

“Rules for Captives, Part 1: God’s Vision for Human Sexuality”

Deuteronomy 21:10-14

October 26, 2025

Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service

Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

We return this morning to the Book of Deuteronomy, as Moses is instructing Ancient Israel about how they are to live as God’s people in the land.

And we find ourselves in a section of Deuteronomy that’s about how Israel is to handle some very difficult situations, which they will have to deal with in a fallen and broken world.

Now if you’re new with us or visiting this morning, here at Faith, because we believe all of Scripture is God’s Word, we preach through whole books of the Bible without skipping parts, which means that sometimes we come to challenging passages, which seems to be happening more often as we go through Deuteronomy. But I say that just to note that I didn’t pick this passage. It’s just what’s next.

This morning’s text brings up some particularly difficult topics, including abuse, assault, and sexual exploitation. I sent out an email yesterday giving a bit of a heads up about this. If you didn’t see that, then I’ll say up front that as we touch on some difficult topics, I will be careful in my language choice, and I won’t be lurid or graphic. I’m sensitive to the range of ages and the range of experiences we have in this room.

But I also want to say that despite how distressing this text might be when we first hear it, what we will come to find as we dig deeper, is the heart that God has for the weak, and the vulnerable – the abused and the exploited, as well as God’s vision for the proper use for human power and human sexuality in this world.

With that said, let’s hear now from our text: Deuteronomy 21:10-14.

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

Moses said to the people:

^{21:10} “When you go out to war against your enemies, and Yahweh your God gives them into your hand and you take them captive, ¹¹ and you see among the captives a beautiful woman, and you desire to take her to be your wife, ¹² and you bring her home to your house, she shall shave her head and pare her nails. ¹³ And she shall take off the clothes in which she was captured and shall remain in your house and lament her father and her mother a full month. After that you may go in to her and be her husband, and she shall be your wife. ¹⁴ But if you no longer delight in her, you shall let her go where she wants. But you shall not sell her for money, nor shall you treat her as a slave, since you have humiliated her.

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

So, we have before us a difficult passage ... which may initially cause us to recoil.

It brings up themes of both human sexuality and the use of human power. And at first what we find taught here might seem distressing to us. But often it’s especially when a text distresses us that we need to dig in deeper and make sure we truly understand it.

So that’s what we’re going to do – we’re going to spend two weeks on this text. This morning we’ll focus on what this passage tells us about the Bible’s vision for human sexuality. And next Sunday we’ll consider what this text has to teach us about the Bible’s vision for human power and authority.

But this week, as we come at this text, I think that when we understand this law in its original context, we see that the Bible’s vision for human sexuality calls us to honor both the dignity and the unity of every person.

Again, when we understand this law in its original context, we see that the Bible’s vision for human sexuality calls us to honor both the dignity and the unity of every person.

Let’s walk through that together.

We Need to Understand This Law in Its Original Context

To begin, we need to understand this law in its original context.

Gavin Ortlund, who I’ll be drawing from a bit this morning [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=If8Vw24LLvA>] explains the importance of context when it comes to passages like this by pointing out that if you had never seen the first *Star Wars* movie – *Episode 4: A New Hope* – and you dropped into it for just the last few minutes of the movie, without any context or background ... then you would find yourself meeting Luke Skywalker, a young man getting into his X-wing fighter, whose goal is to blow up a massive space station that is filled with people. And your first conclusion would be that Luke Skywalker is a psychopath –

he's a genocidal maniac, an aspiring mass murderer. If you value human life at all, you'd be rooting against him.

But then, if you stop and zoom out – if you go back to the beginning of the story, and you learn the context of what's happening, then the context actually flips your understanding of Luke's goals completely. Now Luke is the hero, the defender of human life.

Context has a similar effect when it comes to this text. On a first reading, if we take this text in isolation from its historical setting, what we find commanded here can feel horrific. A young woman has her city conquered. Her parents and family are likely killed. She has been taken captive by enemy forces. And now, some guy takes her home, has her head shaved, her nails cut, her clothing changed, and after just 30 days he can take her as his wife? That sounds awful. We wouldn't wish that on anyone.

But, as Ortlund explains, that narrow understanding of what's going on in this text is kind of like watching the last 20 minutes of *Star Wars: A New Hope*. And if we zoom out and take in the larger context, we actually find that the goal of this law is to do the opposite of what we imagine – it protects the dignity of the captive, rather than subjecting her to humiliation.

Now, how is that so?

Well, the context is that in the ancient world, the women of a conquered people were treated horribly. And in ancient pagan nations that wasn't discouraged ... it was celebrated.

It can be a little hard for us to wrap our minds around this. Today, tragically, abuse, and assault, and sexual exploitation happen in war zones. But when it does, the nations who perpetrate it usually deny it. The soldiers involved usually try to cover it up. Very few countries admit on the national stage that they did, or approved of, those things.

But in the ancient pagan world, the abuse, and the assault, and the sexual exploitation of the women of a conquered people was “not only the standard practice, it was the celebrated standard practice.” The conquering nation would boast about doing it. The nation would make celebratory art depicting it. They would put images commemorating their soldiers' abuse of conquered women on coins and in monuments. As some authors have put it, in the ancient pagan world, nations and armies saw the abuse and assault of a conquered nation's women as part of the celebration of their victory in war – it was, in their culture, what spiking the football after scoring a touchdown is in our culture. And they were proud of it. [Ortlund, 6:15-10:15; Webb & Oeste, 100-102]

Now, that's awful. It's repugnant. It's disgusting. But that's what the ancient world was like. That was the standard practice of the nations surrounding Israel.

And it's into that context that God gives his people this command, as well as other laws regarding sexuality in general, as well as sexuality in warfare in particular.

And realizing that context changes things.

Consider how some of these laws applied to this context.

First and foremost, there would be no sexual exploitation of conquered women allowed for ancient Israel because the seventh commandment forbid the soldiers from any sexual intercourse outside of marriage. The men of Israel were not supposed to have sex of any kind outside of marriage.

Second, and this is often missed, but based on the restrictions concerning sexual conduct in the special presence of Yahweh in the Old Testament, [e.g.: Exodus 19:14-15] along with the Old Testament idea that the special presence of Yahweh was with Israel's soldiers when they went to war [This was, at times (but not always), depicted by the presence of the ark, as implied in Numbers 10:25-26 and described in Joshua 6:7-13. However the language of speaking of soldiers as "consecrated" in passages like Isaiah 13:3 and Joel 3:9 may also communicate this idea, with or without the presence of the ark.], as we learn from later passages like 1 Samuel 21:5 and 2 Samuel 11:11, Israel understood God's law to impose a blanket prohibition on Israelite soldiers when they went to war, which forbid any kind of sexual activity whatsoever. There were likely several reasons for this, and some of it was related to the ceremonial law, but one further effect of it was to create an additional barrier against any kind of sexual exploitation from Israel's soldiers. [Webb & Oste, 106-109; Ortlund 13:25-45]

Third, the law of God specifically condemned assault of this kind as a crime in Israel. In the ancient world, where women were far too often blamed for being assaulted, Deuteronomy 22:25-27 is clear that when such an assault happens, the man who committed it was to be treated as the criminal, and the woman as a victim.

And then, on top of all that, we have this law.

And, in a sense, we can imagine the terrible scenario that this law is preempting: that of a man – and maybe a less than reputable man – in Israel who sees an attractive woman among the captives after a battle, and he wants her, and so he resolved to marry her right there on the spot. He'd technically check the existing boxes in the law, but functionally his actions would not be that different from that of an abusive pagan victor.

But God will have none of that. Moses will have none of that.

Take a look at the text again.

Verses 10 and 11 explain the situation. The Israelites have defeated a non-Canaanite enemy. The combatants have been killed. The women and children have been taken captive to be incorporated into Israel. And an Israelite sees a beautiful woman he desires.

This law makes it clear that he can't touch her. Instead, the most he is permitted to do is to bring her into his home, and provide for her there, without laying a hand on her. That's what we see in the first half verse 12.

Next, we read in the middle of verse 13 that he must give her a month to mourn her family, whom she has lost, and who may have been killed in the war.

Now, a month may not seem like a long time to us. But as scholars point out, in the ancient world, a week was usually seen as a standard amount of time to mourn for a family member. But God

here quadruples that for this female captive, giving her a month to grieve. [Webb & Oeste, 120-121; Ortlund, 17:45-19:50]

Then, in addition to that, we're told in verses 12 and 13 that while she mourns, and while her would-be husband provides for her in his home, she also is to shave her head, pare her nails, and change her clothes.

This had three effects.

One was that it was another customary aspect of her mourning for what she had lost.

Second, there was likely a ceremonial aspect to this in which this woman was marking a new beginning in her life as an Israelite – as a part of God's people.

But third, as later rabbis would point out, the woman was also significantly changing her appearance ... which, remember, was the very thing that drew the man to her in verse 11. Her hair was removed, her nails cut down, her clothing changed. And in just a month, those changes would still be quite obvious. [Block, 496 n.7; Webb & Oeste, 121-123; Ortlund, 19:45ff]

Rather than use her, this man is required to serve her, while she grieves and sheds many of the attributes that drew him to her in the first place. And they are to continue in that for a month. A month in which they'd interact. A month in which he'd get to know her, and she'd get to know him. A month in which he'd see her grieve.

And then, when the month was up, with just a few weeks worth of hair, and a lot of the mystery of who she was and what she was like removed, and the passion of his first sight of her past, and the emotions of the battlefield well behind them ... then ... in that moment ... he had to decide if he still wanted to marry her.

Now, if at that point he chose not to marry her, then he had to let her go free. She couldn't be his servant or his slave, she couldn't be treated like property, she couldn't even be treated as a captive. Verse 14 is clear that he had to let her go. She could go wherever she wanted – which would seem to mean that she could go back to another nation like hers if she wanted to ... or she could stay in Israel as an Israelite. Either way, she was free to choose. [Ortlund, 21:25-22:45; Block, 497]

But if he chose to marry her, he was taking on a real obligation. He could not neglect her or treat her as less because she once had been a captive. Exodus 21:10-11, the principles of which I think would apply here as well, meant that if he neglected her, she was once again free to go.

And in all of this, we're told in verse 14, that God and Moses were concerned with this woman's dignity.

In its original context, every aspect of this law aims to restrict the man in power, and to protect the woman from abuse or misuse.

And ... it's hard to articulate how radically different this was from the ancient pagan treatment of women in a land they had conquered. They would assault and abuse them. They would exploit

them. Actually, they would do even worse things to them which I'm not even going to get into. [Webb & Oeste, 81; Ortlund, 10:15-12:15]

But not in ancient Israel – not among God's people. They were commanded to treat these women radically differently.

Of course, there are still elements of this that make us uncomfortable. We'd like to see some explicit reference to the woman's choice in the matter of whom she marries. But then it's also helpful to remember that in the ancient world, most people didn't choose their spouse. Marriages were ordinarily arranged. [Ortlund, 16:40-16:50]

We might also ask if this woman would be better off single. But then we need to remember that the plight of an unmarried woman without a family, in the ancient world, was fraught, and a risk to her survival. [Ortlund, 20:45-21:30]

All of which is an important reminder that this text is not about God's ideal for his people, but God's trajectory for his people.

God does, indeed, have an ideal for his people. We see it first in the Garden of Eden. But with the rebellion of humanity, that ideal is shattered.

But still God reaches out to his people, in the midst of a broken world. And in some cases, the way he addresses the sin and brokenness he finds, not just in their hearts but in their culture, is not by fixing it all at once, but by pointing them towards his ideal, and moving them incrementally towards it ... by putting them on a trajectory towards that ideal.

And that's what we see here. In its original context this law for the treatment of captives in war is incredibly counter-cultural. But it's not yet the ideal.

And the fact that we know that, without any argumentation, is evidence that God's approach here has worked. Israel followed the trajectory set down here. Christians continued on that trajectory further.

And now, though we may live in a largely post-Christian culture, much of the Christian influence remains. And so the abuse that was celebrated in the ancient pre-Christian world, is now, in the Christian and post-Christian world, abhorrent to us. That's because God's people followed the trajectory of passages like this one before it was the common assumption of the people around them.

Now ... we're going to say more about the Bible's specific teachings on assault in the next chapter of Deuteronomy.

And so, for this text, we'll focus more on two related topics that intersect here. One is how God's people are supposed to use power – especially power over others. And we'll talk more about that next week.

The other is God's intention for human sexuality, and the ideal that this text points us towards. Because as archaic and unenlightened as this passage may seem to us as modern people, I would

argue that it has something to teach us in this realm. And that's what we'll focus on for the rest of our time today.

And what we see in this passage, in context, is a vision for human sexuality, which calls us to honor both the dignity and the unity of every person.

The Bible's Vision for Human Sexuality Is a Call to Honor the Dignity of Every Person

First, the Bible's vision for human sexuality calls us to honor the dignity of every person.

Sexual union in the Bible is an act designed to honor the other person. As Adam sees his wife for the first time, he opens his mouth in poetry and words of praise. As the man and woman approach each other sexually in the biblical book Song of Solomon, they praise, and honor, and glorify each other. The Bible shows us that God designed sexual union to be a means by which two people bless one another, and honor one another, and give themselves as a gift to one other, in love. [John Paul II, 17:3-6 (p.195-198)]

Abuse, and humiliation, and exploitation are to have no place at all in the sexual realm, which is one of the reasons why the sexual mistreatment of others is so heinous.

And so God forbids it. He puts a chasm between war and sex, because there is a chasm between the violence required in war, and the honor and love required in sex. And when a situation with a captive comes up, he lays down specific restrictions to honor the dignity and personhood of the woman.

God hates abuse. He hates exploitation. He hates any use of sexuality that would assault or degrade the dignity of another person.

Far from that, the Bible's vision for sexuality is one in which two people honor and dignify one another. Rather than taking, they seek to give. Rather than harming, they seek to bless. Rather than abusing, they seek to love.

Our text this morning puts human sexuality on that trajectory, by insisting that any man interested in such a woman, treat her with dignity.

And we are called to the same thing. The world we live in, or our own experiences, can impress on us many twisted and broken stories about human sexuality ... stories that strip people of their dignity. If you've been shaped by those stories, I'd encourage you to see that God has something far better in mind for sexuality. And God can help you move closer to that better vision. I'd encourage you, through a pastor, or a counselor, or a leader in the church, or another trusted helper, to seek help in pursuing that kind of growth or healing.

Because the Bible's vision for human sexuality is a call to honor the dignity of every person – that includes both others and you.

The Bible's Vision for Human Sexuality Is a Call to Honor the Unity of Every Person

Second, the Bible’s vision for human sexuality is a call to honor the unity of every person.

Look again at verse 11. A man sees a woman, and he desires her, based on her appearance alone. The temptation in that moment, is to divide her appearance – to divide her body – from the rest of her as a person.

But the God of the Bible will not allow that.

The Bible tells us that our sexuality cannot be fragmented off or separated from the rest of us, but it is deeply intertwined with us as whole and unified persons.

This is something the unbelieving world has often tried to deny – both in the secular culture around us today, and in the ancient pagan cultures that surrounded Israel. They each sought to divide and fracture individual people into separate components of who they are, and to downplay or deny our wholistic unity, by separating a person’s sexuality from the rest of who they are as a person.

But God’s answer here to that temptation in our text this morning is to demand that this Israelite man encounter, and see, and receive, and commit himself to this woman, as a whole person.

He can’t just have her body.

If he is to receive her at all, he needs to receive her as an entire person. And to that end, she is stripped here of some of her physical attractions. He is called on to see her grieve and mourn. He is required to live close to her, and encounter the other facets of her personhood. And after that intense period of encountering the other elements of who she is, then he must make a decision as to whether he will commit himself to her in marriage – make her his wife, giving her a share in his goods, in his life, and in his future. And only once he has come to know her, and agreed to be united to her in all of those ways, can he be united with her sexually.

As distant and archaic as this text might seem to us, it actually has a deeper, more profound, and more humane understanding of what it means to be a whole and unified person than the secular world around us often does.

In pornography, in casual sexual intimacy, in many different ways our culture seeks to divide men and women’s sexuality from the rest of who they are as people – to fragment them. But that’s not how we were designed by God to be or to interact.

Tim Keller puts it like this – he says: when you pursue someone sexually outside of marriage, then what you’re saying to them is: “I want to fully receive your body. But I don’t want to fully receive your heart, or your mind, or your social realities, or your financial realities. I’d like to take this one part of you, and sever it from the rest of you, so that I can receive this part of you completely, but keep the rest of you at more of a distance.” And at the same time, it is also to say, “I’ll fully give you my body, but not my heart, not my mind, not my social life, not my finances – those things I’ll separate and keep for myself, apart from you.” [Keller, 223]¹

¹ This idea is implied in this citation from Keller, but I’m pretty sure I’ve heard him make this point in the form I have used here, but I could not find a proper citation for it.

Even when two people agree to such an arrangement, what they're asking the other person to do ... what they're trying to do to themselves ... is to fracture and divide the parts of who they are from each other ... fragmenting themselves, where God had designed them to be a united whole.

This is why God tells us, in his Word, that the proper channel for human sexuality is a wholistic, lifelong commitment of marriage. Because only in that context do we give and receive our entire selves to each other: mentally, emotionally, socially, legally, and financially ... as well as physically.

That's what's demanded of the man in this text. And it's what's demanded of us as well.

Where are you failing to honor that unity of the person ... either in how you're treating someone else ... or how you're treating yourself?

The Bible's vision for human sexuality is a call to honor both the dignity and the unity of every person – others as well as and ourselves.

That's a call to action – a call about how we treat other people, and how we approach our own sexuality.

Conclusion

But even as we consider that call to action ... we're also confronted with a clear picture of how our lives, both now and in the past, have not always lined up with the vision God gives us here ... how we have used others or been used by others ... how we have failed to treat others as dignified whole persons sexually or how others have failed to treat us as whole persons ... how we have sinned sexually, and, perhaps, how we have been sinned against sexually ... how sin or brokenness mark this aspect of our lives.

But as we see that ... our text is also a reminder that the God of the Bible – the God we worship – that God cares deeply about the dignity of broken sinners like us. He cares deeply about making them whole.

Remember who the woman described in our passage was. She wasn't perfect. Far from that, she was a sinner. She was from a pagan nation. She had lived her life so far rejecting the God who made her. She was a member of a community that had been actively and aggressively hostile to God's people. She had been, in many ways, an enemy of God.

And yet ... even so ... God here is deeply concerned for her dignity, for her healing, for her wholeness. In fact, regardless of what this man decides, God wants her to be a part of his people.

And if God wanted that for her ... then how much more must he want it for you? If God was concerned for her dignity, then surely he is concerned for your dignity. If God demands that she be treated as a whole person, how much must he long to see you made whole?

Whatever you have done, or whatever has been done to you, God cares for you deeply. He wants to cleanse you and bring you healing. He wants to restore your dignity and help to make you whole.

That was God's desire for the sinful and the broken as he dwelt among Ancient Israel. It was his desire centuries later, when he came in the person of Jesus Christ and he reached out to prostitutes and sinners – to the broken and the sinful. And it's his desire today, as he dwells with us now by his Holy Spirit.

Whatever your past, whatever your sins, whatever your wounds, he wants to love you. He wants to receive you into his family. He wants to help you to grieve your sins and your wounds. He wants to work in your life to help make you whole again. He wants to bless you with dignity, and salvation, and an eternity with him.

And so, whatever your struggles, whatever your baggage, whatever your past, he calls you now to come to him – to receive his love.

And then, firm in his love, he calls you to walk in his ways, honoring him, honoring your own personhood, and honoring every person around you, by seeking to live out his vision for your life and your sexuality.

Amen.

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.