

**“Rules for Captives, Part 2: How to Be a Winner”**  
**Deuteronomy 21:10-14**  
**November 2, 2025**  
**Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service**  
*Pastor Nicoletti*

**The Reading of the Word**

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

We’ve been working through some difficult texts the past few weeks. We have a few more weeks in Deuteronomy, but we’ll take a break from it as Christmas approaches, and in January we will switch back to our series in the Gospel of Mark, and then we’ll return to Deuteronomy again next fall.

But for the next few weeks we continue in Deuteronomy, and this morning, we return to a challenging text, which we considered last week, but which we’re coming back to today to draw one more lesson from it.

Now, as I noted last week and emailed about before last Sunday, our text this morning deals with some difficult issues, including abuse, assault, and sexual exploitation. We mainly dealt with those topics last week, but they’ll come up again some today, and when they do, I want to assure you that I’ll be careful in my language choice, and I won’t use any graphic descriptions. I’m sensitive to the range of ages and experiences present here this morning.

But as with last week, I also want to assure you that as we dig into this text, what begins with a confusing and even distressing text will end with a window into the heart of God, who cares for the weak and the vulnerable.

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:

<sup>21:10</sup> “When you go out to war against your enemies, and Yahweh your God gives them into your hand and you take them captive, <sup>11</sup> and you see among the captives a beautiful woman, and you desire to take her to be your wife, <sup>12</sup> and you bring her home to your house, she shall shave her head and pare her nails. <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> 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**

Last week, as we dug into this passage, we considered what it had to teach us about human sexuality. This week our focus is on what it has to tell us about the use of human power.

As the title indicates, this sermon is about "How to Be a Winner" ... not how to become a winner, I can't really help you there, but rather, about how you should be – how you should behave if you are a winner in the eyes of the world ... what kind of person you should be when you have success, or power, or authority, or influence over others.

Now, it might not seem at first that that's what this text is about. In fact, on a first read this text might seem to you like it's calling for something cruel and barbaric. But something different emerges when we understand the context and the intention of this law.

And to see that clearly, we need to recap some of what we talked about last Sunday about how we should interpret this text. So we'll do a little summary now, but the more detailed discussion from last week's sermon is on our website.

### **Understanding This Law in Its Original Context**

Now, the first thing we said was that to understand this law, we need to understand its context – we need to understand what kind of situation this law was spoken into.

And an analogy might be helpful. I once heard a doctor give the medical advice: "Your goal should be to get your weight to 200 pounds."

"Your goal should be to get your weight to 200 pounds."

Now ... to know what kind of advice that is, you need to know the context. You need to know who it was said to.

For example, if that advice was given to my 9-year-old daughter, who weighs 70 pounds, then it's a call for that little girl to gain a lot of weight – to almost triple her weight ... which would be pretty bad medical advice.

Or if that same advice was given to Bobby Wagner ... the 6 foot tall linebacker for the Washington Commanders, who weighs 241 pounds and who regularly benches 315 lbs. ... well, then it

wouldn't be a call to gain weight, but to lose weight ... but it still wouldn't really be a call to become more healthier ... because on Bobby Wagner, the 41 lbs. he'd need to lose would probably be mostly muscle. And so it's still pretty bad medical advice.

But if ... as it actually was ... that advice was given to me ... a middle-aged man who cannot bench 315 lbs., whose cholesterol numbers aren't great, and who has a family history of heart disease ... well, in that context the call to aim for weighing 200 lbs. is a call to get healthier. In that context it's good, solid medical advice.

When an exhortation, or a call, or a command is given, context matters. It matters a lot.

So what was the context into which Deuteronomy 21:10-14 was given?

Well, I'll say a bit more later, but the short version is that in the ancient world, among the pagan nations surrounding Israel, the women of defeated nations were treated horribly by the soldiers who had defeated them. They were treated in awful ways. And in the ancient pagan world this not only happened – it was celebrated. It was encouraged.

That's the historical setting which God is speaking this command into.

It's important to realize that this law was not given directly to a modern nation state, who had signed onto the Geneva Conventions, and had a stellar record of protecting human rights. In that context, a law like this would be a call to give women, and captives of war, fewer rights than they currently have.

But in the context of ancient Israel, in the actual historical context in which this law was written down, this command was a call to give female captives far more rights and protections than what they had in the ancient pagan world.

That's the historical context. But with that, we also need to understand the intention of the law. Specifically, it's important to understand whether a law is intended to express God's ideal for his people, or God's trajectory for his people.

Think again of the advice I was given to make it my goal to weigh 200 pounds.

Let's say that 2026 is the year of Steven. I double my time at the gym, I spend less time on these sermons and more time working out, I get strict and serious about watching what I eat, and by the summer of 2026 I step onto the scale and it says I now weigh 175 lbs.

And I say "Oh no. Look what I've done. The doctor told me to aim for 200. And I've missed the mark by getting down to 175." And I go out the door and head for Winco, and fill my cart with ice cream, and I get to work on getting back up to 200 lbs.

Now, we all know that would be the wrong response. But why?

Well, because when my doctor said "Your aim should be to get your weight to 200 pounds" he wasn't stating his ideal weight for me. He was stating his trajectory for me. From where I was, he wanted me to head towards 200 lbs. – to aim for 200 lbs. But he wasn't saying if I got there he

wanted me to stop there. I was supposed to aim for it ... and then ideally move past it and beyond it. 200 lbs. was a trajectory, not an ideal for me.

Now, many laws in the Bible – both Old Testament and New – do give us God’s ideal for his people. That’s certainly true.

But there are some laws God gives in the Bible which give us not God’s ideal for his people, but his trajectory for his people, in which he points them in the direction of his ideal, but moves them towards that ideal incrementally instead of all at once.

And in those cases, God’s commands were still often strikingly countercultural in their original contexts. But God’s ideal still lay beyond the commands. God’s ideal lay in the picture we’re given in the beginning – when God first made humanity, before sin and death entered the world.

Jesus teaches something to this effect when the Pharisees ask him about marriage and divorce. [Matthew 19:3-9] We see something similar in how the Bible treats polygamy, and even slavery. [McCaulley, 137-163]

In each case, after God’s ideal for humanity in the beginning was marred by sin, and some sins became so enmeshed in the unbelieving world and our fallen hearts, God sought to correct those sins not all at once, but incrementally, setting his people on a trajectory towards his ideal.

And we see that in this law. It’s intended not to give us God’s ideal for all time, but to put God’s people on a trajectory towards God’s ideal. And the very fact that we, in our post-Christian society, demand even more protection for women and captives today than is found in this law, is evidence that God’s incremental approach has worked. We’ve come so far from the ancient pagan world.

So with all that that said, what’s actually going on in this law?

Well, as we said last Sunday, the historical context is that in the ancient world, the women of a conquered people were treated horribly.

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 celebrated. The conquering nation would boast about doing it. The nation would make celebratory public art depicting it. They’d put that artwork depicting those atrocities on coins and in monuments. They were proud of it. [Ortlund, 6:15-10:15; Webb & Oeste, 100-102]

And often, the abuse and mistreatment of those defeated in war extended to other acts of brutality [Webb & Oeste, 81; Ortlund, 10:15-12:15] and humiliation [Wright, 230].

Now, that’s awful. We don’t even want to think about it. But we need to consider that that’s the context into which this law was given.

And in that context, our passage this morning, along with other laws in the Old Testament did a few things.

One was that God’s law demanded something radically different from God’s people when it comes to human sexuality.

That was our focus last week. Last week we saw how this law, along with several others, comprehensively outlawed in ancient Israel the abuse, assault, or sexual exploitation of the women of a defeated nation. In a world where such things were common and celebrated, God's law stood firmly against any kind of abuse, exploitation, sexual humiliation, or fracturing off of a person's sexuality from the rest of their personhood. And that sermon from last week is on our website.

So all of that gives us a recap of what talked about last week.

But this week – this morning – I want to consider what this text tells us, even more broadly, about how we are to use power or authority that we may have over those who are weaker than us.

This morning I want to argue that when we understand this law in its original context, we see that though the unbelieving world tells us to sacrifice those who are weaker in order to serve ourselves, the God of the Bible calls us to sacrifice ourselves in order to serve those who are weak.

Let me say that again: Though the unbelieving world tells us to sacrifice those who are weaker, in order to serve ourselves, the God of the Bible calls us to sacrifice ourselves in order to serve those who are weak.

Let's break that down together.

### **The Unbelieving World Tells Us to Sacrifice Those Who Are Weaker, in Order to Serve Ourselves**

First, the unbelieving world tells us to sacrifice those who are weaker, in order to serve ourselves.

This was the attitude of the ancient pagan world that surrounded Israel. In such a world, people like this captured and conquered woman were among those who were particularly powerless.

And what the ancient pagan world told people – told soldiers – told those with more power ... was that those who were helpless existed for the benefit of the powerful. The weak existed for the satisfaction of the strong. They were there to fulfill their desires – regardless of what harm that might do to them. The calling, the right, the proper thing for the powerful to do was to use the weak to serve their own needs, desires, and whims. And that's what they did. That would be the principle by which a captive woman would have been treated by a pagan soldier in the ancient world.

Now, most of us today would reject that ancient pagan viewpoint toward the helpless and defenseless in war. And that's a good thing – that shows the progress biblical laws like this have achieved over the centuries.

But even though we'd now reject such drastic and severe examples of the misuse of the weak ... even so, still now, in many subtle and not-so-subtle ways, the unbelieving world and our own sinful hearts still tempt us to sacrifice those who are weaker, in order to serve ourselves.

We see it on a big, social scale, as political power and economic forces – both of which God made to be used for good – are instead so often harnessed by the powerful in order to use and exploit

those who are weak – to sacrifice them in order for those of us with more power and more wealth to serve ourselves.

This law shows us that Moses was on alert for such dynamics out in society. And so we, as Christians should be on alert as well, seeking to spot and to reject such dynamics in our politics and our economy.

But, of course, these issues are not limited to such big and abstract social dynamics. This law was also personal. And we are called to also consider how we personally use power in our own lives as well.

So how do you use your power – your authority or advantage over others – at work? If you're a boss, or a manager, or a team leader, or a shift leader, or just have more seniority than someone else, how do you use that power difference?

So often the unbelieving world tells us to sacrifice the wellbeing of those beneath us in order to serve ourselves, to step on them to advance our own career or position, to see only their obligation to us, and not our obligation to them. Are there ways that you fall into this trap at work?

Or what about in the church? When there's a conflict between your comfort here ... and how welcome others feel, who are newer to the church or newer to the faith ... when there's a conflict between how you want the church to cater to you, and the needs of those who are weaker or struggling ... do you find yourself using your power or your influence to sacrifice the needs of others ... in order to get what you want from the church?

Or what about in your home?

When you have power or leverage or some advantage over your spouse ... do you find yourself tempted to use that for your advantage – to sacrifice their happiness or even their wellbeing, in order to serve yourself? Are there ways that you've done that in your marriage? What would your spouse say if I asked them?

Or what about your children? Are there ways you've used your authority in their life in selfish and self-serving ways, sacrificing what's best for them for what you want, and what you've decided is best for you?

We all experience this temptation somewhere – this temptation to use our power and our advantage for ourselves, even if it hurts others. Where do you see that in your life?

That's the first thing for us to see from this text.

### **The God of the Bible Calls Us to Sacrifice Ourselves in Order to Serve Those Who Are Weak**

But the second thing for us to see is that, contrary to this temptation, the God of the Bible calls us to sacrifice ourselves in order to serve those who are weak.

Consider again our text.

In just about every possible way, the man in this passage was the winner in the eyes of the world, and the woman was the loser. And yet, in the context of the ancient world, every aspect of the law given here is designed to restrict the man, and protect the woman, and to call this powerful man to sacrifice his desires in order to serve this female captive's needs.

Think about their standing. He was a man, and she was a woman, in a very patriarchal society. He was a strong soldier, and she was a defenseless captive. He was the victor in war, and she was the defeated. He was the orthodox follower of the one true God, and she was the heretical ungodly pagan. By every possible metric, from an earthly perspective, he was the winner, and she was the loser.

But in every aspect of this law, God is concerned with protecting her, and restraining him – with guarding her dignity: her, the captive, defeated, pagan woman ... while calling him to humble service: him, the strong, victorious, religiously upright man.

Look at the text again.

When the man sees her and desires her in verse 11, he's told in verse 13 that rather than take what he wants from her, he's required, instead, to give to her: to welcome her into his home, to feed her, and provide for her, for a month, and to not lay a hand on her.

Where he would want to celebrate his victory, he's told instead to accommodate her grief for a full month – four times the customary grieving period in their culture. [Webb & Oestle, 120-121; Ortlund, 17:45-19:50] As one scholar puts it: "For one month war grief as a right for the captive ritually trumps the victorious joy of the captor." [Webb & Oestle, 122]

Where he may want to have her looking cheerful and beautiful, he is commanded instead to have her change into ordinary clothes and follow the customary grieving rites of shaving her head and paring her nails, in verses 12 and 13 [Webb & Oestle, 121].

Then, after that, where he might want to keep her at a disadvantage, he's required in verse 13, if he still desires her, after that month of serving her, to give her the full privileges of a wife – not a servant, not a concubine, but a wife, with a claim on his life.

And where he might want to use her to get some profit for himself if he doesn't want to marry her after all that, in verse 14 he's required to let her go free – either to another nation or to live her life as a free Israelite woman, whatever she chooses. [Ortlund, 21:25-22:45; Block, 497]

Where he might be focused on his rights, God, at the end of verse 14, is clearly focused on her dignity.

With one thing after another, this powerful man is required to use his power and his advantage to sacrificially serve this powerless woman in his life.

As one commentator puts it: "The law is thus a paradigm case for the [Old Testament's] concern to defend the weak against the strong" as "the physical and emotional needs of the woman in her utter vulnerability are given moral and legal priority over the desires and claims of the man in his victorious strength." [Wright, 234-235]

And Jesus himself taught the same ethic for how we use our power and our authority, when he said to his disciples: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave,” [Matthew 20:25-27]

Moses calls us, the Bible calls us, Jesus calls us to sacrifice ourselves in order to serve those who are weaker than we are.

What does that look like? What does this mean for us?

Well, it means that when we participate in politics and government, whatever our views, whatever our political philosophy, we engage in the political process not only to advocate for our own interests, but to advocate for the interests of the weak, and the vulnerable, even if such concern must come at our own personal expense.

It means that in our workplaces, we are known for caring for those less influential than we are, for showing kindness to those we disagree with, for being willing to sacrifice ourselves in order to serve others.

It means that in our families, when we come home from a long day, we don't walk in the door expecting to be served by everyone else – demanding that others sacrifice themselves for our benefit ... it means instead that we take a deep breath, and we do our best to walk in the door knowing that however important we may be out in the world, we now have a new collection of people to serve – a group of people dear to our tired hearts, with a range of demands and needs, and we are called to love and sacrifice for them.

And it means that we walk through the church doors with a similar attitude.

Because while the church is our spiritual home, it's the sort of home where we should expect to roll up our sleeves to love and serve others ... a home filled with lots of people, and lots of kids, and lots of needs. We should feel comfortable there. But we shouldn't expect to find ourselves too much at ease. We should expect to be pitching in. We shouldn't be surprised when kids make noise, or conflicts break out, or the young need some guidance, or the struggling need some comfort. We should walk in the door prepared to use our strength to serve those who are weaker or simply more in need at the moment than we are.

That means expecting young children to be present, and perhaps a bit noisy at times, and to seek to support, and encourage, and offer personal help to their parents – like a loving family member would – sacrificing our ease to serve them, rather than expecting them to sacrifice their presence in order to serve our ease.

It means that when new Christians and non-Christians come to our church, we welcome them, and we seek to make them comfortable and meet their needs – sacrificing our time, and our ease, and what might be familiar to us in order to serve them and love them.

It means that when other Christians among us are struggling in one way or another, and need something from us, we don't see that as an intrusion on our own Christian life, but we see it as an

expected part of our Christian calling – and we willingly sacrifice our time, and our effort, and maybe even our money, to serve them, and help them, and love them well.

Whatever our success, whatever our standing in the world ... if God called a victorious Israelite soldier to make sacrifices in order to serve the physical and emotional needs of a captive, pagan woman ... then how much more must the God of Israel call us to sacrificially serve the physical and emotional needs of our neighbors, and our co-workers, and our family members, and those we gather with here at church?

Jesus said: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant”

How do you need to apply that to your own life?

## **Conclusion**

Of course, that’s a heavy task. It’s a burden we all need to wrestle with, in whatever area of life God has given us some measure of power, or authority, or social advantage over others.

It’s a heavy burden. But it’s not a burden that God asks us to carry on our own. Even as Jesus calls us to use our power to serve others ... he enables us to do the very thing he commands ... as he uses his power to serve us.

In a sense, he’s only calling us to do what he himself has already done for us.

And Jesus himself stressed this, because there’s more to the quote I read just a moment ago. Jesus said to his followers: “Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” [Matthew 20:25-27]

Jesus is speaking there about himself.

Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus has power over the entire universe.

But when Jesus came, he used that power not to sacrifice us in order to serve himself. Rather, he used his power to sacrifice himself in order to serve us – to give his life as a ransom for us.

When we were undeserving, when we were in sin, when we were rebels against God ... God came, and he captured us. He took us from a land of sin and selfishness, and he brought us into his household.

But he didn’t bring us there to abuse or exploit us. He brought us into his kingdom in order to serve us. To cleanse us. To help us grieve our brokenness and our sin. To make us whole. To bless us.

That is the salvation we have been given. That is the God we serve: one who sacrifices himself in order to serve and love those who are weak, and vulnerable, and sinful.

And if that's how we've been treated by him ... how could we ourselves act differently? How could we not show the love for others that he has already shown for us?

God has loved us. God has given himself for us. He has sacrificed himself in order to serve us and save us.

And as we receive his grace, let us walk in his footsteps, and so show ourselves to be children of our Father who is in heaven.

He cares for the weak and the helpless.

He even cares for you and me.

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.