

“Protecting Life & Creation”
Deuteronomy 22:6-8
September 6, 2026
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

As we enter the fall, we return this morning to our series in the book of Deuteronomy, picking up right where we left off last year.

Now, as a reminder: As Deuteronomy begins, God has already rescued his people from Egypt, he’s made a covenant with them, made them his own, and he’s about to send them into the land that he has promised them.

And so, Moses and Israel are standing on the verge of the Promised Land. And before Moses leaves the people, and Israel enters the land, Moses is instructing the people, one last time, about how they should live their lives as God’s people in the land.

Moses hits on a number of subjects – and we’ve already covered a wide range of them. This morning, he addresses aspects of how God’s people should relate to creation and to human life.

With that said, let’s turn now to our text: Deuteronomy 22:6-8.

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

Moses said to the people:

^{22:6} “If you come across a bird’s nest in any tree or on the ground, with young ones or eggs and the mother sitting on the young or on the eggs, you shall not take the mother with the young. ⁷ You shall let the mother go, but the young you may take for yourself, that it may go well with you, and that you may live long.

⁸ “When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof, that you may not bring the guilt of blood upon your house, if anyone should fall from it.”

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, your hands have made and fashioned us;

give us understanding that we may learn your commandments.
Work now in our hearts, to conform them to your word,
that we may not be put to shame,
but might delight in you.
Teach us from your word now, we ask,
in Jesus's name. Amen
[Based on Psalm 119:73, 74, 76, 80]

Introduction

So ... if you're relatively new with us – in the last year or so ... welcome to the Book of Deuteronomy. The last few years we've been spending 12 to 14 week here each fall.

At this point, you might be thinking "Is this what I dragged my family out of bed to hear this morning? A sermon on birds and building codes?"

Well ... yeah ... a little bit.

But there's more than that here too. Within these laws, there are principles about how God's people – not just three thousand years ago, but today – are supposed to live their lives. And they're principles not just for hunters and builders, but for all of us.

And this is how the Law of Moses always functioned. As extensive as it is, the Old Testament Law doesn't cover every possible situation. But it gives a selection of laws, that contain principles in action, which God's people are then supposed take, and apply, in different ways, to the many different situations they will face throughout their history.

And so while our passage today is about birds and rooftop fences ... it's also about much more than birds and rooftop fences.

The effect of this, which I think we've seen repeatedly in this series on Deuteronomy, is that when we dig deeper into these texts, we see that there is much to learn that's relevant for our own lives, however removed from us the text might seem at first.

And so, with all that said: What do we see in our text this morning?

Well, what I think we see here is that God cares deeply about creation and human life, and he calls us to protect them both, even when it costs us something.

Let me say that again: God cares deeply about creation and human life, and he calls us to protect them both, even when it costs us something.

Let's break that down together.

God Cares About Creation

First, God cares deeply about creation.

The Bible tells us that God made the world. He created all things, spiritual and physical. He made the natural world and everything in it.

And God likes what he's made. He declared it to be good. [Genesis 1] He thinks the things he's made are wonderful, and he cares about what happens to them.

In fact, the care and development of creation is part of the reason God has placed human beings in this world. In Genesis 2:15 we're told that God put human beings in the garden of Eden to "work it and keep it" – both to subdue it, as we read in Genesis 1:28, and to guard and protect it, which is what's meant by the word "keep" [Waltke, 87; Jordan, 133]. God wants creation developed, in some cases, from a wilderness to a garden, and even on to a garden-city. But he also wants the natural world guarded and cared for.

God himself cares deeply about creation.

God Calls Us to Protect Creation Even When It Costs Us Something

And one thing we see in our text this morning is that because God cares deeply about creation, he calls us to protect it, even when it costs us something.

Look again at verses 6 and 7: "If you come across a bird's nest in any tree or on the ground, with young ones or eggs and the mother sitting on the young or on the eggs, you shall not take the mother with the young. You shall let the mother go, but the young you may take for yourself, that it may go well with you, and that you may live long."

What's going on here?

Well, a few theories have been floated. But as multiple commentators note, the most convincing practical reason for this law is conservation, or environmental sustainability.

These are wild birds in view here. And to take both the mother bird and the young, would not just take one generation, but also the breeding mother as well, hurting this particular bird population in the future. If you took just the mother, the babies would still die. But if you take the young and leave the mother, the eggs or the young can supply food for the people, while sparing the mother also conserves and sustains the birds' future population. That's the practice that God calls for here. [Alter, 986; Block, 513; Brown, 214; Craigie, 288-289; Wright, 241]

And, as several commentators suggest, the end of verse 7 seems to reinforce this. The result of this practice is that it will go well with the people, and they will live long in the land, because there will continue to be a natural supply of food from the wildlife around them, which will be sustained, in part, by this practice. [Block, 513; Wright, 241]

And this practice will cost them something. In a time and a place where meat was not an everyday thing, the people are being called to forego the largest portion of meat from what they've discovered. But that's what God calls them to do.

And so, what we seem to have here, is a law about conserving nature for the next generation, and ensuring the environmental sustainability of how we interact with nature – including what we take from it.

God wants us to protect creation, and so make its abundance available for future generations.

This is a principle we need to take into account in our own lives – in our own patterns of production and consumption, in choices we make.

But these verses are also about shared responsibility as well. This law only has its desired effect if everyone does it. And it is in fact a law, for all the people, not just a suggestion for some.

Which means that some aspects of how we apply the principle of conservation and environmental sustainability in verses 6 and 7 may be social, political, and economic. And the principle would apply not just to bird populations, but all kinds of creation care.

This summer, while I was away on vacation, among other things I listened to a book about garbage. Because apparently that's how I relax. It was titled *Waste Wars: The Wild Afterlife of Your Trash*. And it was written by Alexander Clapp.

And Clapp tracks a number of aspects of our trash and how it impacts creation. And one aspect, of course, was plastic.

It's currently estimated that for every human being alive right now, there exists slightly more than one ton of discarded plastic out there in the world, "scattered or layered in the ground or adrift at sea." [Clapp, 18]

According to one estimate, a garbage truck's worth plastic enters the sea every minute. [Clapp, 18]

One marine biologist estimates that about 10 million tons of plastic waste enters the ocean each year, causing harm to all kinds of marine life. [Mladenov, 67, 68]

Another estimate states that by 2050 the net mass of plastic in the sea will exceed the weight of all the fish in the sea put together. [Clapp, 18]

And a lot of it, in a roundabout way, seems to be ours.

Decades ago, Annie Leonard decided to track where plastic that we place in recycling goes. And so, she meticulously tracked single-use plastic discarded in Seattle ... only to find it traveling all the way to Indonesia, where its fate was far from ideal. [Clapp, 294] And since then, the shipping of American plastic waste to poorer countries, where it often ends up scattered or piled on the

countryside, or flowing from rivers into the sea, has only gotten worse, as Clapp painstakingly demonstrates. [Clapp, 245-326]

Very little plastic placed in recycling bins is actually recycled. [Milbrandt, et. al.] This is in part because the U.S. has reduced its own capacity to actually recycle plastic [Association of Plastic Recyclers]. And the main reason for that is because it's not very profitable. [Hank Green] And our culture tends to only really recycle if there's money to be made in it ... not if it will cost us something.

And so the plastics pile up.¹

Now ... a lot of claims could be made from such facts. But I want to focus on one: The way we're living today doesn't seem to be sustainable. It doesn't seem to be conserving and preserving the riches of creation for the next generation. It seems like it may be a violation of the principle behind verses 6 and 7.

And I don't know exactly what the solution is. I'm sorry I can't hand you one. That's not my area of expertise. But I do know that this is something that should probably bother us. I know it's something we should be concerned about, and maybe want to get more involved with. Just as we, as Christians, worry about a number of cultural, and political, and global issues, like human rights, and sexual ethics, and the integrity of marriage, and so on – so we should also care about how we, as human beings, treat God's creation, and whether we're conserving it for future generations, as these verses seem to call us to do.

Because God cares deeply about creation, he calls us to protect it, even when it costs us something.

That's one thing we see here.

God Cares About Human Life

The next thing we see here is that along with caring about creation in general, God especially cares about human life.² That's the foundation that underlies verse 8.

¹ Of course, there are many other examples, in addition to plastics. One is our smartphones, which are remarkable in part because they seem to be designed to be replaced every few years. [Clapp, 138-139] And while they themselves are small, it's estimated that each new smartphone requires hundreds of pounds of fossil fuels, dozens of pounds of chemicals, and at least one ton of water to produce. [Clapp, 139] And yet, the U.S. alone discards over 140 million cell phones per year, and the tech industry sells about 1.6 billion new phones a year worldwide. [Clapp, 140-141] According to the U.N., "nearly 50 million metric tons of old cell phones and computers and televisions enter disposal streams every year, the equivalent of 125,000 jumbo jets of materials." [Clapp, 143]

² And I do suspect that there is a link between the law regarding birds, in verses 6-7 and the law regarding people here in verse 8.

As the Apostle Paul will point out centuries later, God's laws about animals are often meant to also point us to God's commandments concerning people [1 Corinthians 9:9-10]

While this law is not only symbolic, I suspect it also does have a symbolic component to it, similar to the law we looked at back in Genesis 14, about not boiling a young goat in its mother's milk. ["Relating to Life and Death"]

And this is a biblical truth we see this from the very beginning of the Bible, where we are told that humanity bears the image of God [Genesis 1:27] and God goes on to specify that the life of human beings was to be especially valued and preserved for this reason [Genesis 9:5-7].

And that's reinforced here in our text – in verse 8. Failing to guard human life will result in guilt, because God values human life. He loves human beings.

Again and again in the Bible we see that God cares deeply about human life.

God Calls Us to Proactively Protect Human Life, Even When It Costs Us Something

And because God cares deeply about human life, he calls us to protect it, even when it costs us something.

That's what we see in verse 8. There Moses says: "When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof, that you may not bring the guilt of blood upon your house, if anyone should fall from it."

So, for context, the roofs of Israelite homes were flat, and were really used as another room of the house, for relaxation, sleeping, working, and entertaining guests. [Block, 513-514; Brown, 214; Wright, 241]

People would spend time with their family and with their friends on their flat roof. And this law required Israelites to build a parapet – a low protective wall around the roof – in order to protect people from falling off the roof and getting hurt. And, in fact, this law requires that protective step to be taken so firmly that it says that if you don't build a parapet, and someone does fall, then the owner of the home would be legally responsible for their injury or death, as a form of preventable injury outlined in Exodus 21[:33-36]. [Block, 514; Craige, 289; Wright, 241]

God here requires structural modifications to be made in privately owned homes, in order to protect the lives of both the residents of those homes, as well as anyone else who might visit.

As one commentator puts it, this verse shows us that: "Building regulations and planning permissions begin with God." [Brown, 214]

December 3, 2023, <https://www.faithtacoma.org/deuteronomy-nicoletti/relating-to-life-and-death-deuteronomy-1215-16-21-25>

The general value of life is emphasized here, as God does not want the means that provide life – like milk for a goat, or the care of a mother bird for her young – to be mixed in with the death of those same creatures. With these laws, God also sets up a symbolic binary between life and death – a binary that especially applies to humanity, and to God's call to value human life. [Milgrom, 741]

And it's that symbolic theme that I think ties verses six and seven to verse 8, which focuses more explicitly on human life.

And from the principle we find here, other laws that aim to protect human life can also be extrapolated. Laws that require physical structures or even practices that would protect human life, whether someone else's life or one's own life, can find a potential biblical basis in this verse, which required people to do something costly, in order to protect the life of others, as well as their own lives.

Because this wasn't voluntary – it was required. It wasn't based on your decision, or how much risk you decide to take. You had to do it.

And following the law cost something. Building this parapet would involve additional expense and time. [Craig, 289]

This can have a range of applications to us in our personal lives, from seatbelts and car seats to helmets and other reasonable precautions we may be called to take ourselves or to require of others.

But Christians have also historically applied this law to communities and to larger society.

As one commentator explains: "Using this Scripture, John Calvin insisted that similar provisions about parapets should be made for houses in sixteenth-century Geneva and gave himself tirelessly to matters of public health [...] in order to arrest the spread of illness and disease in the city. He pressed for the introduction of regulations concerning adequate ventilation and effective drainage so that people could live in reasonably healthy conditions. Similarly, at the time of the Industrial Revolution in nineteenth-century Britain, Lord Shaftesbury and his colleagues worked strenuously over many years to ensure that men, women and children were given adequate protection from dangerous machinery in factories, reasonable hours, proper periods of rest, and the like. Their campaign about working conditions was a practical expression of genuine Christian concern." [Brown, 215]

Another commentator writes: "The number of human deaths around the world that are caused, not by malice, but by negligence and carelessness, industrial dangers, inadequate maintenance, unhealthy work environments, [and so on] must be simply incalculable. Christians (like the Clapham Sect in [in early 19th century] Britain) were in the forefront of the struggle for basic safety, hygiene, and worker protection laws. Yet still, the guilt of bloodshed lingers through far too many deaths and injuries caused by negligence and apathy." [Wright, 241]

Because of verses like this, we, as Christians should care about unnecessary deaths through negligence and apathy. We should care about laws concerning public health, accident prevention, worker safety, and so on.

And as Christians, our concern for these issues should extend even beyond the borders of our own country.

Because one problem in our globalized world is that when worker safety is put into law in wealthy countries like the U.S., often, instead of taking on the cost of proper safety standards for hazardous work in our own country, that work is moved overseas, to a poorer country, with few protections, and the lives of the poor are put at risk instead.

Alexander Clapp writes extensively about how this plays out in the industry of ship breaking – the breakdown, recycling, and disposal of large ships.

Workers making a dollar a day [Clapp, 154] or less [204], often with little training [235], are put in extremely dangerous situations. Many of the workers are migrants [189, 195], locked into ten-year leases near the ship breaking yard [235], and if they express concerns about the safety of a certain task, they're reminded how easily they can be fired and replaced [234-235]. Deadly accidents are common [196, 205]. And those who don't die in accidents are often exposed to all sorts of hazardous materials [202], which one doctor working near such a site "equated to 'smoking ten to fifteen packs of cigarettes' every day" [205].

That's just one example one type of work. Situations like this occur all around the world. And while we cannot solve all the problems around the world, still, it should bother us. Shipbreaking exists because shipping exists, and so many of the products around us came here in exactly the kind of ships that are being dismantled in those dangerous ship breaking yards. The ships we rely on could be done more safely. But that would cost something. And so it is avoided.

And that should bother us. It's something that should be on our radar about the world we live in. Just as we pray about and are concerned about wars, and oppression, and natural disasters, we should be concerned and pray about working conditions around the world and in a variety of industries that can be neglectful and indifferent to protecting the lives of their workers.

Both at home, and abroad, in our personal lives and in our social engagement, in the forms of building codes, and product safety, health codes and worker safety, and more because God cares deeply about human life, he calls us to protect it, even when it costs us something.

The Cost of Complexity

Protecting creation, protecting human life – these things can be costly. They can cost us financially, as a society, they can cost us in political effort, in national prosperity and so on.

But before they cost us in any of those ways ... they can also cost us mentally ... and emotionally. Because these kind of callings may require us to take on a more complicated worldview. And many of us refuse that cost right out of the gate.

Some of you maybe even did that this morning. You dismissed this sermon right out of hand when you saw where it was going.

"Ah ... there goes the pastor," you maybe thought. "Out of touch with reality. He's going on and on about the environment. But what he doesn't appreciate is how focusing on the environment can hurt jobs for working-class people and developing economies. And working class jobs and developing economies are important. And so we really need to focus on those instead!"

Or others of you might have thought: “There goes the pastor, going on about proactive safety. Doesn’t he realize that focusing on safety could hurt courageous risk-taking? And courageous risk-taking is important. And so that’s what we should really be focusing on!”

And you know what? Virtuous industry and work are good and important things. Jobs for the working-class are important. Growth and prosperity for developing economies in poorer countries are important. Also, courage is important. And virtuous risk-taking is important. All of those things are important! But so is environmental stewardship and conservation. So is the proactive and wise protection of human life. Each of those things are important, and the one thing we cannot do is allow one set of important things we like, to cancel out another set of important things that we don’t really like.

G.K. Chesterton, in his book *Orthodoxy* writes: “The modern world is not evil; in some ways the modern world is far too good. It is full of wild and wasted virtues. When a religious scheme is shattered (as Christianity was [...]), it is not merely the vices that are let loose. The vices are, indeed, let loose, and they wander and do damage. But the virtues are let loose also; and the virtues wander more wildly, and the virtues do more terrible damage. The modern world is full of the old Christian virtues gone mad. The virtues have gone mad because they have been isolated from each other and are wandering alone. Thus some scientists care for truth; and their truth is pitiless. Thus some humanitarians only care for pity; and their pity [...] is often untruthful.” [26]

As modern people, we have this tendency to divide callings that God has meant to be united together.

In Genesis 2 God called us both to work the garden and to keep it – to subdue creation and protect it. When we pit environmental conservation against development and use of creation, we pit God’s commandments against each other. We separate them. And on their own, they go mad. Instead, God called us to obey them both – he called for those two commands to be kept close together, so that they keep one another sane.

In the same way, God calls on his people to be strong and courageous, and not to fear – to take real risks [Deuteronomy 3:16, 31:7, 31:23; Joshua 1:6, 1:7, 1:9, etc.]. But he also called on his people to value every human life [Genesis 9:6], to act as one another’s keeper [Genesis 4:9], and to proactively avoid unnecessary danger [Proverbs 22:3]. And again, those commandments were not meant to be separated – for us to choose one or the other – but they were meant to be kept close together, so that they keep one another sane.

And both of the laws in our text this morning do just that – they hold together two things, in a sane balance, rather than holding to one, while rejecting the other.

Look again at verses 6 and 7. If Moses only cared about humanity’s right to take from creation, then he would have told the people that when they saw the mother bird with her young, they should count it a gift, and eat them all, with no guilt or regret. Or, if Moses only cared about conserving nature, he might have told them not to eat the mother or the young, but to simply leave every animal untouched. But instead, Moses called the Israelites to hold on to both realities – both the provision God gives them through creation, as they eat the eggs or the young birds, as well as the

responsibility they have to conserve nature for the future. Both are held together, and so both callings remain sane.

In the same way, if Moses were only concerned with courage and fearlessness, he might have told the Israelites not to build parapets, but to take risks, live a little, and trust the Lord. Don't coddle your children with guardrails. Or, if Moses was only concerned with safety, he might have tried to outlaw the use of roofs as a living space altogether. But again, Moses embraces both callings God has given to humanity: to protect life, and to accept that life still has, and at times calls for, risks.

Rather than embracing just one virtue, just one calling, on its own, and letting it grow into an insanity, God's law unites humanities callings – unites their virtues – and thus keeps them sane.

And that's important. Because I think Chesterton is right. Whether on the cultural left or on the cultural right, again and again, we see virtues gone mad – virtues disconnected from God's other callings on us. And faced with the false choice of choosing one law or the other, the Mosaic Law reminds us again that our true calling is to embrace everything God calls us to, and to bring those callings together in our lives.

So which callings have you tended to idolize, and isolate, and let it go a little bit mad in your life? And which callings have you tended to neglect and look down on?

One of the first costs God calls us to in all of this is to bring his callings together, to take in the whole counsel of God, and thus to complicate our worldview, to make it a little less simple and straightforward ... and in the process, to make ourselves aliens in this world – not fit for any cultural tribe around us.

We are to care about human cultivation and environmental conservation ... about courageous risk-taking and the proactive protection of human life.

Conclusion

And our main motivation for this is not to be winsome, or moderate, our well-rounded.

Our main motivation should be to love what God loves – to value what he values, to do what he tells us to do.

We should be willing to take on real costs for these things in our lives, because our God was willing to take on real costs for these things himself.

God calls us to protect human life even when it costs us. That can be hard. But he's paid far more than we ever will to preserve human life. In order to preserve human life for eternity, God himself came to earth in the person of Jesus Christ. And he went to the cross – he gave his own life – all to save the lives of his people, that they would be with him for eternity. And if he loved them like that, then how can we shrug off our own calling to protect human life, with the small costs it brings to us?

And, as Paul tells us in Romans 8, he did that – he took on the burdens and costs he did, not just to save a people, but to save a place – to set all of creation free from bondage and to restore it to perfection forever, so that he and his people will spend eternity in a renewed heaven and a renewed earth forever. And if God loves the natural world that much, then how could we refuse to guard and keep it as he’s called us to now, in this life?

Our God is bigger than our own culture’s divisions and over-simplifications. Our God is bigger than any one political platform. Our God is able to bring all of these truths and values and virtues together in himself.

Our calling is to repent where we have cast his calling aside, and to care about what he cares about, to love what he loves, and to seek to protect what he has died to preserve and restore.

In the gospel, God gave himself to save his people and to restore his creation.

And so, brothers and sisters, as his children, as his stewards, let us obey his call to protect human life and to guard creation, in this life now.

Our God loves these things. Let’s strive to be like him.

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.