

Deuteronomy chapter 13 Let Us Go as Serve Other Gods

In Deut 13, Moses continues to exhort the Israelites about what to do once they conquer and settle down in the PL. In chapter 12, he highlighted the importance of proper worship. In chapter 13, Moses highlights the importance of remaining loyal to God even when others are attempting to lead you astray. He brings up three potential scenarios here, each one beginning with the word “if” – “If this happens, here is what to do; here is how to respond to these potential problems.”

Chapter 12 dealt largely with the potential influence of the Canaanites. The false religion of the Canaanites presented an *external* threat. Israel must avoid learning the ways of the people they are about to conquer.

Chapter 13 deals with those who would lead them astray from within their own people. Cf. .1a “arises among you a prophet or dreamer of dreams.” The threat is *internal*, not external—not the Canaanites; it’s the Israelites who are the source of this threat.

And in each of these cases, someone from Israel might come along and say, “Let us go after other gods ...” (cf. vss. 2b, 6b, 13b).

So the dangerous influence in each of these cases originates from within Israel.

We live in an era of influencers. People who have a following, particularly via the Internet and social media, are now called “influencers.” And they have that name because that’s what they do; they influence people who follow them. Some of these influencers earn an enormous income because of their influence. Companies try to enlist these influencers to advertise their products. People follow influencers.

In this passage, Moses is talking about spiritual influencers, and not good ones. He lays before us three cases of influencers within Israel attempting to lead people away from God and toward idolatry.

Moses’ main point here is that our loyalty to God must exceed our loyalty to anyone else. No matter who is trying to lead us astray—whether it’s the Canaanites or the Israelites; teachers, relatives, friends, or government officials—we must maintain our allegiance to God and not follow anyone into apostasy.

Let’s consider the three potential scenarios/cases that Moses offers here.

I. Religious/spiritual leaders must not divert us from loyalty to God. .1-5

A. .1 A prophet is a proclaimer of a message received from God; he is a spokesman for God.

B. .1a Such a prophet might “arise among you.” So he’s an Israelite; he’s one of them; he’s an insider.

C. This prophet is a “dreamer of dreams.” A legitimate prophet might receive revelation from God through a dream.

Numbers 12:6 ... *If there is a prophet among you, I, the LORD, make Myself known to him in a vision; I speak to him in a dream.*

So this is all biblical so far; no problems yet.

D. .1end Prophets may have been capable of providing a “sign or a wonder.” I.e., some sort of miraculous or unusual act or deed that would authenticate his message.

E. .2a And the prediction or the sign happens. It’s a real miracle; it’s undeniable. His prophecy came true.

F. Normally, if a prophet arose and was able to provide miraculous signs, the miracles would validate his message. That was the purpose of miraculous signs—they validated the message of the prophet. You know the man was a prophet because he could do miraculous signs. You would normally listen to a prophet like that.

We should be aware that seemingly miraculous activity does not necessarily validate the message of a prophet or preacher. The presence of signs and wonders does not guarantee that miracle-worker is a true prophet. E.g., the magicians in Egypt could imitate the signs that Moses did.

So *miracles* are not valid criteria for determining truth. We must evaluate the *message* of the prophet. We do not follow someone just because he can do some neat tricks. We must always check the message of the speaker.

App: The fact that a speaker is impressive in various ways does not mean that he is true. We must check his message, his content.

G. .2b Here’s the problem: the prophet said, “Let us go after other gods and serve them.” Although he is capable of miracles or remarkable deeds, his message contradicts what God has said. Thus, he’s a false prophet.

- H. Notice that Moses expects the people to be discerning about this. They should be able to see that, even though the prophet's predictions or signs came true, still, his message is incompatible with the true faith. This prophet is a false prophet because his message contradicts what God has already revealed. This prophet is promoting rebellion against God, so he's a false prophet.

App: That ability to be discerning is so critical today. We have to be able to discern whether an influencer's message is compatible with what God has already revealed. The standard by which to evaluate an influencer is whether his message lines up with the Bible. Many modern influencers promote a message that is simply unbiblical or in error.

- I. What to do in the case of a false prophet

1. .3a Do not listen to his words. His message is wrong.
2. .3b Recognize this as a test to see if you will maintain your loyalty to God. When encountering false ideas, false teaching, what will you do? Will you remain loyal to God under challenging circumstances? Will you believe a false teacher or remain loyal to what God has already taught? This is a test of covenant faithfulness.

What does it mean to be faithful to God? .3end "to love God with all your heart and with all your soul."

3. .4 Continue in loyal service to God. Keep his commandments, obey his voice, serve him, hold fast to him. I.e., maintain your allegiance to God; don't follow the false prophet. Don't give in to an idolatrous influence. Retain your wholehearted commitment to God.
4. .5 Put to death that prophet or dreamer of dreams. This false prophet is guilty of sedition and rebellion against God. He is worthy of death; that is the appropriate penalty for such a person at this time. Putting such a man to death is how to "put away the evil from your midst" (.5end).

The words "put away" (בָּעֵר) literally mean "burn, consume." Such a person should be eradicated and brought to nothing because he advocated rebellion against God.

App: Do we have false prophets and dreamers of dreams today who are trying to lead us astray? Yes, lots of them. The NT warns us repeatedly about false teachers. Some of them are actively trying to de-convert Christians. I.e., they are trying to undermine the Christian faith, cause people to doubt the truth claims of Christianity, and ultimately, get people to reject Christianity. Some of them, e.g., Muslims, try to get Christians to serve other gods. Some of the, e.g., atheists, try to get Christians to deny God altogether.

How do we respond to these threats? Do we kill the false prophets? No, obviously not.

One thing we do in the face of false prophets is that we try to “kill” the false doctrine, false prophecy, and false arguments. We don’t kill people; we “kill” theological error. We demonstrate the truth of Christianity and expose the error of non-Christian claims. That is apologetics—providing a defense of the faith and showing the errors of those who attack the faith.

And we have very good ammunition for this battle. Really, the facts are on our side. We have very good reasons to believe in Jesus and the Christian message. We can substantiate our faith on historical facts.

Another thing we do is vs. 5end—“put away the evil from your midst.” If false teachers show up in the church, we must confront them, discipline them, and potentially excommunicate them, lest they destroy the church. We don’t allow false prophets to proclaim their false message in the church. We don’t kill anyone, but we do take decisive, stern action to put away the evil. We must guard and maintain the purity of the church, and that requires that we put away the evil from among us.

Trans: When a false prophet arises to influence us away from God, we remain loyal to God. We don’t listen to them. We must destroy their arguments and purge them from the church.

II. Personal relationships must not divert us from loyalty to God. .6-11

Promoters of idolatry could be found among the prophets and even within one’s own household and among one’s closest friends.

So this is much more difficult. Ignoring a false prophet is easy. It’s not easy to ignore a family member or personal friend. Moses tells us here that we cannot simply ignore such a bad influence among us.

- A. .6 In this case, a person from your own family or a close personal friend is trying to lead you astray. Someone you know very well, someone you interact with regularly, someone you love and trust urges you to go and serve other gods.

People we love and respect naturally have a large influence on us. Spiritual leaders have a certain degree of influence; but those of our own families, those we love and respect, have a much higher and stronger influence on us than others do.

- B. .6b He is doing this “secretly.” The false prophet speaks *publically*, while the family member or friend does the *privately*. Private influence from a loved one can be very strong, very persuasive.
- C. How do you respond?

Since this was spoken in secret, it would be easy to keep this a secret. It would be easy to say nothing about it. It would be easy to protect the family member or friend who was trying to lead others astray. Just keep your mouth shut; that would be the temptation.

But if one kept it a secret, he would be guilty of failing to report a crime. You cannot keep this a secret.

1. .8 Do not consent or listen.

Proverbs 1:10 ... *if sinners entice you, Do not consent.*

2. .8b Do not spare or conceal him.

The Israelites were obligated to expose those among them who would promote idolatry. They must not keep this secret.

The temptation would be to keep this a secret because you would not want your loved one to get into trouble. You would want to conceal this terrible influence. And it would be easy to conceal this person or cover up for him because this was done in private. But you can't do that; you must report it.

3. .9-10 You shall surely kill him; you shall stone him with stones.

This would be a terrible thing to have to do. No one would want to see a loved one killed. That is a radical step to take—to kill your family member or good friend.

The nature of this error is so serious that the only solution is the death of the influencer.

Quote: One person is stoned to death to save the whole community from being drawn away from the LORD Sin which is not purged will end in devastation for the whole community.¹

Quote: The seriousness of the punishment fits the seriousness of the crime, a boldfaced act of rebellion against [God] (v. 10).²

.9 And note that “your hand shall be first against him to put him to death.” The one who knows about this has to act decisively.

D. .11 The result: all Israel shall hear and fear and not do such wickedness among you. This drastic action will be a deterrent to anyone else trying to drive others away from the Lord.

.11end Again, notice the emphasis on “among you.” This is dealing with sin “in the camp,” among the Israelites. Israel must not tolerate this kind of idolatrous influence. They must destroy idolatry before idolatry destroys the nation.

So idolatry was simply not tolerated. Promotion of idolatry was a capital crime. There should be no room in Israel for false gods or for those who follow them. Even if relatives and friends entice you, you must remain loyal to God, and you must uproot and destroy idolatrous influences within the nation.

App: Relative and friends are among the most influential people in our lives. The people in our own families and our dearest friends make a huge impact on us. So we might be inclined to listen to them or cover up for them, even if they actively promote rebellion against God.

I wonder how many people have left the faith under the influence of a relative, friend, or spouse. I wonder how often family members or friends lead Christians astray.

The point here is that our loyalty to God must supersede that of family and friends. Loyalty to God and to his will must trump any other loyalties. Our commitment and devotion to God must be stronger than any other loyalties.

¹ Matt Fuller, *Teaching Deuteronomy: From Text to Message*, Teach the Bible (Ross-shire, Scotland; London: Christian Focus; PT Resources, 2022), 199.

² Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, vol. 4, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 232.

Commitment to God may cost us some of our close relationships. That is, we cannot remain in a relationship with that person if he is trying to lead us astray. If the influence of that relative or friend is destructive to my spiritual well-being, I may have to break off that relationship.

Matthew 10:37 He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me.

We should be aware that family members and personal friends may be very bad influences on our families. In fact, family and friends sometimes do terrible things. Abuse may come from family and friends. They may introduce very bad ideas into our families. They may do things or introduce things into our families and try to keep it a secret. So it's wise to be on alert. The fact that someone is a relative or a friend does not mean that he is a suitable influence on your family. Relatives and friends are sometimes guilty of horrific crimes, so we must remain vigilant.

And we should let our children know that if someone does something bad to them and tells them to keep it a secret, they are not obligated to keep that secret. They must tell on those who would do such things.

We also see here that strict and severe punishment of crime is a deterrent to further crime. When criminals know that they will be arrested and punished immediately and sternly, it cannot help but reduce crime. One of the main problems with our justice system is that criminals are often not punished or not punished severely. There is no deterrent to crime when criminals have no fear of punishment.

And sometimes swift and stern church discipline is necessary. In certain situations, the church must act severely and decisively to purge the evil from among us.

1 Tim 5:20 Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear.

Trans: Moses has thus far addressed idolatrous influences from prophets, family members and friends. He has one more category to consider.

- III. Public officials (fellow citizens?) must not divert us from loyalty to God. .12-18
- A. Now the scene shifts to one of the cities where Israel has settled down. They are now living securely in the PL.
 - B. .13 The report comes that someone has enticed the inhabitants of a city with the invitation to “go and serve other gods.”

1. .13a These are “corrupt men,” literally “sons of Belial.” I.e., worthless, wicked, destructive men; deceitful men who lead others astray.
2. They live “among you” (vss. 13a, 14end). So this is another threat from within.
3. .13a The verb “enticed” here (נִינֵן) has the sense of compel, force, thrust away, drive out. Same as vs. 10.
I.e., they have pushed this agenda; they have tried to force the people into this. They are actively promoting idolatry.
4. The entire city has become paganized. Apostasy has gripped the whole town under the influence of wicked men.³

C. .14 What to do in this case:

1. Make an inquiry, search out, ask diligently. I.e., do you “due diligence” to verify if this report is true or false. Take care to find out the facts of the case. Inquire, probe, search, examine, investigate thoroughly and diligently.
2. If it is true that “such an abomination was committed among you,” if the facts demonstrate that the accusation is true, then certain actions follow.

.14b The word “abomination” (תּוֹעֵבָה) – a disgusting thing; something utterly wicked, unclean, and detestable. Pushing others to abandon God is abominable.

If that has truly happened, then...

3. .15 Strike the inhabitants of the city with the sword, utterly destroying (הָרַם) it.
 - a) The assumption is that the city itself followed its public officials—these sons of Belial. The people of the city had followed their leaders into idolatry. The whole town is liable for their rebellion against God.

³ Edward J. Woods, *Deuteronomy: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. David G. Firth, vol. 5, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2011), 196.

- b) And as a city in Israel, the citizens knew better; they were accountable; they were under the covenant. They knew what the penalty was for idolatry. So they had no excuse.
- 4. .16 Burn the city to the ground; it shall not be rebuilt.
- 5. .17a That city is now an “accursed thing” (אָרְכָּל), something banned, something devoted to destruction, just like the Canaanite cities.

Quote: Clearly, those who rebel against the Lord by breaking the covenant and going after other gods are no better than the heathen and deserve the same divine punishment.⁴

This doom ... indicates how serious the Lord considered any defection from him.⁵

- 6. .18 Remain loyal to God. Listen to his voice, keep his commandment, do what is right in the eyes of the Lord.

App: Do we have worthless men among our public officials who influence us toward disloyalty to God? Are any of these people “sons of Belial”? Yes, many of them. Public officials ought to be doing the very opposite; they should be encouraging loyalty to God, to honesty, to hard work, to virtue. But instead, we have public officials who defend the things God hates.

Obviously, we don’t kill such people, and we don’t destroy and burn cities to the ground. Some people do that; we don’t. Over the last few years, we’ve seen quite a few violent riots in which many people were killed and large parts of cities were burned down. But Christians were not responsible for that. Political conservatives did not participate in the violent, deadly riots that we’ve seen lately. Worthless people did that.

In our situation, what can we do with public officials who lead the public astray? We can throw the bums out through elections.

⁴ Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, vol. 4, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 233.

⁵ Earl S. Kalland, “Deuteronomy,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 98.

We don't burn down cities, but we may want to move away from such cities. Public officials of a certain persuasion have made some cities nearly unlivable by their corruption and poor government. Many people are moving out of regions where the public officials are corrupt and moving to places that are better governed. E.g., CA --> Texas, FL.

In some cases, we might take more radical steps through the legal system to get rid of corrupt public officials more quickly. E.g., impeachment, recalls, law suits.

How do you respond under the kind of influence that would lead people into idolatry? Will you remain loyal/committed to God, or will you compromise?

Is it possible that some sitting here today will eventually turn away from God and serve false gods? You probably won't become flagrantly idolatrous, but you might not retain your loyalty to God. I can think of several people who used to sit in church like this, but who now either have totally turned away from God or who have left evangelical Christianity. It's very sad, but it happens frequently.

This passage is also a warning about whom we allow into our lives as influencers. We must be very careful about the influences we allow in our lives. Will you retain relationships with worthless people/sons of Belial? Will you continue to follow false prophets and erroneous spiritual leaders? Will you vote for corrupt public officials? I hope not.

The correct response to anti-God influencers is to exclude them from your life. Don't listen to them; don't consent to them. Don't allow access to them; don't allow them to be an influence. And if you want to be more pro-active, fight against them. Argue against them; demonstrate the error of their ways. We can't destroy them physically, but we can destroy their arguments and their bad ideas. We can try to degrade/reduce their influence. We can keep them away from us.

Vs. 18 should be our commitment in the face of evil influences.