

Deut 12 Proper Worship in the Promised Land

We are now ready to begin the third major section of the book of Deuteronomy. Chapters 12-16 cover the Specific Stipulations of the Covenant. Moses will be explaining the specifics of the law and how to implement it in daily life. Chapter 12 gives us instructions for worship.

I keep emphasizing that we see a distinction between Israel and the church; the church is not the same as Israel. In some respects, God's expectations for Israel are different from God's expectations for us today. Still, we find some timeless principles and parallels here that still pertain to us today.

.1 -- "be careful to observe in the land..." Moses is about to start a long discussion of how to apply the Law when they settle down in the PL. Since they left Egypt, the whole nation has been together in one group. But when they get into the PL, they'll spread out and occupy the whole land. So things are going to change; they have to be ready for that.

The first issue that Moses addresses is worship. Worship is important. Israel must worship the Lord properly in the PL. Success in the conquest depends on proper, pure worship.

You may be aware that in our own day, there is much controversy over Christian worship. For the past 50 years or so, the church as a whole has engaged in "worship wars." There has been a heated debate about how to worship God and what style of worship is suitable.

God cares about how we approach him in worship. Jesus said that we should be worshipping God "in spirit and in truth." There are *improper* ways of worshipping God and *proper* ways of worshipping God. This passage reveals several things about how to worship God properly.

Moses is making two main points in this passage: 1) Don't worship like the pagans; 2) worship according to God's commands.

The main point is that Israel must worship the Lord exclusively and obediently. Israel's worship must be distinct from their pagan neighbors. That is still true today. We must worship God properly and avoid improper worship. Our worship must be exclusive, distinct, proper, and obedient.

What are the two main points that Moses makes about worship?

I. .2-4, 8-9, 30 Don't worship like the pagans.

A. Do not worship God according to pagan practices.

1. .2 Utterly destroy the *places* of pagan worship.

.2b Mountains, hills, green trees—these were the places where the pagans typically worshipped their false gods.

The Canaanites worshipped their Baal gods all over the place. Evidence of idolatry was everywhere.

Illus.: In the “Bible belt” south, you’ll see a church on just about every corner—like bars in WI. In the land of Canaan, you saw a shrine to Baal on just about every hill or next to every grove of trees. Idolatry was very common, pervasive in that culture.

2. .3 Destroy the *paraphilia* of pagan worship.

a) .3 altars, pillars, images—all these were part of their pagan worship system. They often set up these things on hills and near groves of trees.

b) .3 Israel must destroy all of these materials and objects of pagan worship—the paraphernalia of worship. There must be no cooperation with false worship, no synthesis, no ecumenical dialog. Israel must utterly, completely destroy all of this heathen religion.

c) .3end Even the names of the false gods should be eradicated. God’s intent was that the name and memory of the Canaanites and their gods would be obliterated.

Quote: The complete destruction of these cultic objects was intended to remove the temptation to worship their deities and to stop polluting the pure worship of the Lord with pagan rituals and objects (12:4). The Lord would not tolerate a partial commitment. By destroying these cultic objects and centers the Israelites could express their total allegiance to Him.¹

¹ Jack S. Deere, “Deuteronomy,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 283–284.

there must be no residue of paganism remaining after the conquest.²

So God is calling for a total eradication of the Canaanite religious system—places, paraphernalia, and names.

App: We are not obligated to destroy any places of worship. We are not conquering any territory or destroying any property. The weapons of our warfare are not “carnal.” We are engaged in spiritual warfare, not physical.

However, we do want to “destroy” false worship in the sense of exposing it as false and persuading people to reject it. 2 Cor 10:5. We would be very happy if all the false churches and all the false religions shut their doors. We should be working to destroy idolatry and false religion. But that does not mean that we are destroying property.

And we should have no union/cooperation with these false religions. We are not ecumenical.

3. .4 Do not worship God like the pagans. Don’t worship in those places, and don’t use those things. The worship of Yahweh must be totally different from the worship of the Canaanite false gods.

App: We should not adopt a pagan worship system in the church. That is, we should not mimic the secular world in the church.

A major failure of the church in general is the effort to make itself appealing to lost people by mimicking the world. In an attempt to become popular, the church has become much like the world. We have allowed the world to infiltrate the church. We must not import pagan practices into the church.

² Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, vol. 4, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 220.

4. **.30-31** Beware of idolatry; don't follow the ways of the heathen/pagan idolaters. Don't even inquire into the ways that the heathen worship. The idolaters do what God hates, even burning their children in the fire.

Quote: Such unspeakable forms of religious expression were common in the ancient Near Eastern world, especially in Canaan, and tragically enough sometimes were emulated by [Israel].³

We must not emulate the anti-Christian elements of our world. We must not adopt such practices or import them into the church.

Moses begins and ends the chapter with the same message (vss. 2-4, 29-31)—do not worship God like the pagan Canaanites worship their false gods. This is a very important, timeless principle.

App: We should maintain a clear distinction in worship between what is Christian and what is pagan. We don't want to use anything that is clearly associated with paganism in the worship of God.

We must not use pagan materials or ideas or expressions in our worship of the true and living God.

More broadly speaking, like Israel, we must resist the influences of our pagan, heathen culture. A large part of our culture is anti-Christ, and we must separate from it. We must be very careful in our use of cultural elements, such as music, entertainment, TV, radio, Internet, books, magazines and media. Much of this material promotes immorality and insults Christianity. We must be separate.

2 Corinthians 6:17 *Therefore "Come out from among them And be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, ..."*

Cf. Eph 5:11

³ Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, vol. 4, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 228.

Like the Israelites, we must resist the influences of an increasingly pagan society. .31 –“every abomination to the Lord which he hates they have done”; same is often true today—they engage in abominable/detestable acts which the Lord hates. Why would I engage in things the Lord hates? Why would I import any of that into the church? We should hate what God hates. God hates some religious practices.

False religion often leads to horrific behavior. E.g., burning children as a sacrifice to a false god. We see similar kinds of atrocities from false religions today. Islam, for example, imposes all kinds of brutality on Christians.

What would be the moral equivalent of child sacrifice today?

Abortion. Who advocates for abortion? Those who believe false religion like evolution. Humanism is a false religion that leads to great atrocities in our world today.

Do not worship like the pagans.

- B. .8 Do not worship God according to human imagination—every man doing what is right in his own eyes.

Moses recognized that how the people were acting at that point was not proper. They had apparently become rather lax in their worship practices during the wilderness wanderings. They were not very careful in how they were doing things. When they get to the PL, they'll be more standardized in their rituals and practices.

App: We must not worship God according to our own imaginations. We don't worship God according to whatever way we decide, any way that we like. We worship God in the way that he has designated.

The Second London Baptist Confession of 1689: “The acceptable way of worshiping the true God, is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped ... [in] way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures” (22.1).

In some ways, the modern church is violating both of these principles. They have imported the ways of the world into the church, and they worship God according to their own imaginations. They format the church to appeal to the unsaved world, and then they do things that have no biblical basis. We must be careful to avoid both of those errors.

Trans: Moses is very clear here. Don't worship God like the pagans, and don't worship God according to your own imaginations. These are timeless principles that still apply today.

II. .5 Worship God in the proper place; in the place of His choosing.

Unlike the Canaanites, Israel was to worship God at a single, central altar. First, they would destroy the Canaanite worship locations, then they would establish a central place of worship for all of Israel.

A. .5 Worship at the central altar. This will be the place where God dwells with his people.

He repeats this same theme several times:

1. .11 God's name will abide in that place.
2. .14 It's a place of God's choosing.
3. .26end It's a place which the Lord chooses.

Moses does not say where that place will be. But once they get into the PL, God will reveal the place where he wants Israel to set up the tabernacle.

App: For Christians, what is the central place of public worship? It's the local church, the assembly of the saints. It's not in only one location; churches exist throughout the world. The Bible tells us not to forsake the local assembly. The local church is the pillar and ground of the truth, and it's a Christian obligation to be part of a church and gather regularly with the church to worship God.

BTW, the universal church is not a place of worship. Some excuse themselves from the local church by claiming that they are part of the universal church and don't need to assemble with other believers. That is a wrong belief. Membership in the universal church does not exempt you from your obligation to be a member of a local church.

B. .5 Worship where God will "put his name." Israel must destroy the places and the names of the false gods and seek the place where God will cause his name to dwell. God's name on/over a place indicates sovereignty and ownership over land and people. Israel must replace the Canaanites and their false religion; God's name must now be installed over that land.

C. .7, 12 Worship includes rejoicing and eating.

Under the OT sacrificial system, the people brought their sacrifices and presented them to the priest. The priests would sacrifice the animals, burn parts of the animals in sacrifice, and give most of the meat back to the family. So the sacrifice would have been a time of feasting and rejoicing.

Quote: Eating is an act of fellowship and communion and so it's natural to do it in the LORD's presence. It is also a recognition that all the blessings of the land have come from the LORD's hand, not local fertility gods.⁴

Something else is going on in this banquet. It was common in the ancient world for kings to meet periodically with their subjects to renew the covenants between them, and this meeting usually included a meal. The king would share a banquet with his loyal subjects where he would pledge his protection of them, and they would pledge their loyalty to him. So this eating and rejoicing sounds much like that covenant renewal ceremony.

1. .12 Include your household.
2. Include the servants.
3. Include the Levites. Cf. vs. 19

The Levites would be distributed throughout Israel, and they would teach the Law and have various religious responsibilities. So Israel would conduct some religious practices locally, but the main focus would be on the central sanctuary—the tabernacle.

Everyone in Israel was included; everyone should attend the central altar at the set times.

App: The NT church does not have a sacrificial system. Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. That sacrifice is finished; Jesus paid it all. So there is no more sacrifice for sin. We don't kill animals and eat them as part of our worship system.

However, like Israel's worship, our worship should include rejoicing. When we gather in worship, we express our thanks and praise to God for his care for us.

⁴ Matt Fuller, *Teaching Deuteronomy: From Text to Message*, Teach the Bible (Ross-shire, Scotland; London: Christian Focus; PT Resources, 2022), 186.

We do have a meal as part of our worship system—the Lord’s Supper. We eat and rejoice in God’s presences.

D. .15-18 Worship is different from daily routines.

Moses makes a distinction between sacrificing animals in worship and butchering animals for household meals. His point is that you can’t work the worship system at home.

1. .15 You can eat meat at home.

They could butcher an animal at home and eat the meat, as long as it was not sacrificial meat. Sacrificial offerings had to be made at the central altar, but butchering and eating meat for regular meals could be done at home. And it did not matter if you were ceremonially clean or unclean; anyone could eat meat at home.

Why did he say this? Previously, the people were to slaughter their meat animals at the entrance of the tabernacle (Lev 17:1-4). While they were living in the wilderness, everyone lived rather close to the central altar. But when they settled in the PL, most people would live far away from the tabernacle. So they could butcher their meat at home.

There was one important restriction on butchering meat:

2. .16 Don’t eat the blood with the meat. Cf. vss. 21-25

- a) When they butchered an animal for normal household consumption, they were to pour out the blood on the ground.
- b) Remember that the life of the flesh is in the blood. God imposed restrictions on the handling of blood, whether blood from butchering or the blood of a sacrifice. The blood was always considered as sacred.

Leviticus 7:26–27 Moreover you shall not eat any blood in any of your dwellings, whether of bird or beast. 27 Whoever eats any blood, that person shall be cut off from his people.

Quote: By refraining from eating blood the Israelites demonstrated a respect for life and ultimately for the Creator of life.⁵

These rules stipulated that you could eat meat at home, but you could not work the sacrificial system at home. You had to go to the central altar, the tabernacle, to do the sacrificial system.

3. .17 Don't eat those things that rightly belong to God.
 - a) The tithe of grain, wine, and oil
 - b) The firstborn of herd and flock
 - c) Things freely offered or things vowed
 - d) The heave offerings
 - e) .18 You must go to the central altar with these things. Things offered to God had to be presented at the central altar. You could not do your own sacrificial system at home.

App: We find a timeless principle here—worship is distinct from daily routines. I.e., you can't do at home what is properly done at church. Applying the principle to our timeframe, you should be part of a church, and you should gather with the church regularly. And we reserve certain actions/rituals for the church; we don't do the ordinance of the church at home.

Illus.: Taking the Lord's Supper at home; watching church on TV or online. No, it is improper to take the LS at home; it's a church ordinance that should be served when the church is gathered. Same for baptism—you don't just baptize people in your backyard pool.

Another principle here is that we must reserve some of what we have for the Lord (cf. vs. 17). God owns everything, but he requires that we give back to him some of what we have. Worship requires that we sacrifice some of our possessions for the Lord. We don't use what belongs to God for ourselves; we give it to God.

- E. .28 Worship results in blessing.

⁵ Jack S. Deere, "Deuteronomy," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 285.

Obey these commands that it may go well with you. This is what is good and right in God's sight. If you want to remain in the land and enjoy God's blessings, you must worship God rightly.

App: If we want to enjoy God's blessings, we must worship him rightly, properly, in a decent and orderly way. We must do what is good and right in the sight of the Lord our God. That is the key to success.

F. .32 Worship according to God's commands.

Be careful to observe these things; do it the way God commands. God has rules for proper worship; we worship God only in the ways that he has commanded, not just any old way we want to.

.32b Don't add anything to these commands and do not take anything away from them. I.e., don't change these requirements.

The main question in worship is *not*, "Do I like it?" The main question is, "Does God like it?" If God finds it acceptable and if it's faithful to biblical expectations, then it should be acceptable to us. If we are worshiping God "in spirit and in truth," decently and in order, then it does not matter how we feel about it. We are obligated to worship the Lord in spirit and in truth, and do it in a way that is biblical and right.

Moses' main points here are very simple and still very applicable to ourselves: don't worship like the pagans; worship in the way that God commands. We must worship the Lord exclusively and according to his revealed will.

Notice the words in these verses: .13 "take heed to yourself"; .19 "take heed to yourself"; .28 "observe and obey"—or "be careful and listen" (NASB). Many Christians and many churches are careless and negligent when it comes to worship. They import pagan, worldly, improper practices into their churches. They worship God according to their own imaginations—doing whatever is right in their own eye. Their worship is disorderly and indecent. We must be careful not to do that.

We must not worship like the pagans, and we must worship according to God's commands. If we worship God properly, God will bless us.

.32 – Obey what God has commanded and do not change it. These are timeless principles that still pertain to us today.