

“Dignity Despite Depravity”
Deuteronomy 21:22-23
November 16, 2025
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

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

We’ve dealt with some challenging laws, the last few weeks in Deuteronomy. But all of them, I think, have been fruitful as we have dug into them to better understand them.

And now, today, we hear from Deuteronomy 21:22-23

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

Moses said to the people:

^{21:22} “And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, ²³ his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God. You shall not defile your land that Yahweh your God is giving you for an inheritance.”

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,
When we think of the direction you give us through your word,
we take comfort.
Let your word be now our joy and delight,
as we attend to it here in your house,
so that we would remember your revelation as we go from here, day and night,
that we may cling to and follow it.
Grant this, we ask, in Jesus’s name. Amen
[Based on Psalm 119:52, 54-56]

Introduction

Our text this morning is another one that may at first seem odd and obscure. But as we consider it in its historical and its biblical context, it's another law that has significant implications for us today.

When we dig into this text, and we consider it in the context of the whole Bible, then what I think we find here is that: There is no depravity in this life that can strip the image of God from a human being, or remove them from the reach of the saving work of Christ, and therefore we must treat every person with dignity, and make Christ's grace available to all.

Let me say that again: There is no depravity in this life that can strip the image of God from a human being, or remove them from the reach of the saving work of Christ, and therefore we must treat every person with dignity, and make Christ's grace available to all.

Let's break that down together.

Context: Depravity in This Life

First, this text is dealing with human depravity. The immediate context is serious and grievous sin, and the person who has committed that serious and grievous sin.

That's the context we're given in verse 22. It says: "If a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree..."

So right off the bat, we are dealing with a person who has committed a crime worthy of death – a serious sin in Israel: the most serious kind of sin you could commit.

Human depravity is at the forefront.

From that, there's a clear sequence in verse 22: First, this individual's depravity has led to a capital offense. Second, there is a judicial process that convicts him of that crime and sentences him to death. Third, the man is actually put to death. And then fourth, the people decide to hang the man's body on a tree. [Block, 500-501]

Now to be clear, commentators generally agree that the man in this verse was not to be killed by hanging him on a tree. He was killed instead probably by stoning. While other ancient pagan cultures came up with more elaborate, painful, and dehumanizing ways to carry out executions, stoning, the standard form of execution in Israel, was relatively quick. [Millar, 135]

And so what's in view here is that after the man was executed by stoning, perhaps because his sin was especially grievous, perhaps as a further intensification of the punishment and to bring even more shame on the offender, or perhaps as a way to warn others against committing the same crime – after this man was executed by stoning, his dead body would be displayed publicly, by hanging it on a tree or some kind of wooden post, for others to see. [Block, 501; Craig, 285]

That's the situation in view here. And so the context is God's people having to deal with a particularly heinous case of human depravity – when someone has committed one of the most serious kinds of sin.

That's the situation.

There Is No Depravity in this Life That Can Strip the Image of God from a Human Being

And given that situation, this passage has a striking lesson for us.

Because one of the first things it teaches is that there is no depravity in this life that can strip the image of God from a human being.

Now ... how do we see that here?

Well, we see it in the fact that God is concerned about the treatment of the body of this criminal who committed a particularly heinous sin.

Note the details of this law. First, this law does not order or encourage the display of the executed body. [Craig, 285; Wright, 236-237] Such display was already a common practice in the ancient world. And as we've seen in other cases, God here is not supporting that practice but restraining it. He's not outlining his ideal for how the body of an executed criminal is treated, but he's setting his people on a trajectory towards treating the body of such a criminal with dignity by significantly limiting how long the body could be displayed to only a few hours and ordering that the body be buried that same day.

In contrast to that, in the nations surrounding Israel, the remains of some executed criminals were intentionally left out overnight, and for several days, so that the birds and scavenging wild animals would eat the body of the criminal. [Block, 501; Brown, 211] This was a further way to degrade the one who had committed a terrible crime in the community.

But God clearly doesn't want that among his people. This law seems designed to reduce and prevent such degradation of the condemned criminal.

Now ... why is that? Why does God care about this?

After all, this guy isn't even alive anymore ... it's not like it's causing him pain. Why does God outlaw this degradation of the criminal's body?

Well, God cares, because all human beings bear his image. Even the worst of sinners.

The Bible tells us that God made humanity in his image. [Genesis 1:27] And even after sin entered humanity, all people – every human being – continued to bear God's image [Genesis 9:6; James 3:9]. Sin may twist or distort that image of God in human beings in many ways, but it does not erase it – it does not eradicate it. And so the Bible says that every human being should be treated with dignity because they bear the image of God. Their very being, in many different ways, shows forth God's image, and so is worthy of dignity and honor.

And that's reflected in our text here this morning. We see here that there is a dignity – a sacredness – to all human beings. And we see that that dignity is not only bestowed on the human mind or the human soul, but also the human body. [Alter, 984] Because, as Herman Bavinck has put it: “The whole person is the image of God.” That includes both the human body and the human soul, because both are part of our humanness. “The body,” Bavinck writes, “is not a prison, but a marvelous piece of art from the hand of God.” And so, the body “belongs integrally to the image of God” and is “just as constitutive for the essence of humanity as the soul.” [Bavinck 554-555, 559]

There is something sacred about the human body. And we all know this. Our culture has a lot of language and a lot of practices that devalue the human body after death. We say “that's not really them anymore” as we see the body of our dead loved ones. Or we look for ways to handle the bodies of the dead that deny their sacredness. And yet ... even so ... I don't know anyone who, when their loved one dies at home ... has the impulse to throw the body over their shoulder, carry them out to the trash bins in front of the house, and shove the body inside one of them for the garbage collectors to pick up the next morning.

The very thought horrifies us because we all know that there is something special, something sacred about the bodies of human beings – even after they're dead – something that requires us to treat them with dignity. God agrees. And he calls us to treat as sacred not just our loved ones, but every human being. Because every human being bears his image.

And if God demanded his people to treat even the dead bodies of the worst criminals and worst sinners with dignity [Wright, 237] ... then surely we must treat living sinners and living criminals with dignity as well. If the dead bodies of notorious sinners still bear God's image in some way, then how much more must the living bodies of such notorious sinners bear the image of God as well?

One thing we see here in this law is that there is no depravity in this life that can strip the image of God from a human being.

Therefore We Must Treat Every Person with Dignity

And it's for that reason that we must treat every person with dignity – even the worst of sinners, even the worst of criminals.

Now, that doesn't mean that crimes should not be punished, or that sin should have no consequences. If you've been with us through the book of Deuteronomy so far, then you know that's not what Moses or God are arguing for.

Israel's failure to bring a just punishment on a criminal could result in guilt for the community – a kind of defilement of the land [Deuteronomy 19:13, 21:9, 21:21].

But here we're reminded that over-punishing a crime – unjustly exacting more than is right or proper for wrongdoing – that too can defile the land. That's what we see at the end of verse 23. There's a line that's too far – a line that seeks to strip someone of their dignity and deny their humanity. And God here forbids that.

There's two ways to go wrong in administering justice. One is by failing to call others to account for their wrongdoing. But the other way is by being overly punitive on those who have done wrong, and so unjustly over-penalizing them, degrading them, or denying the dignity God has given them.

Our text reminds us that we need to beware of both errors. And that applies both at the large scale of criminal justice and foreign policy ... and also at the personal scale of how we discipline our children, or how we respond to friends or family who have hurt us.

Throughout Deuteronomy we have seen laws that require God's people to call others to account for their sins or their crimes.

But here we have a law that combats the second error: The error of over-reacting to, or over-punishing, a crime or sin.

And this is not the only law of this kind. The famous law of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth was not, as it's often portrayed, a law meant to encourage harsh penalties for crimes. Rather, it was meant to restrain judicial penalties, which, in many pagan cultures, would seek to exact more than an eye for an eye, and more than a tooth for a tooth. [Wright, 226]

Both treating an offense too lightly and treating it too harshly can bring guilt on the people and defile the land.

Now ... in the abstract we may all be ready to agree with that ... but the positions we take on public matters, or the positions we fail to take ... or the way we treat people around us ... often speak differently.

I remember, 20 years ago, when stories first started breaking about the abuse of detainees at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay, one news source noted how the magazine issues that broke those stories tended to sell terribly. No one bought them. No one wanted to read them. [I remember this news story, but I could not find it again.]

Now ... there could be a few reasons for that ... such articles are not exactly pleasant to read. But also, it seemed plausible that many Americans at the time simply didn't care about such terrible mistreatment ... as long as it was happening to suspected terrorists. No matter how bad it was ... many Americans figured that they deserved it. There was no limit on the penalties that could be carried out on such people, they seemed to quietly assume.

But God here places limits. And he calls us to care about them. And these limits we find here applied not just to criminals within ancient Israel, but even to the international enemies of ancient Israel.

Joshua, Moses's successor, applied this law even to Israel's foreign enemies, like the Canaanite king of Ai. [Block, 505; see Joshua 8:29]

Joshua read this law as a call for us to care about the just limits on how even our worst international enemies should be treated. And because God cares about that, we should care about it too.

When you think of those you most strongly oppose – those you view as foreign enemies, or even those you view as domestic political enemies – the worst of the worst in your mind ... do you fall

into ways of thinking, or ways of speaking, that not only desire for just penalties to come upon them ... but do you think and speak in ways that deny that such people bear the image of God ... do you, in your words or thoughts, treat them as less than human? Do you deny the dignity that God says they have?

If so, our text calls you to repent.

But the concern of this law is not limited to enemies on the national or international stage. The more common setting this law would come up in was with local criminals within Israel.

And for that reason, this law also challenges us to consider how we think, how we speak, what kind of policies we support, when it comes to those who have committed crimes within our own country or even our own communities.

Scholar and theologian Anthony Bradley notes that in our culture, on top of whatever penalty a lawbreaker receives in our justice system as the sentence for their crimes, above and beyond that, they are also given a new label, which often “redefines” their humanity, and excuses further punishment and degradation beyond their judicial sentence. [Bradley, 2] “In the criminal justice system,” Bradley writes, “those who break the law are given new labels like ‘deviant,’ ‘offender,’ ‘ex-con,’ and so on. These labels come to define the entire identity of the criminal, and he or she is treated accordingly in the system – forever.” The result, Bradley notes, is “a crisis of human dignity.” [Bradley, 4]

Now, the point is not that crimes should not be punished. The point is the ways that, in addition to a just sentence, we, as a culture, seek to further degrade the dignity of such people beyond what is just, or what is required for public safety.

Now, we may not actively do this ourselves. But we often don’t care much when it happens. And that itself can be a sin of omission – a sin of inaction.

When you hear stories or reports about the mistreatment or neglect or even abuse of criminals in some specific facility in our own country ... how do you respond?

Is it with concern for the dignity and the humanity of those suffering in those unjust conditions ... or is it with a shrug of indifference ... because, after all, you maybe think to yourself ... they’re criminals ... if they didn’t want to suffer such things, then they shouldn’t have broken the law.

But our text this morning reminds us that committing a crime does not strip the offender of their human dignity – it does not erase the image of God, it does not excuse any and all forms of degradation going forward. In verse 23, even the worst of criminals could not be exposed long after their execution. And the community was called on to act – to take action to ensure the offender received a proper burial that day. And if God is so concerned for such things with a criminal who is dead, how much more must he care about such just and dignified treatment when a criminal is still alive?

So our text has implications at the national or international scale. It has implications at the level of criminal justice.

But it also has implications for our personal lives. An individual has committed a shameful act in our community ... or a member of our congregation has committed a serious sin ... or an acquaintance has sinfully harmed our close friend or family member ... or a person has sinned seriously against us ... and so often, our desire, is not to seek mere justice – not to merely try to make right what is wrong – but our temptation, so often, is to seek to inflict far more on the other person: to ruin their reputation, to damage their standing with others, to see in one way or another, that when it's all said and done, what they experience will be far worse than the harm they did to us or to the person we love.

In other words ... we want to exact more than an eye for an eye ... more than a tooth for a tooth.

We want to strip them of their dignity. We want to dehumanize them in our heart.

None of us want to admit it ... but we're all tempted to do this in some setting. Where is it a temptation for you? Where in your heart, or in your life, or in your words, have you sought to strip someone of their dignity or their humanity because of what they had done?

The first thing we see here is that there is no depravity in this life that can strip the image of God from a human being, therefore we must treat every person with dignity.

There Is No Depravity in this Life That Can Remove a Human Being from the Saving Work of Christ

But there's more.

In addition to all that, another thing we find in this text is God's truth that there is no depravity in this life that can remove a human being from the reach of the saving work of Christ.

Now ... where do we see that?

Well, I'd argue we see it in a few ways.

First, there's a hint in the text itself. And we find that, I think, in the call to bury the offender.

Now, all kinds of people in history have buried their dead, believers and unbelievers alike. But in the Bible, among God's people, burial took on special significance. Because the Bible tells us that a dead body will not always remain dead. A dead body ... is kind of like a seed.

The Bible says that the day is coming when God will raise all people from the dead – every human being and so every human body will be renewed and brought back to life. And all those who have trusted in the Lord – in the God of the Bible – and who have followed him will enter eternal life.

And so, the Apostle Paul tells us that in light of this future hope, when we bury our dead ... it's like we're planting them as a seed ... and trusting that one day God will raise them up to new life. [1 Corinthians 15:20-23, 35-38, 42-44]

And the insistence on burial even here, in verse 23, holds out hope that if this criminal, between his crime and his execution, repented of his sin and turned to the Lord in faith, then he too could look forward to a resurrection that would lead to eternal life.

But in addition to that hint, there's the reality that while certain laws in the Old Testament called for the execution of certain criminals, there was no assumption that such crimes cut one off from the possibility of salvation. The criminal could always repent and be saved. After all, Jesus himself assured one such criminal, condemned to death, that he would be saved because of his faith, even as he died on the cross right next to Jesus. [Luke 23:39-43]

But if that's not enough, there's also a later text that draws from these verses and fills them with hope.

Verse 23 says: "For a hanged man is cursed by God."

Now, there's some ambiguity in the language, but I agree with commentators who say that the reason for the curse in that verse is not the hanging of the body itself, or the fact that the body is dead. The reason this man is cursed by God is because of his great sin. It is his sin that makes him cursed. [Block, 502; Craige, 285]

But that leads to a problem. How can I argue that such a man was in reach of God's grace, when our text itself says that the man who sinned so grievously before God was cursed by God?

The answer comes from the Apostle Paul. Paul says that this curse is real. And it falls on all who break God's law – all who disobey his commandments.

Paul writes: "It is written, 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.'"

But then Paul tells us there is hope. Then Paul adds: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.'" [Galatians 3:10b, 13]

Paul, citing our text this morning, is reminding us that Jesus, nailed to the tree – Jesus who was crucified on the tree, on our behalf – Jesus Christ received the curse of the law that we deserved ... so that we might be spared ... so that we might be saved ... so that we might have hope.

That is the offer of the gospel. And it's an offer not just for minor sinners ... but for great sinners. Even notorious sinners. For as we've already heard this morning, Paul writes: "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost." [1 Timothy 1:15]

Jesus received the curse that was due even to the worst of sinners so that they would be saved, if they would simply call out to him in faith.

And so, there is no depravity in this life that can remove a human being from the scope of the saving work of Christ.

Therefore We Must Make Christ's Grace Available to All

And for that reason, we must make Christ's grace available to all.

We must tell both minor sinners and great sinners about the grace available to them in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We must pray for those who have committed great public sins ... and those who have committed great private sins ... and even those who have sinned grievously against us or against those we love. We are called to pray for them, that they might be saved – that Christ's grace in the gospel might reach them, and give them eternal life.

Because, as God told Ezekiel, God himself has no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather, he desires that the wicked would turn from his ways and live. [Ezekiel 18:23] And if we are to be children of our heavenly Father, then we should desire the same thing for those who have sinned grievously.

That's not always easy. But it's what we're called to do.

But in addition to praying for them, to the extent that we can, we ourselves are to point such people to the grace of the gospel – to the mercy of Jesus. As individuals, as a congregation, as the larger Church, we are called on to speak the truth in love to them, to be Christ's loving hands and feet to them, so that, hearing the good news from us and from others, seeing it in action in our love towards them, they might turn to the Lord and live.

Such a proclamation of the gospel to those who have harmed us or harmed those we love ... that is one of the most profound ways that we can love our enemies, as Jesus has called us to do [Matthew 5:44].

There is no depravity in this life that can remove a human being from the scope of the saving work of Christ, therefore we must make Christ's grace available to all.

Conclusion: This Truth Is Not Only For Others, But Also for Us

There is no depravity in this life that can strip the image of God from a human being or remove them from the reach of the saving work of Christ.

That truth must shape how we relate to the people around us in this world.

But that truth also needs to shape how we relate to ourselves.

Far too often, when we sin, when we have done something shameful and wrong ... we believe the lie that now we have lost our dignity for good ... we believe the lie that now we are maybe even beyond the saving work of Christ.

But Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners ... even the foremost of sinners ... even sinners like you and me. [1 Timothy 1:15] And no sin can put you beyond his saving work.

Are you one of those people who believes that the saving work of Christ is for other people ... but not for you? Are you one of those people who believes God wants dignity for other people ... but not for you?

The Bible tells you that God himself came in the person of Jesus Christ, in order to save sinners just like you. And he calls on you to trust in his grace, and trust in his love, for you.

To doubt that is to doubt him – to doubt his love, and to doubt his willingness to keep his promises.

Friend ... do not doubt God, but believe him. We serve a God who, when we had sinned, when the curse of the law had come upon us, he himself came to earth, and he himself was hung on the tree, for our sake, so that the curse we deserved would fall on him, until there was nothing left of the curse for us.

That's how great his love is for you.

Do not doubt it, but instead trust in him.

And then, seek to show others the grace he has shown to you: treating them with dignity despite their sin, and pointing them to the saving work of Jesus Christ for their salvation.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

- Alter, Robert. *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary*. New York, NY: Norton, 2004.
- Bavinck, Herman. *Reformed Dogmatics. Volume Two: God and Creation*. Edited by John Bolt. Translated by John Vriend. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004.
- Block, Daniel I. *The NIV Application Commentary: Deuteronomy*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012.
- Bradley, Anthony B. *Ending Overcriminalization and Mass Incarceration: Hope from Civil Society*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Brown, Raymond. *The Message of Deuteronomy: Not by Bread Alone*. The Bible Speaks Today. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity: 1993.
- Craigie, Peter C. *The Book of Deuteronomy*. NICOT. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976.
- Millar, J. Gary. *Now Choose Life: Theology and Ethics in Deuteronomy*. Downers Grove, IL: Apollos, 1998.
- Theopolis Podcast*. "Episode 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.