

Sermon outline and notes © Dr. Stephen Felker
Pastor, Swift Creek Baptist Church (SwiftCreekBaptistChurch.com)
18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834
Sunday, October 20, 2019

Deuteronomy 12:1-32 (read vv.1-8) “True Worship”

Intro. Chapter 12 begins a new section in the book of Deuteronomy. In this section Moses gives a restatement of the law, especially in how it will apply to living in the Promised Land. I think it is significant that he begins by dealing with the subject of worship. That shows the priority that worship should have in our lives.

On an internet Bible Study site, a question was asked, “Can Christians Worship God in Their Own Way?”¹ How would you answer that question? While it is true that there is flexibility in how we express our worship to God based on individual gifts and personalities, one fundamental principle that comes out of our text is that we must worship God according to His instructions, not our own desires or according to the ways of the world. Those who say, “I can worship God in my own way,” reveal a total ignorance of the meaning of worship. The true worshiper acknowledges God as sovereign, and therefore offers worship as God instructs us. Look at how this chapter begins in v.1, “These are the statutes and judgments which you shall be careful to observe in the land which the LORD God of your fathers is giving you to possess, all the days that you live on the earth.” He then proceeds to give instructions relating to worship. Then, after giving these instructions, He also said in v.28, “Observe and obey all these words which I command you, that it may go well with you and your children after you forever, when you do what is good and right in the sight of the LORD your God.” Likewise, he concluded this chapter by saying in v.32, “Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it.” This basic concept is affirmed by Jesus Himself in John 4:23, “But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him.” God is seeking for a people who will worship Him, not just in spirit, but also in truth, or according to the truth He has set forth. One example is found in vv.13-14, “Take heed to yourself that you do not offer your burnt offerings in every place that you see; but in the place which the LORD chooses....” One important aspect of Israelite worship was sacrifice. Yet they were not to offer their sacrifices in just any place they wanted but where God established His tabernacle.

In contrast, Moses says in v.8, “You shall not at all do as we are doing here today - every man doing whatever is right in his own eyes.” Someone says, “I like the way so and so church does worship.” So you think that you should choose a church based on what you like? Worship is not about pleasing you but doing what pleases God! In the end, the divine verdict on our worship is the only verdict that matters. So Moses gives a warning not to make decisions regarding worship practices on the basis of personal desires and preferences. Acceptable forms and styles of worship are not to be determined by worshipers, especially the unregenerate or those who are marginally spiritual. Too often in the modern era churches have determined their worship practices by what they think will appeal to unbelievers they invite to church.

I think you get the picture here. So what we have in chapter 12 are instructions about how the Israelites were to worship God. You may feel that Old Testament law has nothing to do with the Christian. I agree that we are not saved by keeping the law, and the ceremonial laws that have

¹ <https://ask.studybible.info/1758/can-christians-worship-god-in-their-own-way>.

been fulfilled are no longer binding, including some of the laws in chapter 12. Yet even the apostle Paul never denied the value of the law. He wrote in Rom. 7:12, “Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good.” So I believe that we can draw from our text the principles of worship that are still applicable for today. So the first principle is this:

I. DO NOT USE WORLDLY RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

Look at vv.2-4, “You shall utterly destroy all the places where the nations which you shall dispossess served their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. And you shall destroy their altars, break their sacred pillars, and burn their wooden images with fire; you shall cut down the carved images of their gods and destroy their names from that place. You shall not worship the LORD your God with such things.” Here we see that we are not to worship God by imitating the religious practices of the world. They use idols as aids to worship. We are not to do that. The destruction of all that remained of the worship of idols was to prevent temptation to worship such idols, or to worship the true God by means of the idols and practices that were so common in pagan religion.

Likewise, look at what Moses says in vv.30-31, “take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them [the nations], after they are destroyed from before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, ‘How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.’ You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way...” Their worship practices, which included immorality and child sacrifice, did not please God but was an abomination to God! (v.31b). In the cult of Moloch, an idol made of metal with a human body and a bull’s head was heated by a fire lighted inside it. When the image was red hot, little children were deposited in its fiery lap as a sacrifice to their god. That is not much worse than the cult of unlimited sexual freedom that is practiced today. To keep such sexual freedom from hindering their selfish pursuits, they insist upon being able to sacrifice their children through abortion. The abortionist may burn the skin of a child or dismember an unborn child even while it is yet alive.

By the 5th century A.D. pagan religious practices began to be incorporated into Christian worship. It was one thing to convert pagan holidays into Christian holidays, but a far greater concern was the introduction of pagan worship practices into Christian worship. Houses of worship became full of images. Instead of worshipping a pagan goddess, some began to worship and pray to Mary, the mother of Jesus. The gospel of grace also began to be compromised.

So we need to be careful about the danger of syncretism. That is where you blend Christianity with the beliefs and practices of false religion. They can be so seductive because they retain enough of Christianity to make it acceptable. The problem is, when you add false religion what remains is no longer Christianity.

What if I were to take your favorite beverage and add a teaspoon of poison. Would you drink it just because it contains your favorite beverage?

So instead of following the religious practices of the world, we should:

II. FOLLOW BIBLICAL WORSHIP PRACTICES

I would like to give a definition of worship by Commentator Donald F. Ackland, “Worship is the engagement of the entire person in contemplation of God’s glory, praise for his goodness, responsive giving for his bounty, enjoyment of his fellowship, attentiveness to his

voice, submission to his will, and dedication to his purposes.” Much of that definition is a reflection of what we read here in chapter 12. So what worship practices are commended for us in chapter 12?

A. Worship with Other Believers - Though individuals and families no doubt worshipped on the Sabbath, God commanded that the whole community was to come together for worship at various times. And if believers were to come together for worship, the first question to settle is where? Moses says in v.5, “But you shall seek the place where the LORD your God chooses, out of all your tribes, to put His name for His dwelling place; and there you shall go.” This requirement is repeated in vv.13-14, “Take heed to yourself that you do not offer your burnt offerings in every place that you see; but in the place which the LORD chooses, in one of your tribes, there you shall offer your burnt offerings, and there you shall do all that I command you.” Instead of worshiping in any location they wanted, including sites common to pagan religion such as on hills and in groves of trees, they were to gather in one place that God would choose.² The verb “to choose” (*babar*) represents the most explicit term for “election” in Deuteronomy. Notice also that they were to “seek” this place of worship. They were not to be passive in regard to worship but very active and intentional. Worshiping the one God in such a central location would also minimize the temptation to worship idols. Also, Moses hereby offers his people regular access to the Lord.

The first permanent location of the tabernacle was Shiloh (Josh. 18:1), a site chosen only after the land had been brought under control. Shechem (Josh. 24) and Bethel (Amos 4:4) were also used. Then after King David took control of Jerusalem, that city was chosen by God. Speaking of Jerusalem, in Jer. 3:17 he predicts a time when all nations will be gathered to the city “to honor the name of the LORD” (NIV). The New Jerusalem is mentioned in New Testament prophecy.

That requirement has been abolished by Jesus as part of the new covenant. He said in Jn. 4:21 to the Samaritan woman at the well, “Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father.” Then Jesus said in v.24, “God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” Since God is Spirit, he is not confined to a temple or any other central location. Even Solomon understood this when he built the temple (1 Kings 8:27). Since Jesus fulfilled what the sacrifices in the temple stood for, we no longer have to make pilgrimages to a temple in Jerusalem or anywhere else. Today, our worship is not centered in a temple but the One who was the fulfillment of the temple, the Lord Jesus Christ. We are to gather to proclaim His sacrifice for sin, both in preaching, singing and in the Lord’s Supper. We are to gather to praise His name.

Another principle that still applies today is the fact that worship is intended to be, not just a private practice, but also a public practice. We are to meet with other believers to worship the Lord. True worship is communal, not just private. While we recognize that for believers all of life should be worship and that private basking in the presence of God is a great privilege and delight, when God’s people gather for corporate worship, they gather to bring collective praise and petition to God. Public worship at a chosen location should never be abandoned by God’s people.

One expression of choosing your own way of worship rather than God’s way is to substitute watching worship on TV or the Internet for doing so in person with other believers.

² Moses does not say how that choice will be revealed, but this eventually happens to David through Gad the prophet (2 Sam. 24:18-25; 1 Chron. 21:18). - Block.

That is so much easier! You can stay in your pajamas! You can snack while you watch! You don't have to burn gas in your car! Granted, for some, this is necessary due to sickness or disabilities. Yet short of a true disability, we should obey God and not be "forsaking the assembling of ourselves together...", as stated in Heb. 10:25.

Note also in v.12 how inclusive our worship with others should be, "And you shall rejoice before the LORD your God, you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female servants, and the Levite who is within your gates, since he has no portion nor inheritance with you." In Dt. 16:11 God adds, "the stranger and the fatherless and the widow who are among you, at the place where the LORD your God chooses to make His name abide." Everyone is to be invited, though elsewhere in the law we read of the few exceptions, such as a person who was ceremonially unclean. Bring your whole family to worship! Your kids should not be the ones making that decision. Worship should be multigenerational.

Unfortunately, it has long been said that the worship hour on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of the week. In the past this comment lamented the division of God's people on ethnic and racial grounds. Yet in recent times we have added segregation based on age and maturity. When churches split their services on the basis of race or age or musical tastes, the enemy has achieved his goal—a house divided. Yet ideals are hard to achieve, especially if doing so changes existing norms. Let us not seek to achieve an ideal by forced conformity, but rather by patient exhortation and prayer.

Another biblical practice of worship we see in chapter 12 is this:

B. Worship by Giving Offerings to God - No subject of an earthly ruler would have entered the royal presence without a gift. In fact, Dt. 16:16-17 says, "they shall not appear before the LORD empty-handed. Every man shall give as he is able, according to the blessing of the LORD your God which He has given you." So look at what Moses says in v.6, "There you shall take your burnt offerings, your sacrifices,³ your tithes, the heave offerings of your hand, your vowed offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks." This is repeated in the last of v.11, as well as vv.26-27. Here Moses lists seven different offerings that should be included as people came to worship. Except for tithes, these offerings appear together elsewhere only in Leviticus 7. Not all would be presented to the Lord every time they came to worship, but at least a few of them would be included each time. Burnt offerings were completely consumed on the altar (Lev. 1:1-17; 6:8-13). The tithe was 10% of all the crops and animals that God bless them with. The law of the tithe is further expounded in 14:22-29. Heave offerings were that portion of sacrifices set apart for the use of the priests. At times people would vow to give the Lord a certain offering, and they were to be sure to fulfill their vow. Freewill offerings were gifts which went beyond any stated obligation: spontaneous acts of love by which the worshiper said, "Thank you, Lord." Furthermore, God required that the firstborn of herds and flocks be given into him (Ex. 13:2, 12-15; 34:19-20; cf. Dent. 15:19-23).

Here in this text of Scripture we see one of the purposes for the offerings that were to be given. It was to care for and provide for the Levites, who were servants of God. Moses said in v.19, "Take heed to yourself that you do not forsake the Levite as long as you live in your land." Moses commanded in v.12 that they were to be sure to invite the Levite to participate and to share in the bounty of the sacrificial offerings.

³ "sacrifices" was a general expression for animal sacrifices in which the blood and fat were burned on the altar and the meat eaten by the worshiper and the priests in the presence of Yahweh (Lev. 7:11-18) -Block.

I believe the giving of offerings should still be one aspect of our worship. We do not offer animal sacrifices to the Lord, for they were fulfilled by the sacrifice of Jesus. Heb. 9:12 says, “Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption.” Yet two offerings mentioned in v.6 are especially relevant today. Giving God a tithe of your income is still practiced by many believers today, as well as the giving of additional free will offerings. By these offerings we not only pay the expenses of the church, but we also support God’s ministers and missionaries.

I want you to pay special attention to the next requirement of worship that may surprise you:

C. Rejoice in God’s Goodness - Moses says in v.7, “And there you shall eat before the LORD your God, and you shall rejoice in all to which you have put your hand, you and your households, in which the LORD your God has blessed you.” This command is repeated in v.12 and the last of v.18, “you shall rejoice before the LORD your God in all to which you put your hands.” Here God is pictured as the host in worship, and as His people bring their sacrifices to Him, He shares with the people the very food that has been sacrificed to Him. Fellowship meals were a part of Israel’s worship. At all the great feasts, the people ate together “before the Lord” (v.7). Also, a shared meal was standard protocol at times of covenant making or renewal as a number of biblical texts attest (cf. Gen. 31:54; Ex. 24:5-11; Dent. 12:18; 14:23, 26; 15:20; 27:7). The fellowship of a good meal is a joyful time, and God expects us to rejoice before Him in worship, especially as we reflect upon how God has blessed us by His goodness.⁴ Deuteronomy loses no opportunity to stress the element of joy in worship. In fact, Moses seems to have seized on Leviticus 23:40, which says that during one of the feasts, “you shall rejoice before the LORD your God for seven days.”

We see in our text one example of God’s goodness to His people. Whereas before, in Leviticus 17, the people could only eat domestic meat that had been sacrificed at the tabernacle, God knew that in the Promised Land, many would no longer live near enough to the tabernacle to make that practical. He knew the reality expressed in v.20, “When the LORD your God enlarges your border as He has promised you, and you say, ‘Let me eat meat,’ because you long to eat meat, you may eat as much meat as your heart desires.” In order to accomplish that, God said in v.21, “If the place where the LORD your God chooses to put His name is too far from you, then you may slaughter from your herd and from your flock which the LORD has given you, just as I have commanded you, and you may eat within your gates as much as your heart desires.” He only added in vv.23-24 the stipulation that the blood was not to be consumed, but poured out on the ground. That command dates back to the time of Noah (Gen. 9:4) and was even reaffirmed at the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15:20. That is because the life of the flesh is in the blood, and even animal life is sacred. God permitted the killing of animals only for food or self-defense, and only with the understanding that the life’s blood of the animal is poured out so that we may sustain life by the meat provided. Yet the main point I make here is that God knew of the people’s desire to eat meat, a practice that was not only enjoyable, but also necessary in times that food was scarce. Out of His goodness He made provision for the eating of meat wherever they lived.

I am reminded of 1 Tim. 6:17, where we are commanded “to trust ... in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy.” As we gather for worship we should rejoice in the

⁴ Dt. 16:15 says, “because the LORD your God will bless you in all your produce and in all the work of your hands, so that you surely rejoice.” Thus a bountiful harvest was another cause for rejoicing.

goodness of God and give thanks to His name. Though we should approach worship with reverence, that does not mean that we remain somber. Here we see that God intends that we express joyful worship. There should be joy in our singing. There should be joy in our fellowship. We should give thanks joyfully. The apostle Paul embodied similar thoughts in three crisp exhortations found in 1 Thess. 5:16-18, “Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.” Even the giving of offerings should be joyful according to 2 Cor. 9:7, “So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver.” We get our English word “hilarious” from the Greek word translated cheerful.

Finally, this message would not be complete without adding one more point:

D. Follow Other Biblical Practices of Worship - Since we have noted that we should worship according to the directions that God has given, I want to add a few more elements of worship that should be a part of our worship services.

The first would be the proclamation of God’s Word. The book of Deuteronomy itself contains several messages by Moses to the people of Israel. They were to hear God’s Word and give heed to God’s Word. Even so we are to gather to hear God’s Word and obey God’s Word as an act of worship throughout the week.

Though implied in the command to rejoice before the Lord, I will add that giving praise to God in song and in other ways is certainly a vital aspect of true worship. And again, let us do so joyfully, even if it is not a song you prefer to sing. Think about the meaning of the words, not the tune or rhythm.

Finally, I believe that prayer is a vital part of worship. Jesus said in Mark 11:17, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations” (cf. Lk. 19:46). He was speaking of the temple, but I believe it is fair to apply that verse to any house of worship dedicated to God.

We typically have 3 public prayers in our morning worship service. May I suggest two other times for personal prayer during the service? You can pray during the prelude, asking God to prepare your heart for worship. Then you can also pray during the offering, especially if you didn’t bring an offering!

Conclusion: So let us be careful not to worship according to our own desires, or the ways of the world. Instead, let us worship publicly with other believers. Let us give offerings to God as part of our worship. Let us rejoice in God’s goodness, giving thanks to His name. And finally, let us follow the other aspects of worship that I have just shared with you. Worship is really important. Let us see to it that we please God in our worship rather than please ourselves!

Sources: Donard F. Ackland, *Studies in Deuteronomy* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1964); Daniel I. Block, *The NIV Application Commentary: Deuteronomy* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012); Stephen Felker, *Devotional & Explanatory Notes on the Entire Bible* (Col. Hgts, VA: Published by Author), 2019; J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 1 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1981); Eugene H. Merrill, *New American Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982). Nothing available from Maclaren.

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