

Worship in Spirit & Truth

Deuteronomy 12

David Sunday October 18, 2020

My friend, Jeff Brewer, was visiting a dentist some years ago. It's always awkward to try to have a conversation with your dentist

when you're sitting in the chair and your mouth is filled with gauze. I admire Jeff for having the presence of mind to try to witness to his dentist while he was sitting in that chair. Somehow they got on a conversation about church. The dentist informed Jeff that he had no need to go to church. Jeff dribbled, "Why is that?" The dentist said, "Nature is my church.."

Ever since I heard that statement, it's stuck in my mind. Have you ever met someone who thinks, "What's the point of getting out of bed and leaving home to go and worship God in a stuffy room with people, singing songs you don't really enjoy, when you could just as easily sit in your La-Z-Boy and look at the birds and squirrels and worship God however you please?" Maybe you yourself have been tempted at times to kind of take the Burger King approach to worship: "Have it your way." Maybe you've attempted to customize the worship experience that fits your preferences and desires. After all, if you're not into it, what's the point of worshipping?

We're coming to a new section in Deuteronomy where Moses is going to spell out in great detail what the life of faith looks like in all kinds of ordinary circumstances. He's going to do that throughout chapters 12 through 26, but he starts here in chapter 12 with our worship, because that's where the Ten Commandments start. *"I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image"* (Exodus 20:2-4 ESV).

Deuteronomy 12 is all about this. It's a stirring reminder that when it comes to worship, we need to starve our cravings to have our individual desires and preferences met, then instead we need to focus on God's desires. That's because worship isn't about what you and I desire and prefer. Worship is all about desiring God's desires. His desires, not yours or mine, dictate what worship requires.



Thankfully, God doesn't leave us in the dark about what He desires. As we're going to see from this chapter, when we align our desires with what He desires, we will find our deepest delight satisfied by Him and in Him. We're going to explore this chapter in three parts:

1. The place God chooses to be worshiped.
2. The pleasures He gives to His worshipers.
3. The purity God demands from our worship.

The place God chooses to be worshiped.

Notice where the chapter begins in verse one: *“Be careful to follow these statutes and ordinances in the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has given you to possess all the days you live on the earth.”* But then in verse nine he says, *“Indeed, you have not yet come into the resting place and the inheritance the Lord your God is giving you.”*

So these are people who have already received the promise of the land, but they have not yet entered into their inheritance of the land—and it's the same for us. We've already received great and magnificent promises in Christ, but we have not yet entered into the full realization of all we have in Christ. It's the certainty and hope of the promised inheritance we're going to enjoy that fuels our faith-filled efforts right now to live for Him in this world in this “already-but-not-yet” phase of waiting.

In light of the great and magnificent promises of the land in verse one, Moses is going on to say in verse two that there is corruption in the world that they must escape. There are places of worship that need to be destroyed. Beginning in verse two, you get the sense that idolatry has permeated the land the people of Israel are about to enter. It's everywhere you look. It's on the high mountains. It's on the hills. It's under every green tree. You can find the paraphernalia of Canaanite worship all over the place: their altars, sacred pillars, Asherah poles and carved images of their gods.

Here's the key phrase at the end of verse three: *“Wipe out their names from every place.”* That's because there's only room for one Name in the worship of God's people. All the other names are to be deleted and destroyed. Just look at how aggressive God wants His people to be about wiping out the names of all these false gods. Notice the active verbs in verse three: *“Tear down... smash... burn... cut down... wipe out.”* Why? Because, as verse four says, this is not the way the Lord your God wants to be worshiped—not as the Canaanites do.

This raises the question of how militant are we against the idols in our lives? No, we're not supposed to start destroying the buildings where false gods are worshiped in our culture. God doesn't want us to do that. We're to respect people's religious freedom for everyone who

lives in our society. But we are commanded as God's people to keep ourselves from idols. God wants us to be just as militant in eradicating the idols of our hearts as He commanded the Israelites to be in completely destroying all the vestiges of Canaanite idolatry in their land.

So what is your posture toward the idols in your life? What is your posture toward anything more important to you than God? Is there anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God? Is there anything you seek to gain what only God can give, as Tim Keller's definition of idolatry states? What is your posture toward the idols in your life? Are you coddling them or are you determined to completely destroy them? That's how we should search our hearts as we look at verses two through four.

Notice in verse five that God's goal is not merely to rid your life of idols. God's goal is to fill your life with His presence. That's why He wants us to eradicate all the idols, so we can enjoy His presence in the place where He dwells. Moses continues preaching in verse five, "*Instead*" — instead of the Canaanite ways that you're to get rid of— "*turn to the place the Lord your God chooses from all your tribes to put his name for his dwelling and go there.*"

Here's the reason why God doesn't want His people living under the intoxicating influence of Canaanite idols. It's because He wants to place His name at the center of their lives. He wants them to be filled with His presence, dependent on His power, confident in His availability to them at all times. He wants His nearness to be on their minds and in their hearts constantly.

So the point of the place they are to go and worship God is not so much the geographic location; the point is that God is dwelling there. God's dwelling place changes throughout the Old Testament. It starts in Eden, then moves to the portable tabernacle so that wherever the people go, God goes with them. Eventually it is set up in the temple in Jerusalem. But the point of the place of worship is not where it was, but Who dwelt there.

Children, that's one of the questions on your worksheet, if your hands aren't too frozen to write something. The reason the place mattered is because of Who dwelt there. It was because God made His presence known in that place.

Look at verses six through 12. God is making it clear that worship involves offering our very best to the Lord. Whatever offerings our worship requires us to bring, we're to bring all of it to the place where the Lord our God will choose to have His name dwell. We see it again in verses 11, 13 and 14. He keeps telling them, "Only in the place that I choose are you to worship Me."

The point is that God's people must worship the one true God alone—only Him, only His name that's above every other name and only in the place where His presence dwells. Who brought the people into this land? Only the Lord. Who's going to make the people fruitful in this land? Only the Lord. Who's going to deserve the grateful response of worship for all He has done? Only the Lord.

Fast forward to the New Testament. In John 4, Jesus meets a woman from Samaria and she asks Him where we are to worship. Jesus answers, *"The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth"* (John 4:23-24 ESV).

Jesus is saying that with His coming into the world, the Father is going global in seeking worshipers for Himself. Worship is no longer going to be focused in one place, because God's presence dwells where? God's presence dwells in Jesus. Jesus has the fullness of the presence of God, so wherever Jesus goes around the world through His gospel, by His Spirit, He's creating worshipers of God. He's building up the people of God as living stones into the temple of God.

So the church is not so much a place; it's a people in whom God's glory dwells. God is now filling the whole earth with His glory. He's making the whole earth His dwelling place, as the Spirit of God empowers the people of God to proclaim the gospel of Christ among all the nations. You don't have to go to a special place to worship God, but you do have to go to where God's glory dwells. You've got to go to Jesus to worship God aright.

Where does Jesus like to spend His time? Jesus likes to hang out with His bride. Jesus likes to be with His church, His people. The Spirit of Christ dwells among the people Jesus is redeeming. So if you want to worship the one true and living God properly, you can't just do whatever seems right in your own eyes, as Moses admonishes the people in verse eight. You have to gather in spirit and in the truth with people who are being built together as the body of Christ. You can't divorce yourself from the church and become a do-it-yourself worshiper. You've got to come where God's presence is most palpably manifest in the world. You've got to gather with God's global church. This is not supposed to be a grim drudgery; this is meant to be a tremendous joy.

The pleasures God gives to His worshipers.

So let's look next at verse seven. God actually commands His people to rejoice in the experience of worshiping Him. He says, *"You will eat there in the presence of the Lord your*

God and rejoice with your household in everything you do, because the Lord your God has blessed you.” So coming to worship, the people made offerings—not grudgingly, not under compulsion—but cheerfully, because God loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7).

Worship was like coming to a banquet feast, when they would share in the joy of eating meat from the offerings they had sacrificed to the Lord. And worship should be like that for us today. It should be a celebration of the great goodness God has stored up for us who fear Him. It should be a feasting on the abundance of His household and a drinking from the river of His delights.

I pray sometimes that all our children would experience this church family as an atmosphere of grace and gladness, so that when they grow up, leave their homes and move away from this church, the memories they have of gathering with God’s people at New Covenant Bible Church would be infectiously attractive to them—so attractive that they would never want to walk away from God and His people. We should be a more compelling community than anything the world has to offer our children.

Notice, the whole household and the whole community were to share in the joy of feasting in God’s presence. Look at verse 12: *“You will rejoice before the Lord your God—you, your sons and daughters, your male and female slaves, and the Levite who is within your city gates, since he has no portion or inheritance among you.”* He didn’t have a place in the land, but they needed to include him in their festivals.

So the fellowship and worship of God’s people is not for the rich and the elite at the expense of the less well-to-do. Everyone is invited, everyone is welcome, everyone is cherished at the table, everyone partakes of the bounty. No one is to be left out, no one is to be looked down upon—that’s what the feasts of worship in God’s presence in the tabernacle were to look like.

But what about the ordinary times? What were the people of God to do when they were back in their homes, some of them living quite a distance from the tabernacle? If they could only offer sacrifices at the one place where God chose for His name and presence to dwell, does that mean they could never eat meat back in their own homes? That’s the question behind verses 15-28, and the answer might surprise you. Moses says, “By all means! Enjoy meat in your homes.”

In fact, look at verse 15, and see what this tells us about God and how generous He is with His people. He’s generous in the timing. He says, *“Whenever you want, you may slaughter and eat meat within any of your city gates...”* God is generous in the quantity. The

ESV or the NIV says, “*As much as you desire...*” God is generous in the ceremonial restriction; “*...lean or unclean may eat it...*” God is generous in the menu: “You may eat hunted animals, like the gazelle or the deer.” Then verse 21, “*...you may slaughter any of your herd or flock he has given you...*”

The emphasis is on the generosity of God’s blessing on His people’s lives. Notice how often He says, “You may... You may... You may...” Sometimes we think that God’s law is all about, “You shall not... You shall not...” But it’s not all about that. It’s about, “You may...” because He is a God of bounty and wants us to enjoy His blessings, not just when we come to worship in formal ways, but through all the ordinary days of our lives. When we’re in our homes, when we’re out in the woods with a crossbow, God wants us to experience His bounty and goodness.

He wants us to receive His gifts with joyful thanks. Look at the end of verse 18. I love this. “*Rejoice before the Lord your God in everything you do*”—in all the daily elements of your lives. For a believer, all of life is to be a celebration of joyful worship. When you’re eating the fresh produce of the land or of the herd, when you’re drinking the fruit of the vine, when you’re savoring a salted caramel chocolate, when your wife makes you a fresh Danish puff pastry that just melts in your mouth because it’s oozing with butter (Kate did that for me today).

When you’re on vacation in the Grand Tetons. When you’re resting, or when you’re recreating, you are to do what? Rejoice before the Lord your God in everything you do. God is not stingy. God is not a killjoy. God doesn’t want His people to be afraid of enjoying life too much.

But there are two guardrails that Moses puts up to moderate the enjoyment of God’s people so the good things of life don’t become gods to us, so we don’t turn godly pleasure into inordinate lust. The first guard rail has to do with the blood. Look at verse 16: “*But you must not eat the blood; pour it on the ground like water.*”

So children, one of your questions is why did God tell His people they couldn’t eat the blood? The reason for this is found in verse 23: “*But don’t eat the blood, since the blood is the life, and you must not eat the life with the meat.*” What Moses is saying is that God has given human beings dominion over the animal world. We may enjoy its flesh for food. But God wants us to remember that we did not give animals life and we do not own those animals’ lives. Life belongs to God. There’s a sacredness here that we are to respect. We are not to be savage in our treatment of animals, so when we receive meat on our tables, we are to remember it’s a gift from God.

I heard a pastor friend, Eric McKiddie, preach on this text back in January. It was a wonderful sermon that has influenced me at several points in the preparation of this sermon. He reminded us how confounded Jesus' disciples were when Jesus said these words in John 6:53-55. Jesus said:

Truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life in yourselves. The one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day, because my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.

That was shocking. That was scandalous in the ears of the disciples because they'd grown up all their lives being told not to eat the blood, because the life was in the blood. But Jesus is saying to them, "My life is the life you need. If you don't have My life, you will perish forever, because you are dead in your sins. I am the light and the life of man, so you must eat My flesh and drink My blood or else you have no life in yourselves."

How do we do that? We feast on the flesh and drink the blood of Jesus when we exercise faith in the perfect life He lived in our place as sinners. We were sinners and He was the righteous. We eat His flesh and drink His blood when we trust in Jesus' death on the cross for our sins and treasure His death as our only hope of salvation. We eat His flesh and drink His blood when we esteem Jesus; when we trust in Jesus as the Risen One Who gives us eternal life.

We act out this faith when we take this bread and drink this cup in the sacrament of holy communion. It's powerless if you're just going through this as a mere ritual, not looking to Jesus, not trusting in Him, not treasuring His death and resurrection. But if you are trusting in Jesus, this sacrament He has given becomes a precious sign and a seal of the covenant where Jesus nourishes your heart with His sanctifying and sustaining grace.

So that's the first of the restriction on the pleasures God intended for His people. Don't eat the blood because the life is in the blood. The second guardrail is that before they enjoyed the produce of the land—the vine, herd and flock—they were to set aside a tenth, which means a tithe, as an offering to the Lord. You can see that in verses 17 and 26. God was saying, "You must take a tenth off the top of all that I've given you and return it as an offering to Me." Don't spend your tithe on your own family. Don't burn through everything God has given you, then hope that maybe there's a little bit left over at the end of the month that you can give away.

No, set aside what you're going to give first and make it a principle habit of worship. Make it an act of trust in the Lord Who has provided so much bounty for you to enjoy. God is laying down a principle for His people in the old covenant that you can live better off 90% of

what God has given you than if you spend 100% of what God has given you. If you will just trust Him and live off the 90%, you'll live better than if you squander the 100%.

The question we should be asking today is not, "Do we still have to give a tenth of everything we earn to the Lord? Do we have to? Do we have to?" The question should be, in light of the fullness of all God has given us in Christ, "How can I possibly show my gratitude for how generously God has given to me?" The standard of giving for a Christian is not a percentage—it's a Person. "*For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ: Though he was rich, for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich*" (2 Corinthians 9:8).

It's hard for me to see that under the new covenant we should give less than the people of God under the old covenant. I think it's wiser and more in tune with the gospel to see tithing like the training wheels for our giving. I think Randy Alcorn says something like that. I'm not just talking about money. I'm talking about your time, treasure and talents.

Let's face it. If we have enough to live comfortably in the Fox Valley in the 21st century, we most certainly have enough to give generously to the work of the Lord, to the poor and the needy. If you can live a comfortable lifestyle in the Fox Valley, but you don't have enough to give generously and consistently to the work of the Lord, then your lifestyle is sinfully extravagant. God wants you to adjust your lifestyle so that you can respond gratefully to the lavish grace He's shown you in Christ by giving generously. That's God's word to us. There are pleasures He wants us to enjoy, but He must always come first. We must always give to Him first.

The purity God demands from our worship.

Look at verses 29-32. Moses returns to the theme that began this chapter. The point Moses is making here at the end is that even though the worship sites and objects of the Canaanites have been driven out of the land, it doesn't mean that idolatry has been driven out of the hearts of God's people. They need to guard themselves from temptation. They need, as verse 30 says, to "*...be careful not to be ensnared by their ways after they have been destroyed before you.*" Don't be ensnared by them.

The warning of these verses, in the words of Eric McKiddie, is that we need to guard our curiosities. Today we hold in our pockets or purses an object that is loaded with spiritual dangers. A smartphone can become a sinister snare. We can find out a whole lot about the ways of the nations by opening up a browser and typing in just a few words, then boom! You're ensnared. There are curiosities that must not be entertained, but squelched.

For example, it's not wrong to be curious about God's gift of sex. It's truly one of the good and precious pleasures He has given us to enjoy. But guard your curiosity. Be careful where you turn to find out more about God's gift of sex. Are you turning to godly counselors, like a parent, a godly friend or a teacher whose mind and heart are infused with the Word of God to find out what is God's will for sexual relationships? Or are you turning to Google, Netflix or Tinder?

The question we should be asking is not, "How do these nations worship their gods? I'll do the same." Instead, we should be asking, "How can we make disciples of all the nations, so that they become worshipers of the one true and living God?" That's the Great Commission Jesus gave us (Matthew 28:18-20). We are called in 2 Corinthians 10:4-5 to "*demolish arguments and every proud thing that is raised up against the knowledge of God, and...take every thought captive to obey Christ.*" We need to be vigilant in this.

Moses reminds God's people that there are repulsive and detestable acts that the gods of the nations demand of their worshipers—things as abominable as the sacrifice of their own children, which God hates. Verse 31 says, "*They even burn their sons and daughter in the fire to their gods.*" Friends, the gods of this age continue to demand the sacrifice of our children, whether it's through the death industry of abortion, or the draconian ideologies of the LGBTQ movement, which seeks to make it illegal for us to try to stop our children from transitioning genders. Whatever it is, the gods of this age are thirsty for the next generation.

But as you read the old covenant, you see that the God of Israel also requires the firstborn. He requires the firstborn of the herds and the flocks—and of the family—with one crucial difference. The Lord provided a substitute for the children of Israel. They were allowed to sacrifice an animal in the place of their child. And when the child asked his father, "What is the meaning of all this?" the father would say to the child in Exodus 13:15 (ESV), "*I sacrifice to the Lord all the males that first open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem.*"

That was God's plan. God redeems all the firstborn of the children of Israel—until He sends His Own Son into the world. What does He do with His Own Son? Jesus comes into the world, not to be redeemed, but to be the Redeemer, to be the One Who does the redeeming work. He does this so that we who have worshiped idols, we who have run after the ways of the nations and we who have squandered God's gifts in selfish living can instead now, through Jesus, be cleansed by the blood of Christ.

We can be forgiven for the guilt of our iniquity, set free from our bondage to sin and be empowered by His Holy Spirit to now walk in newness of life—a life in which we express our

gratitude for such a great salvation by being careful, as in verse 32, to do everything He commands us, not adding anything to it or taking anything away from it. That's only possible through the cleansing work of Jesus and the empowering of His Spirit in our lives. So thanks be to God for the indescribable gift of His Son!

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