

## 8.8.21

## Reverence for Life

## Deuteronomy 30.15-20

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What's the first thing you think of when you hear the word, "life?" The word, "life," appears in many memorable phrases that are used in everyday conversation, in songs and in movies. That's life. Hold on for dear life. Your money or your life. Life in the fast lane. Not on your life. A new lease on life. Lead a double life. Set for life. The time of your life. Full of life. Low life. Get a life. Art imitating life. Facts of life. The prime of life. Larger than life. Circle of life. Love of my life. As if your life depended on it. A matter of life and death. Choose life. Reverence for life.

**Many of these phrases with the word "life" in it, communicate that something important is at stake.** That's the case in the book of Deuteronomy. The word "*Deuteronomy*" means "*second law*," meaning Moses' restating of God's laws. The events described in Deuteronomy take place 40 days before the Israelites enter the land of Canaan. They're in Moab which was an ancient kingdom whose territory today is in the west-central part of Jordan. Moses issued a call to obedience and reviewed God's covenant with the people. Moses recounts the experiences of the past 40 years in the wilderness, restates the Ten Commandments, and gives the Israelites guidelines to follow regarding different aspects of life. He tells the people that he will die before they enter the Promised Land and appoints Joshua to take his place. Moses gave the Israelites three reasons to renew their obedience to God: God's history of goodness to the people, the wisdom of God's laws, and God's promises of blessings for the future.

Near the end of his third major speech to the people in **Deuteronomy 30.15-20**, Moses presents two ways of living, between which the people must choose, and he warns **it's a matter of life and death**. He says, "15 See, I have set before you today **life and prosperity, death and adversity**. 16 If you **obey** the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by **loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live** and become numerous, and the Lord your God **will bless you** in the land that you are entering to possess. 17 But if **your heart turns away** and you **do not hear**, but are led **astray** to bow down to other gods and serve them, 18 I declare to you today that **you shall perish**; you shall not **live** long in the land that you are crossing

the Jordan to enter and possess. 19 I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that **I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.** 20 loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that **means life to you** and length of days, **so that you may live** in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.”

Picture yourself in the crowd listening to Moses. When he says, *“I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.”* I think most of us would say, *“I’ll take life and prosperity over death and adversity.”* But how do you do that? In Moses’ speeches in Deuteronomy, he keeps saying, *“this is what the Lord has done for us, this is what the Lord commands us to do so that we can live.”* Terms of the renewed covenant included not worshiping false gods, turning away from unworthy loyalties, turning the heart to God and not following the desires of your own stubborn heart, and not abandoning the covenant with God. The Israelites are to love God and keep his commandments so they may have life.

**Life** in one form or another is mentioned at least **eight times** in Deuteronomy 30.15-20. It doesn’t refer merely to living longer but is asserting that **true life is found in loving, obeying, and holding fast to the Lord your God.** God implores the people to choose life, to choose to live as God directs.

As Christians we want to do all we can to encourage the flourishing and health of all God’s children so we may have life in all its fullness as God desires. My sermon title today, **“Reverence for Life”** is taken from the work of Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965). Schweitzer is remembered for his work as a doctor and missionary in Africa, for which he was honored in 1952 with a Nobel Peace Prize. He was also a theologian and philosopher. In *Civilization and Ethics*, Schweitzer wrote: ***“Ethics is nothing other than Reverence for Life. Reverence for Life affords me my fundamental principle of morality, namely, that good consists in maintaining, assisting and enhancing life, and to destroy, to harm or to hinder life is evil.”***

You can look at any issue you care about that stirs you emotionally either to compassion, pity, or anger that you think other people should care about and use Schweitzer’s quote as a guide to shape your response, **“good consists in**

***maintaining, assisting and enhancing life, and to destroy, to harm or to hinder life is evil."***

In *Out of My Life and Thought*, Schweitzer declared: *"The most immediate fact of man's consciousness is the assertion **"I am life that wills to live in the midst of life that wills to live"** Affirmation of life is the spiritual act by which man ceases to live thoughtlessly and begins to devote himself to his life with reverence in order to give it true value. To affirm life is to deepen, to make more inward, and to exalt the will to live. At the same time the man who has become a thinking being feels a compulsion to give to every will to live the same reverence for life that he gives to his own. This is the absolute, fundamental principle of ethics."*<sup>1</sup>

**Reverence for life begins with devoting yourself to your life with reverence to give it true value.** If you believe that life is precious and sacred, then you don't want to squander, waste, or misuse your life. The commandments, laws, and ordinances that God gives the people in Deuteronomy are for their own good to help them lead a fulfilling life and to live well in community. God's wise instructions are for your benefit.

In **1 Corinthians 6.19-20**, Paul tells the Corinthians how precious each of their lives is declaring, *"Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? 20 For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body."* You are not your own. Your body is a temple or sanctuary of God's Spirit. Treat yourself with reverence. Jill and I enjoyed watching the Olympics and seeing the amazing athletes who have trained so hard and long for a brief chance, in some cases less than ten seconds or a minute, to achieve their personal best and perhaps an Olympic medal or a world record. The apostle Paul uses the image of a runner in **1 Corinthians 9.24-27** to describe the kind of self-control and discipline with which you should live your life. He writes, *"Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. 25 Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. 26 So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; 27 but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified."* The first step in

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<sup>1</sup> A. Schweitzer, *Out of my Life and Thought* (Johns Hopkins University Press 1998), 156-157.

having reverence for life is treating our own body and life as a temple or sanctuary of the Holy Spirit which has been bought for God by the life and death of Jesus Christ. This shapes what we put in our body, what we do with it, and how we treat it as far as sleep, exercise, self-care, and healthy habits. **Reverence for life begins with devoting yourself to your life with reverence to give it true value.**

**Secondly, reverence for life means we value every human life, every person, from the beginning of life to the end.** This begins before a child is born which is what some people think of the most when they hear or use phrases like choose life, sanctity of life, or reverence for life. The call experience of **the prophet Jeremiah** affirms that before he was born God knew him. (Jeremiah 1:4-5 (NIV), *“The word of the Lord came to me, saying, 5 **“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.”***

In a similar way, **the prophet Isaiah** declared (49.1b, 5), *“**The LORD called me before I was born, while I was in my mother’s womb he named me.** And now the LORD says, **who formed me in the womb to be his servant**, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the sight of the LORD, and my God has become my strength.”*

The Apostle Paul used similar language to describe himself in **Galatians 1.15** saying, *“**God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace.**”*

Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Paul all express a belief that God knew them, called them, set them apart before they were born. That has implications for how we view life. Their statements reflect a belief that God has a destiny or a purpose for each person that can be pursued and fulfilled, or ignored, missed, or thwarted. It’s a sad indictment of our culture that there are so many abortions every year and we should be seeking to help people reduce unwanted pregnancies and abortions. Having reverence for life, however, is about more than the issue of abortion. If we truly have reverence for all human life and the sanctity or sacredness of life, then being “pro-life” means more than being pro-birth. It’s about supporting and encouraging priorities, conditions, and behaviors, that help individuals live, thrive, and survive once they’re born. That has implications for many areas of life including food insecurity, education, gun violence, healthcare, and an environment with clean air and water, just to name a few. I’m an

advocate for having a consistent ethic of reverence for life from beginning to end, rooted in the belief that human life is created in the image and likeness of God.

I saw an article in the August 5 edition of the Cape Cod Times titled, “Bitter Burden.” If you didn’t see it, you might think the article was about something truly awful. It’s about caring for aging parents! In a healthy family, parents care for us for many years when we’re young and utterly dependent on them. In a healthy family, children should be able to return the favor, if necessary, without it being a bitter burden. Pope Francis said, *“All life has inestimable value, even the weakest and most vulnerable, the sick, the old, the unborn and the poor, are masterpieces of God’s creation, made in his own image, destined to live forever, and **deserving of the utmost reverence and respect.**”*

**Reverence for life begins with devoting yourself to your own life with reverence to give it true value. Secondly, reverence for life means we value every human life, every person, from the beginning of life to the end,** no matter where they live, whether they’re rich or poor, or what they look like, or anything else. Jesus says in **Matthew 7:12**, *“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.”* This includes valuing other people’s lives as you want people to value yours.

**Finally, Reverence for life should extend through all the areas of our life to all of life.** James Brabazon, author of *Albert Schweitzer: A Biography*, wrote, *“Reverence for Life says that the only thing we are really sure of is that we live and want to go on living. **This is something that we share with everything else that lives, from elephants to blades of grass—and, of course, every human being. So we are brothers and sisters to all living things, and owe to all of them the same care and respect, that we wish for ourselves.**”*

Reverence for life includes our care for God’s creation and all other living creatures and supporting efforts that lead to health and allow all people and creatures to flourish. Human beings have not done a good job in this regard at all. In some ways, human beings have been more like a destructive force disrespecting and destroying other forms of life rather than revering it. Our reverence for all life should influence and

shape the choices we make in all areas of life including things like how much water we use, what we put in our lawn, what we eat, and much more.

**Having reverence for all of life is a Biblical value rooted in the story of creation at the beginning of Genesis**, even though we don't always see it in some of the violent passages we find in the first five books of the Bible that some of us have been reading this past month. However, passages like **Job 12:7-10**, make it clear. *"But ask **the animals**, and they will teach you; **the birds** of the **air**, and they will tell you; ask **the plants** of the **earth**, and they will teach you; and **the fish** of the **sea** will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the LORD has done this? **In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being.**"*

Poet Mary Oliver wrote, *"I would say that there exist a thousand unbreakable links between each of us and everything else, and that our dignity and our chances are one. The farthest star and the mud at our feet are a family...we are at risk **together**, or we are on our way to a sustainable world **together**. We are each other's destiny."* (Upstream: Selected Essays),

**"Good consists in maintaining, assisting and enhancing life, and to destroy, to harm or to hinder life is evil."** God calls us each one of us to be a **person who has reverence for life** – for our own life, for every other person no matter how young or old, and for every living thing God has made because we are all part of God's interconnected web of life.

### Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. Which phrase using the word "life" in the opening paragraph, or another of your choosing, expresses your feelings right now?
2. What is your response to Albert Schweitzer's statement: *"Ethics is nothing other than Reverence for Life. Reverence for Life affords me my fundamental principle of morality, namely, that good consists in maintaining, assisting and enhancing life, and to destroy, to harm or to hinder life is evil."* Do you agree with him? Why or why not?
3. Albert Schweitzer wrote, *"Affirmation of life is the spiritual act by which man ceases to live thoughtlessly and begins to devote himself to his life with*

*reverence in order to give it true value.*” How do 1 Corinthians 6.19-20 and 9.24-27 speak to this type of devotion? Identify at least one way you can live more thoughtfully and intentionally to devote yourself to your life with greater reverence to give it true value.

4. How does the principle of reverence for life shape how you regard every other human life from beginning to end? What implications does it have for you? What can we do to make reverence for all human lives a greater priority?
5. What step(s) can you take so that the principle of reverence for life has a greater influence in shaping the daily choices you make in every area of your life? For example, think about what you buy or what you consume, or what you eat, or your use of natural resources?
6. How does reverence for life impact how you regard God’s creation and other living creatures?