

**“Responsibilities in Both Directions”**  
**Deuteronomy 21:15-21**  
**November 9, 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 Israel about how they are to live as God’s people in the land.

Once again, we have a text that’s alarming at first ... but that begins to make more sense the more we dig into it. So hang in there, and don’t panic when we first hear from it, as we turn now to Deuteronomy 21:15-21

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

Moses said to the people:

<sup>21:15</sup> “If a man has two wives, the one loved and the other unloved, and both the loved and the unloved have borne him children, and if the firstborn son belongs to the unloved, <sup>16</sup> then on the day when he assigns his possessions as an inheritance to his sons, he may not treat the son of the loved as the firstborn in preference to the son of the unloved, who is the firstborn, <sup>17</sup> but he shall acknowledge the firstborn, the son of the unloved, by giving him a double portion of all that he has, for he is the firstfruits of his strength. The right of the firstborn is his.

<sup>18</sup> “If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother, and, though they discipline him, will not listen to them, <sup>19</sup> then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gate of the place where he lives, <sup>20</sup> and they shall say to the elders of his city, ‘This our son is stubborn and rebellious; he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard.’ <sup>21</sup> Then all the men of the city shall stone him to death with stones. So you shall purge the evil from your midst, and all Israel shall hear, and fear.

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, once again this morning we come to a challenging passage of your Word.  
And so we ask you to 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**

We have before us, again, another difficult text.

Believe it or not, this text has something real and significant to teach us. But before we can get to that, we need to take some time to sort through the questions that are likely swirling through your mind.

So we're going to start this morning by walking through this passage and answering some questions and concerns. And then we'll turn to how this law applies to us today.

## **Understanding the Text in Context**

So first, let's seek to understand this passage rightly and in context.

Let's start with the first law here, found in verses 15-17.

The law starts, "If a man has two wives." Now, the Bible is not endorsing polygamy here. In fact, this law critiques polygamy by pointing to some of the strife it leads to. And the Scriptures as a whole work overtime to phase polygamy out of the life of God's people. But in Moses's day, this was still a sad reality that unfortunately needed to be addressed.

But with that said, as we hear about this law, which is focused on who should receive a double portion of the inheritance of a family, we may want to ask: Well, why does a double portion need to be given at all? Why can't things just be divided up evenly?

Here it's important to know that historically the double portion inheritance was not just a privilege ... it was a responsibility. The firstborn also had a special responsibility to care for his parents in their old age, along with others who were older in the household – in this case including his father's second wife. Other responsibilities came with the role as well. [Block, 498] And so, this was not just an arbitrary privilege, but also an additional responsibility that came to the firstborn.

So ... that context may clear up a few of our questions about the first law here.

But what about the second law?

Let's start with the first question that comes to mind for many: How could God advocate treating a child this way?

The answer is: God does not advocate treating a child this way. Commentators are agreed here that the son in view in this law is clearly not a child. Verse 20 identifies him as a glutton and a drunkard. What's in view is not a child, but an adult son. Now, that may raise new questions, but we can at

least put away the idea that this law is about how we are to treat children. The son in view here was an adult. [Alter, 983; Block, 500; *Theopolis*, Episode 691. It seems to be simply assumed in Brown, 208; Copan, 90]

Even so, the next thing we want to ask is: “Still ... how could the Bible advocate giving parents this much power over their children?”

But actually ... this law is a significant restriction of the parent’s power. Hear me out. This law does not give parents the right to stone their children. Rather, it says that when their ordinary modes of direction and correction are not effective, parents can appeal to the civil authorities to intervene. After verse 19, it’s the civil authorities that take over. Though it’s not spelled out in detail, a standard judicial procedure, carried out by the civil authorities, is implied between verses 20 and 21. The parents give their testimony about the situation in verse 20. But beyond that, they do not decide what happens to their son. [Their absence seems to be highlighted in verse 21. Compare Deuteronomy 17:7 with 21:21 here. [Block, 500]] A clear principle behind this law is actually that parents “could not take the law into their own hands.” [Craigie, 284]

They are instead instructed about when to turn to outside, and more objective authorities to carry out justice in a difficult situation. [Wright, 236; Alter, 983; Copan, 91; Brown, 208-209; Craigie, 284; Block, 499]

[It’s possible that further insights could be gleaned by comparing this law to how much authority other ancient societies gave to parents. Specifically, it is often noted that in the (much later) Roman world, the father at the head of the household (the *paterfamilias*) had “the legal right to decide the life and death of other members of the family” [Bakke, 29; also Crook, 113, 119; Strange, 20]. But it’s also been argued that in practice this authority was far more restricted [Bakke, 38; Strange, 20; Crook, 122]. More research would be needed than could be done in the time allotted to prepare this sermon in order to determine whether and how much this law really was a contrast with ancient pagan cultures like Rome [as Brown, 209 suggests].]

And with that, it’s implied that the elders could decide against the charges the parents bring. They could decide that the parents have overstated the son’s sins, or even that the parents themselves are a significant part of the problem. It would take some humility for the parents to turn the matter over to someone else who might disagree with their assessment ... but that’s what’s expected here.

So ... just to make it clear ... any parent today who would cite this verse as a grounds for them to take into their own hands extreme acts of discipline against their child has twisted this passage to its opposite meaning. If ordinary modes of discipline don’t work, this verse is more likely to point parents to look for help from those outside the situation, from those with more authority, and also with an outside, more objective perspective.

And just as this passage puts limits on parental authority in general, it also puts limits on the authority fathers and husbands more specifically. It’s a striking contrast from what we expect in the ancient patriarchal world, and from what we find in later pagan cultures like Rome and Greece, that this verse is not just about a father’s authority over his son, but both father and mother. In fact, for this process to move forward at all requires the son’s persistent disobedience to both his father

and his mother, in verse 18. Then it's both his father and his mother who have to bring the son to the elders in verse 19 for it to escalate to the civil authorities. And finally, both the father and the mother are expected to testify about the situation in verse 20, so that the elders can hear from both as they make their own assessment. [Brown, 209 n.5]

Where the pagan world often stressed the singular power in the household of the father [Crook, 113], the Bible, from the fifth commandment to the book of Proverbs, and in many other ways, is not concerned with the singular power of the father, but the joint authority of father and mother working together in the home [Block, 499; Wright, 236; Millar, 134]. In some ways this shouldn't surprise us, as the God of the Bible himself, in his trinitarian nature, is a community of multiple persons working together to exercise authority together towards a common goal. And God seems to delight in replicating that pattern throughout creation – including in the home. We see that in these very verses, as God calls not for a household ruled by a single authority, but for father and mother to be working together and sharing authority at every turn.

With that said, knowing that this text is not about the treatment of children, it's not about giving extreme authority to parents, it's not about singular patriarchal authority in the home, even so we are struck by the harshness. Execution for persistently dishonoring your parents? Really?

But here we need to be careful not to minimize the sin that's being described.

God said: "Honor your father and your mother." And what's in view in this passage is not a man who struggles with that – who tries and fails at that – who has some blind spots with that. What's in view here is a man who has determined he's simply not going to obey God in this area of his life.

That's a serious thing. When the God who made you, the God who has given you every good thing you have, the God who reigns over all things, when that God gives you a commandment ... and you say "No," you won't obey him ... that's a big deal. And the God who gave you life, if you rebel against him, does have the right to take that gift of life away. [Brown, 208-209]

On top of that, as some commentators point out, since this law is paired with the one that came before it, what may be especially in view here is a rebellious firstborn son. If that's true, then what's being addressed is the son who will inherit more of the estate, and whom others in the household will be especially dependent on when his father dies, for their daily provision, their wellbeing, and their financial viability. [Wright, 235; Copan, 91] The fear, then, is also that this son will selfishly consume the estate and so neglect and harm those who depend on him.

God says here that such sin against him, and such sin against those who depend on you – that kind of sin deserved to have the gift of life revoked.

And yet ... even so ... what's practically in view in this command was most likely not execution.

As Paul Copan points out, the death penalty is mentioned in relation to 16 different crimes in the Law of Moses. But only for one of them – premeditated murder – does the law specify that elders and judges cannot reduce the sentence to something less than execution. And the presence of that

restriction in that one cases draws attention to the absence of that restriction when it comes to the 15 other crimes in the Law of Moses where the death penalty is mentioned. The conclusion that many Old Testament scholars have drawn is that elders and judges had the freedom to reduce the sentence in those other 15 capital crimes to something less than execution. And that was probably the case here too. For crimes like this, execution was not the minimum sentence, but the maximum sentence, and such a serious maximum sentence is given in large part to mark just how seriously God takes this commandment to honor our father and our mother [Copan, 90, 95-96; Wright, 236; Block, 500]

And that's reinforced by the fact that there is no account of this law ever leading to an execution. [Wright, 236; Brown, 209-210; Block, 503, 508] Even the Babylonian Talmud, compiled over a thousand years ago, argues that this law was given for strictly didactic purposes [Alter, 983; Copan, 90] – to teach an important lesson, and not to be carried out in practice.

Taken together, this law is focused on a situation in which parents have a terribly rebellious adult son, whose actions might lead to the destitution and ruin of others, which encourages such parents not to take the law in their own hands, but to appeal to the civil authorities, which will lead to a judicial process, in which appropriate penalties can be exacted of this son, and in which execution is threatened, though its mention primarily indicates just how seriously God takes this kind of sin.

That's what we have before us.

And so, zooming out in our passage as a whole, we have two laws that, when taken together, emphasize both our obligations to those who came before us, like our parents, and our obligations to those who will come after us, like our children. There's something of a symmetry there. [Wright, 235; Brown, 208]

And so, for the rest of our time this morning we'll consider that though we are tempted to put our own desires first, God calls us to show justice and responsibility towards those who came before us, and those who will come after us.

Let me say that again: Though we are tempted to put our own desires first, God calls us to show justice and responsibility towards those who came before us, and those who will come after us.

Let's take that one piece at a time.

### **God Calls Us to Show Justice & Responsibility towards Those Who Came Before Us**

First, though we are tempted to put our own desires first, God here calls us to show justice and responsibility towards those who came before us.

And this comes up in both laws here.

Remember that behind the first law, in verses 15 to 17, is the assumption that the firstborn son in this system had a special obligation to care for his parents, and others who were older in the family – a special call to show justice and responsibility towards those who came before him.

And this calling comes across even more clearly in the second law, in verses 18 to 21. The root sin there is the son's failure to show justice and responsibility towards his parents. And while we've said that this law may never have led to an actual execution, God also makes it clear that he takes this sin so seriously, that it is, in fact, worthy of death.

And lest we think that level of concern or strictness on God's part is an Old Testament thing, we should note that Jesus quoted with approval a similar Old Testament law, saying that "Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die." [Matthew 15:3-9]

The God of the Bible takes the command to honor one's parents very seriously. We should as well. [Copan, 90; Block, 500]

Now, we do need to give a disclaimer that this kind of honoring does not mean willingly opening yourself up to abusive treatment, or extreme harshness, or allowing your parents to exceed their rightful authority in your life – as we noted, this text, while calling on adult children to honor their parents, also places very real limits on parental authority, and when things get difficult, it invites outside authorities to make a judgment on the situation. We see similar limitations on parental authority given in the New Testament as well. [Ephesians 6:3; Colossians 3:21; see Block, 507] So this law is not a call to open oneself up to abuse or oppression.

But that said, in ordinary situations – when our parents are operating within their rightful realm, then we are called on to honor them – to show justice and responsibility towards them.

And that calling starts early in life. Children ... and adolescents ... and youth ... this applies to you.

God cares deeply about how you treat your parents. As you live in their home, as you live under their authority, you are called to honor and obey them. That doesn't mean you'll always agree with them. But it means you're to show them respect, even when you disagree. It means, as a child, you'll obey them in their rightful role as your parents. It means you'll make real efforts to remember and not so easily forget all your parents do, and all they give, to provide for you. Because there's likely not a lot in your life that you have right now that you did not receive, as a gift, from them. And in addition to that, God himself, in his wisdom, has placed you under their authority, not because they're perfect, but because he wants you to learn from them. And he calls on you to honor and respect them.

As we get older, as adults, we may no longer be called to obey our parents, but we are still called to honor them: not to insult or slight them, but to treat them justly – in what we do, and also in what we say both to them and about them.

And even later, in the next stage of life, the Bible is also clear that we may be called on to care for and provide for our elderly parents. This too is a way that we show gratitude, justice, and

responsibility towards our parents, as the Apostle Paul stresses that it is a “return” we give to our parents for all they have done for us, which “is pleasing in the sight of God.” And then Paul adds: “But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” [1 Timothy 5:4, 8] That’s a pretty serious way to put it. Jesus, affirms this view, equating a failure to provide for one’s parents in their old age with reviling them – a sin, he notes, that is worthy of death before God. [Matthew 15:3-9] Yet still, we are tempted to dodge this responsibility. As Tim Keller notes: “Far too many evangelical Christians today hide behind the high mobility and privatization of our society to screen themselves from duties of mercy to their kin.” [Keller, 126]

Though it may look different over time, in each stage of life we are called on to show justice and responsibility towards our parents and other older family members.

But that responsibility extends beyond our families as well. In fact, both these laws contain concerns for those beyond the immediate parents. There is a broader responsibility, beyond our own parents, to show justice and responsibility towards those who came before us.

In our larger society this means showing respect for older generations, willingly hearing their perspective and their wisdom, caring for their needs as a society, and valuing them as a part of our community.

So this call applies to our families. It applies to our broader society. But it also applies to our churches.

We should strive to be a congregation that honors those who came before us here. That doesn’t mean we need to worship them, or idealize them, or get stuck in the past. But it means that even as things may change, we maintain a healthy respect and gratitude for those who came before us ... and we make sure that this congregation remains a real spiritual home for them, and a true community for them.

Some aspects of that are simple, like being vigilant to keep our younger children from running around the narthex, so that our older congregants with mobility issues can attend here without fearing that they’ll be knocked over and hurt – which is pretty important if we want them to be here with us.

Beyond that, it means that we honor and appreciate those who are older here, and that as a church, we value and listen to their opinion, resisting our culture’s idolatry of youth.

But more personally, it also means we should actively pursue real relationships with our older members, wanting to know them and be known by them, building friendships across generations that bless us and bless them, and deepens both their and our sense of belonging.

In a range of ways, our text calls us to show justice, responsibility, and love, toward those who came before us: in our families, out in the world, and in our churches.

Where do you need to do that better?

That's one thing we see here.

### **God Calls Us to Show Justice & Responsibility towards Those Who Will Come After Us**

But another thing we see here is that though we are tempted to put our own desires first, God here also calls us to show justice and responsibility towards those who will come after us.

We see aspects of this in the second law, as the parents seek justice for their son by turning to an outside and more objective authority, rather than taking the law into their own hands. By this very act they open themselves up to the possibility that they might be wrong, by seeking objective justice for their son more than seeking their own way.

But this idea comes across even more clearly in the first law. There, we are reminded that we cannot allow our preferences, or our emotions, or our whims, to determine what we owe, or what we will give, to those who will come after us – especially our own children. That's what's at the heart of verses 15 to 17.

Our own circumstances will look very different from what we see in verse 15. But the principle remains the same: we are called to show justice and responsibility towards those who come after us, regardless of our feelings about them.

Sometimes we may struggle with our children ... in a difficult moment ... or a difficult season ... or a difficult long-term clash of personalities.

And yet, our text this morning reminds us that your feelings towards your child in those difficult moments in no way lessens your responsibility to them in God's eyes. You still owe them all the things God calls a parent to give their child: to meet their physical needs, their spiritual needs, their educational needs, and so on. But more than that, you are called to give them your very self ... even as your heavenly Father gives himself to you.

And you're called to do that even when you don't feel like it. Even when you're struggling or clashing with them. Even when it is difficult, you are called to show justice and responsibility towards your children at home.

Parents ... how have you maybe fallen short of that? What adjustments might you need to make?

And is one of the future adjustments maybe asking for outside help from someone with wisdom and grace who can help you approach these challenges?

This principle applies to our homes. But it also applies beyond our homes. We are called, as a society, to show justice and responsibility towards those who are younger – seeing that their basic needs are met, protecting them from harm, striving to be a society that seeks to serve those who will come after us and not just ourselves.

But even more than that, we are called to show this justice and responsibility towards those who come after us in the church. We are to welcome, not resent, the younger faces we see. More than that, we are to help and serve them. That may mean mentoring or discipling a younger Christian who's an adult. Or it may mean volunteering to serve even younger Christians among us, in our children's Sunday school ministry, or our nursery ministry.

It means also seeking to build cross-generational relationships with those who are younger than you are, communicating to them that they belong here, and you want them to thrive in this congregation.

In a range of ways, in our families, in the wider world, and of course in our church, we are called on to show loving justice and responsibility towards those who will come after us.

Where do you need to do that more intentionally?

## **Conclusion**

Though we are often tempted to look only to ourselves, to put ourselves or our peers or our generation above others – above those older or younger, we serve a God who works across generations. And so our text this morning calls us to show justice and responsibility towards those who came before us, and those who will come after us.

That's an important calling – and we are called to pursue it with vigor.

But as we do, we also know that we've already fallen short. We've failed to show justice and responsibility towards the people God has called us to care for – both older and younger.

And even as we seek to do better, we also know that in our past, or in our present, or even just in our hearts, we are, in many ways, the stubborn and rebellious son described in verses 18 ... and not just in how we've treated the people around us ... but also in how we've treated God – how we've treated our Heavenly Father. We've dishonored and disobeyed him too, stubbornly rejecting his correction.

We each are the stubborn son of this passage – every human being who ever lived.

Or rather, every human being fits that description except for one.

And interestingly, that one person – that one man – who never was, in any sense, the rebellious son ... interestingly, he is perhaps the one biblical example of someone accused of breaking this law ... and in the end it helped lead to his execution.

In Matthew 11 and Luke 7, Jesus himself summarizes the accusations of others against him, as they claimed that Jesus is “a glutton and a drunkard.” That's the same phrase used to sum up the sins of the rebellious son in verse 20 of our text. Jesus is, in some sense, accused of being the

rebellious son. And those accusations lead, eventually, to his execution on the cross. [Luke 7:34; Matthew 11:19; Copan, 91; *Theopolis*, Episode 691]

The one person in all of human history who never broke this law – the one person who lived his life as a perfectly faithful and obedient Son of his Heavenly Father – he is the only person we know of who was executed after an accusation of being like this rebellious son.

We deserved the penalty for this sin. But he received it instead. He has already paid the price for our sin, so that we might be forgiven.

And now that we've been forgiven – now that we've been cleansed, he calls us to follow in his footsteps: To seek to be just, as he is just. To seek to be faithful, as he is faithful. To seek to be responsible for others, as he has been responsible for us. He calls us to show justice and responsibility and love towards those who came before us and those who will come after us, just as he has done – just as he has done for you and me.

And so, having been shown such grace, let us go from here striving to be like Jesus, our Elder Brother: showing justice and responsibility towards those who came before us, and those who will come after us, just as he did ... loving them, because he has loved us.

Amen.

---

**This sermon draws on material from:**

- Alter, Robert. *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary*. New York, NY: Norton, 2004.
- Bakke, O. M. *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity*. Translated by Brian McNeil. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005.
- 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.
- Crook, John. A. "Patria Potestas." *The Classical Quarterly*. Vol. 17. Issue 1. 1967, p.113-122.
- Keller, Timothy. *Ministries of Mercy: The Call of the Jericho Road*. Second Edition. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997.
- Millar, J. Gary. *Now Choose Life: Theology and Ethics in Deuteronomy*. Downers Grove, IL: Apollos, 1998.
- Strange, W.A. *Children in the Early Church*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004 (Previously published 1996)
- Theopolis Podcast*. "Episode 689: Wives of War and Inheritance Rights (Deuteronomy 21:10-17)" December 6, 2023. <https://soundcloud.com/user-812874628/episode-689-wives-of-war-and-inheritance-rights-deuteronomy-2110-17>
- Theopolis Podcast*. "Episode 691: A Rebellious Son (Deuteronomy 21:18-22:4)" December 13, 2023. <https://soundcloud.com/user-812874628/episode-691-a-rebellious-son-deuteronomy-2118-224>
- Wright, Christopher. *Deuteronomy*. NIBC. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of "Reformed Catholicity"), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.