are a part of this single growing thing that is humanity.

But the single growing thing has gone deeply wrong. We have brought an infection into it.

Our first parents, and each generation after them, and we ourselves, have all added to that infection with our own sin and guilt. And though we try, we cannot recover on our own. We cannot heal ourselves.

But God has not left us to ourselves. God has acted.

And in Christ Jesus he has established a new root. And a new trunk. And from that trunk he has sought to establish a new humanity. And he has taken us – branches from fallen humanity – and he has, in some sense, broken us off from the diseased tree we were a part of. And he has grafted us into himself – grafted us into the tree of Jesus Christ. And grafted into him, we are so united to him in true solidarity that our sin and our guilt flows to him, so that he can dispose of it on the cross – washing it away from us just as the water in this ritual washed their guilt into the sea. And at the same time, bound and grafted into him, in a deep corporate solidarity with him, his new life flows to us, so that we are made new, and we share in his blessings and eternal life.

At the heart of our salvation is the concept of corporate solidarity. But it's not a solidarity with Adam, who rebelled and brought sin and death to us ... by God's grace, it's a solidarity with Jesus Christ, who loved us, and gave himself for us, and shares with us his eternal life.

By grace, through faith, we are made a part of a new community, a new corporate body – the Body of Christ. And united to him, by his grace, we have life.

And God is ready to spread that new life beyond us and on to others.

To that end, God has embedded our lives in many different communities: in families, and churches, and neighborhoods, and associations, and cities, and nations, and in humanity as a whole. Even as we are united with Christ, he has also given us a measure of corporate solidarity with each of these communities. And he's called us there to be his instruments ... To be channels of his power ...

And to follow in his footsteps, so that just as he has taken corporate responsibility for us, so we might take on corporate responsibility for others in need, showing forth his love as we do.

For it is his love that empower us, and his love that enables us to build one another up and bear one another's burdens in corporate solidarity, to do what we could never do on our own.

Amen.

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***This sermon draws on material from:***

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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.