
The Law: Covenant Worship

Deuteronomy 12

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Worship is a big topic in Christian circles and Christian ministry...

Worship is a big deal in the relationship between God and His people...

Worship is much, much more than we tend to realize...

Worship in the Old Covenant was strictly regulated...

The opening verse makes the connection between what has gone before and what we will be taking up today.

¹ “These are the statutes and rules that you shall be careful to do in the land that the Lord, the God of your fathers, has given you to possess, all the days that you live on the earth.

The Mosaic Covenant Law was comprised of different types of commands. But the imperative here is *to be careful to do*. This is the essence of the Law: you must do.

The Mosaic Law is tied to the land. The blessing and curse were flowing out of the land they were to possess. There is an *in the land* focus to the Mosaic Law. This is why the ejection from the land in the Babylonian captivity was such an important event. This comes to us in the New Testament where we live with an anticipation of the return of Christ and the realization of the New Creation.

The land was given by God, but they were to go in to possess it. God had promised but faith was required; that is, they had to believe God in an obeying way. Thank God for grace where God’s promises are delivered by God in His time in His way. By faith we believe in the promises and thus are empowered by the Spirit. But we also by faith live and obey the truths of the Word of God given to us as indicatives and imperatives.

The command for Jewish people to keep the Law was a life-long obligation. That came to an end with the death and resurrection of Christ.

Now Moses moves into the commands and instructions that focus on worship of the Lord in the context of pagan worship and practice.

The Purification of Covenant Worship (v. 1-14)

The Destruction of Pagan Worship (v.2-4)

God gave instructions to destroy all places of pagan worship.

² You shall surely destroy all the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess served their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. ³ You shall tear down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and burn their Asherim with fire. You shall chop down the carved images of their gods and destroy their name out of that place. ⁴ You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way.

Israel was to utterly destroy the places and the idols that the pagan nations worshipped. This was non-negotiable. Yet, through their history there were times of passionate cleansing out of the pagan idols. But, from the times of the Judges until the exile to Babylon, Israel repeatedly worshipped the pagan gods. Often, they not only did not destroy the sacred groves or tear down the false idols, but they built them, manufactured them, preserved them and worshipped them.

The point of desecrating their *places* of worship (v.2) is that that was where their *names* were remembered (v.3). The pagan cultures believed that in the name lay the being and the power of any person or god. This is why the Name of God was to be revered and held in honor. It was also the reason the names of false gods were not to be respected nor honored. Such beliefs and thinking are still evident today particularly in Islam.

Several important observations we can draw from this.

- God requires exclusive worship of His people. He requires the dismantling of the means of worship that unbelievers use. In the freedom that God has given us, we must still be thoughtful and wise about our own worship of God. Yes, we live a life of worship. But we also assemble together for worship. In both our lives and in our gatherings, we must be sure that all the ways in which are before the face of God is pleasing to God.
- We must not incorporate pagan ways of worship into our lives and gatherings. This is much more subtle than what the Israelites faced. But this is what Paul is talking about in several texts. Think with me about Romans 12:1-2:

¹ I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Since we have died and been raised with Christ, we are not to allow the world, the pagan thinking and values from our culture to shape our lives and gatherings. Rather, we know what God's will is, from His Word. Then we live with discernment and wisdom.

In what ways is your own lifestyle shaped by the values and thinking of the world around us?...

The Location of Godly Worship (v.5-14)

God commanded to worship only at the place God chooses.

⁵ But you shall seek the place that the Lord your God will choose out of all your tribes to put his name and make his habitation there. There you shall go, ⁶ and there you shall bring your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and the contribution that you present, your vow offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herd and of your flock. ⁷ And there you shall eat before the Lord your God, and you shall rejoice, you and your households, in all that you undertake, in which the Lord your God has blessed you.

Verse 5 is an anticipation of the establishment of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. IT would be the home to the temple and to the monarchy. At this point, Israel is told to worship there when God identifies that place. It is to become the center of the life of the nation. The pagan false religions had sacred groves scattered across the territories they held. The greater the god, the greater the number of sacred places.

Israel was to be different. God is the Lord of the Universe; He does not have to have conquer land or peoples by establishing sacred spaces. Israel was to conquer the land and then establish a central place to which they were to go and from which God would rule His people.

But what about us? Do we have designated places of worship that are commanded and authorized by God like this? The answer is no. There are no sacred places and no sacred spaces in the New Covenant. Listen to Jesus' interaction with the woman at the well who has presented a "where are we to worship" question: **John 4:19-26**

¹⁹ The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship." ²¹ Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this

mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. ²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ But 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. ²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth. ²⁵ The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things." ²⁶ Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he."

What is required is the sacred space of a regenerated heart. What is required is not outward form but inward reality. We gather in facilities, have our main meeting in an auditorium. This is not sanctuary. There is no altar here. There are no symbols of our faith to be put on walls and hung around our necks. The Biblical symbols of Christianity are the two ordinances, baptism and the Lord's Table. We, believers, are the living temple. When the gathering is over, the church goes home. When the gathering is over, the living temple goes home.

The Focus of Covenant Worship (v. 15-28)

Connected to the sacred place of worship is the central place of food and sacrifice. This is establishing how Israel was to think about the meat they were allowed to eat and to make a difference with what they were required to sacrifice.

Regarding Food and Sacrifice (v.15-19)

¹⁵ "However, you may slaughter and eat meat within any of your towns, as much as you desire, according to the blessing of the Lord your God that he has given you. The unclean and the clean may eat of it, as of the gazelle and as of the deer. ¹⁶ Only you shall not eat the blood; you shall pour it out on the earth like water.

¹⁷ You may not eat within your towns the tithe of your grain or of your wine or of your oil, or the firstborn of your herd or of your flock, or any of your vow offerings that you vow, or your freewill offerings or the contribution that you present, ¹⁸ but you shall eat them before the Lord your God in the place that the Lord your God will choose, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant, and the Levite who is within your towns.

And you shall rejoice before the Lord your God in all that you undertake. ¹⁹ Take care that you do not neglect the Levite as long as you live in your land.

Here is what we usually think of as the Kosher laws. Elsewhere, God has established what meat they can and cannot eat. He has also established what is clean and can be offered as sacrifice and what is not and must not be brought. All the animals they were allowed to eat, they must drain the blood and not eat the meat with blood still in it.

They are commanded not to eat what was owed to the Lord. It does not matter what it was: animal, bird, grain or oil: if it was a part of the first fruits, the tithe, then they were not to consume it. It was reserved for the Lord. There were portions of the sacrifices that could be eaten. But they were only to be eaten in the designated places, at the designated offerings and in the designated way.

Heart attitudes are addressed. Obedience was not to be self-centered. It was to be done with Godward joy. It was to be celebrated mindful of the Levites who lived nearby. The Levites had no inheritance, no land. They were dependent on the generosity of the people to provide for them.

What does the New Testament say about the food we eat? Do we live under food regulations?

In the same way that Gentiles are now an integral part of the kingdom of God, we are no longer bound to the Law. Consider several New Testament texts:

Acts 10:9-16

⁹ The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. ¹⁰ And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance ¹¹ and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. ¹² In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. ¹³ And there came a voice to him: "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." ¹⁴ But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." ¹⁵ And the voice came to him again a second time, "What God has made clean, do not call common." ¹⁶ This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven.

1 Timothy 4:1-6

¹ Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, ² through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, ³ who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. ⁴ For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, ⁵ for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.

⁶ If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed.

Colossians 2:16-17

¹⁶ Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. ¹⁷ These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

Colossians 2:20-23

²⁰ If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— ²¹ "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch" ²² (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? ²³ These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

Romans 14:1-9

¹ As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. ² One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. ³ Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. ⁴ Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

⁵ One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶ The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. ⁷ For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. ⁸ For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. ⁹ For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

Converted Jewish people were allowed to limit what they ate but in the public meetings of the church but were to not judge anyone who ate freely. Whether it regards food or

holidays or festivals from the Old Testament, we are to accept our differences and welcome one another.

I want to point out that the Bible does not talk about the health benefits of following the Mosaic Code *even in the Mosaic Code*. This is a modern invention. Of course, you are free to follow them if you wish. But not as a matter of law nor anything to do with Christianity. Further, you may not judge other Christians who eat differently. God has freed us from the strict regulations of the Mosaic Covenant. Let us live in the freedom we have.

Regarding Meat and Blood (v.20-28)

Moses gives emphasis on not consuming blood.

²⁰ “When the Lord your God enlarges your territory, as he has promised you, and you say, ‘I will eat meat,’ because you crave meat, you may eat meat whenever you desire. ²¹ If the place that the Lord your God will choose to put his name there is too far from you, then you may kill any of your herd or your flock, which the Lord has given you, as I have commanded you, and you may eat within your towns whenever you desire. ²² Just as the gazelle or the deer is eaten, so you may eat of it. The unclean and the clean alike may eat of it. ²³ Only be sure that you do not eat the blood, for the blood is the life, and you shall not eat the life with the flesh. ²⁴ You shall not eat it; you shall pour it out on the earth like water. ²⁵ You shall not eat it, that all may go well with you and with your children after you, when you do what is right in the sight of the Lord. ²⁶ But the holy things that are due from you, and your vow offerings, you shall take, and you shall go to the place that the Lord will choose, ²⁷ and offer your burnt offerings, the flesh and the blood, on the altar of the Lord your God. The blood of your sacrifices shall be poured out on the altar of the Lord your God, but the flesh you may eat.

²⁸ Be careful to obey all these words that I command you, that it may go well with you and with your children after you forever, when you do what is good and right in the sight of the Lord your God.

Here is a repetition of earlier commands. But there is greater emphasis on not eating the blood in the meat. Now the Old Covenant rationale for it is argued.

The blood is the life of the flesh. This is pointing us to the life of Christ represented in the blood.

The blood was to be poured out like water. This is pointing us to Jesus whose blood was poured out on the cross signifying the pouring out of His life to pay the penalty for His people.

The blood is to be poured out on the altar when making a sacrifice. This points us to Jesus whose outpoured life was the full and final sacrifice for our sins.

Be careful to obey. These commands related to food, blood and sacrifice were essential for national, personal and family blessing of God’s people. What God commanded must be carefully obeyed. And what God commanded here covered the sin of not carefully obeying when offered in faith.

Our biggest problem is not our finances, our emotions, our relationships, our mental or emotional struggles. Our biggest problem is our sin and sins. We have a bad heart and a bad record. We stand under the judgment of God and have incurred the wrath of God. But God has made the way to settle the judgment, to pour out His wrath and to pay the debt. All was done through the blood of Christ. He poured out His life for us. He was raised again for us. He ever lives in heaven, for us. This is the gospel. This is the good news. The simple acts of the Old Covenant are types, pictures, symbols of the divine and spiritual reality. This is what you

must believe. And you must be willing to bow to the One who has done all this for His people.

The Corruption of Covenant Worship (v.29-32)

But we come once again around to God's greatest concern. It was a concern of God for Israel. It is still a grave concern for us.

The Clear Warning (v.29-30)

Moses issues a stern command against adopting the practices of other nations.

²⁹ "When the Lord your God cuts off before you the nations whom you go in to dispossess, and you dispossess them and dwell in their land, ³⁰ take care that you be not ensnared to follow them, after they have been destroyed before you, and that you do not inquire about their gods, saying, 'How did these nations serve their gods?—that I also may do the same.'

Israel was to be very careful that they were not ensnared, trapped into following the pagan ways and the false gods of the people there. How could that happen? They would get curious and inquire, investigate, ask questions that would lead them into idolatry.

Paul warns about the very same kinds of dangers for Christians. The devil has traps for believers (2 Timothy 2:24-26). There are sins and evils that are not to be examined or even spoken about (Ephesians 5:11-14). Peter and Paul both exhort leaders and followers to avoid certain kinds of discussions and inquiries which will lead to errors and sins. I personally know people who have read false teachers and have been led into believing their errors. One man was the editor of a Reformed journal, read some authors on new perspective on Paul and now has joined the catholic church and preaches against the reformation.

2 Timothy 2:24-26

²⁴ And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, ²⁵ correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, ²⁶ and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.

Ephesians 5:11-14

¹¹ Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. ¹² For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. ¹³ But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, ¹⁴ for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."

The Dreadful Reason (v.31)

³¹ You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way, for every abominable thing that the Lord hates they have done for their gods, for they even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods.

With children present, I want to be careful. We often think of idolatry as being wrong, but relatively benign. Idolatry is incredibly dangerous and degrading. To worship the creation or the creature leads to depraved minds and depraved behaviors (Romans 1:16-2:5). Many of the people groups in Canaan were involved in Baal worship which involved live infant human sacrifice to the god of fire. Yet, over her history, Israel repeatedly got involved in Baal worship and in the worship of the fertility gods, the Ashtaroth's.

In the western world, we are not usually tempted to physical idols that function as religion. Hopefully, none of you have a squatting Buddha statute or a multi-armed Shiva shield in your home. Statutes of gods and idols from other countries are not benign. As has been said, "Most idols worshipped by Christians are not on the shelf but are in the self." We tend toward heart

idols. A heart idol is anything that we serve or worship above the God of heaven. Heart idols usually function as deeply controlling wants and cravings. Many of them are rooted in pride and self-centeredness.

The most powerful diagnosis of our heart idols is when we want something or someone so much that we will sin to get it or sin when we do not have it. Therefore, good wants often become heart idols because we do not submit to the providence of God and therefore do not want what God wants for us. It has been my observation over myself and many people whom I have shepherded and counseled over the years that good things can become our heart idols. We just want them so much that we are unwilling to accept God's providence.

The Closing Exhortations (v.32)

Two admonitions come at the end of this text.

³² "Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it or take from it.

First, give serious attention to obeying God. They were to obey God through careful attention to the Mosaic Law. We obey God by giving careful attention to the commands in the New Testament. Giving careful attention to obey God is not legalism. It is simply, for us, grace enabled, Spirit empowered holiness.

Second, stay on the line of the Word of God. Do not add to it lest you fall into legalism. Do not take away from it lest you fall into liberalism. Both will lead to not pleasing God. God's people must always take God's Word seriously. May the Lord help all of us to give careful attention to the Scriptures.

Reflect and Respond

What is God like?

- Our God is the only one, true deity...
- Our God is worthy of our worship.

What is God concerned about?

- God is concerned that our lives and hearts are not driven by what is false. He is the God of truth and hates when His people live by lies.
- God is concerned that His people obey Him – that they conform their lives to the truths and commands He has given them.

How do we worship God?

- We worship God in spirit and in truth. The underlying reality of our relationship with God is in our hearts, our inner persons and in what we believe. Yes, it expresses itself in physical ways of life, living, behaving, feelings and even in expressions of praise and adoration in gatherings.
- We too often talk as though what we do in our public gatherings is worship and the rest of our lives is not. This is false. Our whole lives are worship – they are living a Godward, God-aware life. They are lived to be pleasing to Him. That is worship. What we do in our public gatherings is not more than that nor is it less either. It is a great joy to live before the

face of God. It is a great joy to gather with you and hear God's Word to us and sing God's truths to one another and to Him.

How will you reject your heart idols?

- You must recognize your beliefs and wants that are driving your actions and emotions.
- You must identify where your sins are arising from not bowing to God's providences. What are those areas that what you want, even a good thing, you want so much you sin to get it or sin when you don't have it?

Will you worship God alone?