

## “Fitting Worship for a Faithful God”

Deuteronomy 12

Series: *Loving God in Every Way*

**Introduction:** Take your Bible and turn with me to Deuteronomy 12. One of the major themes of Scripture is worship. In fact, you could make the case that worship is the central theme from Genesis to Revelation. In the Garden in Genesis, Adam and Eve chose to worship another god and this rebellious idolatry brought the curse upon mankind. This Fall set into motion God’s eternal plan to choose a people to Himself and from that people to bring a Savior who would give His life to ransom them from their sinful condemnation before the thrice Holy God. This salvation would not be just for that one nation, but it would be for all people, available to every nation and tribe and tongue. And this salvation would restore them to God’s original creative purpose – to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. And this is how the plan will be completed – the salvation of mankind will be complete and those whom God has chosen will find themselves in His eternal Kingdom in the New Heavens and the new Earth where God will dwell with man and man with God, and we will forever ascribe to our great God the glory, honor, power, and majesty that alone are His.

Which means then that worship is an all-encompassing concern for the Christian today. If you have been redeemed by the precious blood of God’s Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, then part of this redemption within you is a desire to honor and glorify this great God who has saved you from your sins. But what should this worship look like? What should be some marks of this worship flowing from your heart into every aspect of your life? What is false worship and what is true worship? What pleases the Lord and what detests the Lord in our worship Him? We come to an Old Testament text this morning that helps us answer that question. The focus in Deuteronomy 12 is to instruct God’s people about a theology of worship as they prepare to enter the Promised Land. God wants them to know what pleases Him and what does not. He wants them to know what He expects of his people whom he is giving this gift of a land to. So, let’s read all of chapter 12, and as we do I want you to notice a few things. The chapter begins and ends the same way – with clear instruction about what they are to do with the false worship of the nations they are going into the land to dispossess. And then the middle of the chapter tells them what God expects of them in their worship of him. So, the negative, or what they are to get rid of, is like a parenthesis around the good, the right, the true – what God wants from them. So, with that in mind, let’s read.

The focus of this chapter is not to give God’s people a manual about all the intricacies of their worship in the Promised Land, but rather, the focus is to give them a theology of worship. The contrast with what is false versus what is true is intended to show them what is right and good in the worship of God. And just to be clear, when we are talking about worship we are talking about a heart and life and words and actions which are ascribing worth and value and honor to someone or something. It is what millions of people did yesterday when they ordered their lives

around their favorite college football team – they ascribed honor and respect and worth to those athletes and to their team because they deemed it valuable and right and good and praiseworthy. In a positive way, it is what the Christian seeks to have true of them in every aspect of life as they declare the greatness and goodness of the God who has redeemed them. So, in contrast to these pagan idolaters they are going in to dispossess, their worship should be look like this – Moses says. That’s our task this morning – to contrast the two – false worship versus fitting worship so that we can know what is pleasing to God.

Before we jump into that comparison, just notice how the chapter starts. Remember that we are transitioning in the book of Deuteronomy in chapters 12-26 to talk about the specific commands of the Law which they are to follow in the Land. And the first order of business is to order their worship. You could say that chapter 12 is a further explanation and application of the first 2 commandments of the Ten Commandments – to have no other gods before God and to make no graven image to worship. And notice that this worship and the rest of the commands are predicated on the goodness of God in giving them this land in verse 1. The gift comes before the command. The love of God precedes the expectation of obedience to God. They are to lovingly obey God by singularly worshiping God because God has set His love on them. And this will look first like them getting rid of any hint of the false worship that is currently in their land. The verbs in verses 2-3 are in an intensive Hebrew stem – meaning they are to be filled with holy intensity in getting rid of this false worship. They are to utterly destroy these high places and these altars and pillars and Asherim and carved images. This is a serious call about a deadly serious issue.

And I would argue that it is no different for us today. The circumstances are different and the expressions of false worship are different, but the intensity and deadly seriousness are no different. So, we must learn the difference between false worship and fitting worship and we must put to death any expression of false worship that we see in our hearts and in our lives. The first contrast we see between false worship and fitting worship is customized versus corporate.

### 1. Customized (2) vs. Corporate (3-7, 29-31)

- a. False worship is customized to the individual worshiper. Which is contrasted in our text with the corporate aspect of true worship. In verse 2 we read that this false worship of the nations in the land took place on high mountains and hills and under every green tree as they worshiped their multiplicity of gods. In other words, they worshiped the god they wanted to worship and they worshiped where they wanted to worship and they worshiped how they wanted to worship. That is the nature of false gods and false worship. It can be fit to the individual because it starts with the individual and not with the god being worshiped. The god being worshiped is simply a means to an end in false worship. That means that anything goes. Whatever the individual can dream up that might awaken their chosen god to bless them in their chosen way, then this will be good and right in their eyes. This worship is syncretistic and tolerant and pluralistic – any god and any worship is acceptable. It is a big tent which covers your god and your chosen method of worshiping your god. So, if you wanted a high place to be a place for worship because you thought that got you closer to the god, then who

was to argue with you. If the green tree was an expression of the creative power of your god and you wanted to worship him there, then go ahead. False worship always starts with the individual and works toward the deity being worshiped as a means to gain something wanted by the individual.

- b. But true worship of the one true God starts with Him and is all about him. That's why when they get into the land they are to tear down all these places of worship of all of these various gods. They are then to gather together in the one place of worship in the Land that the Lord himself will choose. And His name will be on that place and his people will gather at that place and they will worship Him with the offerings that he has specified.
  - c. So, true worship is exclusive in that only the one true God is being worshiped. And it is unified in that all of God's people will gather in God's specified place and it will be corporate in that they will all participate when they gather in that one place. Notice how anti-individual this is. Not that the individual doesn't matter, but that the individual isn't the deciding and determining factor like he is in false worship. God is the one who matters in true worship. It starts with him it ends with him and it is directed by him in all its means and ways.
  - d. This was really important for them as they were about to enter the land. They had been unified as this corporate mass of people moving through the wilderness for the last 40 years. But now they were about to enter into the land where they would spread out and could easily not be together for the rest of their lifetimes. If left to their own ways they would worship God in the ways that were most convenient to them as individuals. But that is not true worship. True worship is not about individual convenience, but about reverent honor and praise with the corporate people of God.
- 2. Immoral (2, 31) vs. Holy (26-27)**
- a. The next comparison between false and true worship is that false worship is immoral and true worship is holy. You probably hardly need me to explain to you the immorality that was involved in this false worship. Their worship was driven by their desire to appease the gods so that the gods would bless them with fertility in children and bounty in their crops. So, their worship of these gods involved all kinds of sexually immoral acts so as to gain the attention and the approval of these gods. Which is what false worship always entails – some form of twisting of God's clear ethics and morals of sexuality. This immorality went well beyond sexual practices though. As we read in verse 31 they also sacrificed their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods. Again, they imagined that if they offered the fruit of their womb as a sacrifice to their god then the god would be pleased and would bless them for their great sacrifice with greater blessing and bounty. It was a completely immoral and unethical system of worship.
  - b. But true worship is holy. True worship is directed by God in all of its facets and takes God at his word and worships him as he tells us to. So in verses 26-27 they are told to bring the holy things to the holy place to worship their holy Lord. Their worship of God is to be fitting to the character of God. Because He is holy

and totally set apart our worship is to reflect that reality by also being holy – absent of any sinful immorality or ungodliness.

### 3. Life-wrecking (2, 31) vs. Life-giving (7, 18-19, 20-22, 28, 32)

- a. The third comparison is that false worship is life-wrecking while true worship is life-giving. This false worship being practiced in the land was destroying the lives and families and communities of the Canaanites. This sexual immorality was not without consequence. It wasn't like what happened at the high place stayed at the high place. Rather, it ripped apart marital relationships and destroyed family unity and spread relational dysfunction all around. Not to mention the sacrifice of children, which is the ultimate act of life-wrecking one could imagine.
- b. One commentator described this life-wrecking false worship this way – “Canaanite worship was socially destructive. Its religious acts were pornographic and sick, seriously damaging to children, creating early impressions of deities with no interest in moral behavior. It tried to dignify, by the use of religious labels, depraved acts of bestiality and corruption. It had a low estimate of human life. It suggested that anything was permissible, promiscuity, murder or anything else, in order to guarantee a good crop at harvest. It ignored the highest values both in the family and in the wider community – love, loyalty, purity, peace and security – and encouraged the view that all these things were inferior to material prosperity, physical satisfaction and human pleasure. A society where those things matter most is self-destructive.”<sup>1</sup>
- c. Doesn't that sound like the false worship which dominates our culture today? Where we discard the highest ethical values for prosperity and pleasure at all cost? If you chase that worship upstream you find the bubbling spring of a false god.
- d. But the true worship of the true God is life-giving, not life-wrecking. If the nation of Israel will walk by obedient faith when they enter the Promised Land they will be blessed with enriched life. As they enjoy this rich blessing of the Lord then they are to come to His place and worship Him according to his command. And notice that even the sacrifice of worship is life-giving to them. So, in verses 6-7 Moses lists 7 different sacrifices, which is not even close to an exhaustive list. So, we know he is not giving them here a manual for their worship, but rather a theology of their worship. These sacrifices in verse 7 are brought to God's place and they sacrifice them and then they eat there before the Lord – literally in front of his face. The burnt offerings would be completely burned on the altar, but the rest of them, the blood would be sprinkled on the altar and the fat would be burned and then they would eat the meat with their family in the presence of God.
- e. That is what is described in verses 18-19. They are to eat these meals of worship to the Lord with their son and their daughter and their male servant and female servant and the Levite who is dependent upon the generosity of God's people to meet his needs as he gives himself to the service of the Lord. Instead of sacrificing

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond Brown, *The Message of Deuteronomy*, The Bible Speaks Today Series; pg. 146.

their children, they are to worship together with them and this worship is life-giving as they eat of the bounty of God's supply. True worship is life-enriching and life-giving. As Jesus himself said, he has come to give us life and to give that to us abundantly. When the North Star of our life is the one true God and all that we have and are and do are in line with loving Him in every way, then you can be assured that your life will be fuller of all that is good and right.

#### 4. Joyless (2, 31) vs. Joy-filled (7, 18-19)

- a. The fourth comparison is that false worship is joyless, but fitting worship is joy-filled. False worship starts with man and works its way up to the deity being worshiped, and this is all for the purpose of obligation so as to secure some supposed blessing the deity offers. This means that the whole of this false worship is a contrived scheme trying to get a response. And therefore, this is a joyless experience – duty without delight – obligation empty of relationship.
- b. But the true worship they must pursue when they are in the land is to be a joy-filled experience. So, both in verse 7 and then again in verse 18 the capstone of this worship is rejoicing in the Lord who has blessed them. There's that little phrase translated in the ESV as "in all that you undertake." A different way to say it would be to say "that to which you extend your hand." The idea is the product of the labor of your hand. And we know that this labor of their hand in the Promised Land will be greatly blessed by God. And they are to bring the fruits of that labor to the one place chosen by God to offer before Him worship and praise for all that he has given them in great abundance.
- c. It creates an ironic contrast with the false gods and their false worship. Instead of bringing the fruit of their hands in worship to the false gods, they were actually coming before the gods who were themselves the work of their hands. That's how Moses described them in 4:28. In a passage prophesying their future exile he says, "And there you will serve gods of wood and stone, the work of human hands, that neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell." So, true worship is responsive in nature in that it is rejoicing in the goodness of God who has faithfully blessed according to His will. That makes true worship full of joy because it is an expression of response rather than a joylessly contrived religious ritual to get a response. The prescribed rhythm of going to God's place to worship Him is to constantly remind them who it was that blessed them with such great abundance.
- d. So, too for the believer today. The regular rhythm of meeting with God's people to sing to God and to receive God's Word and to pray and to celebrate the Lord's Table is to constantly remind us that this is all God's doing. Our gathering with one another is not a celebration of our own righteousness, nor is it a religious ritual to try to get God's attention and bend his favor toward us. No, it is a gathering of joy in a great and loving God who has given us every good thing, not the least of which is the forgiveness of our sins through His very own Son. True worship is joy-filled and not joy-less. If your worship of our Lord this morning has been joy-less, then you are missing one of the key elements of true worship.

#### 5. Compartmentalized (2, 31) vs. Complete (15-28)

- a. The fifth comparison is that false worship is compartmentalized while fitting worship is complete. These false worshipers in the land did not think about Molech or Baal when they didn't need to. They thought about their gods and the religious rituals when they needed to, but it was completely compartmentalized in their lives. So much so that they could commit heinous acts of immorality or even sacrifice their children, but not see how that ruined other aspects of their life. And this is how false worship always is. It deceives us into thinking that we can take it or leave it as it is convenient or necessary for us. But true and fitting worship of this faithful God is not something we can compartmentalize to one or two sections of life.
- b. We see this in this text in how Moses describes what they should do with the meat they eat, not just for the sacrifices but in all of life. So, in verses 15-28 he describes to them that they can eat meat whenever they want to, not just when they bring an animal as a sacrifice to the Lord at his chosen place. When they craved meat in the wilderness wanderings it was sin because they wanted something God had not supplied. But now, in the Promised Land, the supply would be so abundant that they could eat meat whenever they desired. Which by the way, would still probably be only once every couple of weeks – unlike us who eat meat every day.
- c. But notice that when they eat meat in the normal routine of life and when they take an animal and offer it as a sacrifice to the Lord, they are to treat the blood of the animal the same way. They are to pour it out on the ground, or if it is a sacrifice they are to offer that blood on the altar of God. Moses says in verse 23 that this is because the life of the animal is in the blood, or this life is sustained by the blood. Therefore, they were not to eat the life of that animal with the meat of the animal. And this was not just a command for the sacred moment of sacrifice before the Lord in His place. Rather, this was an all-encompassing deal. Every time before eating meat they must acknowledge the creator of that animal and the life sustained by that Creator to give them the meat they were about to eat. In other words, the worship of God is all-encompassing over every area. This is just one area for them, what they do with their eating of meat, but as we go on through chapter 26 you will see that God cares about every area of life. And for his people to worship him they must worship him in every area of life, even the meat they eat outside of worship. So, as 1 Corinthians 10:31 says, “Whether, therefore, you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”
- d. For the follower of Jesus Christ today, this truth is even clearer. We no longer have to bring animal sacrifices to the Lord's place and put the blood of the animal on the altar of God for the forgiveness of our sins. Rather, Jesus Christ came so that he could be the Lamb of God slain for us. His blood was shed as he laid down his life to make atonement for our sins. But not only was he the lamb slain he was also the High Priest who took that blood into the Most Holy Place and offered it on our behalf once for all. Hebrews 10:12 says, “But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.” And then Hebrews 10:18 says, “Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any

offering for sin.” And then in 13:12 of Hebrews the author says, “So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood.” So, it is the blood of Christ offered once for all – his life given so that we may have eternal life – which speaks constantly before God of our forgiveness. And what then should we do in light of this glorious truth? Well, if you are in Christ by grace through faith, then the author of Hebrews says in 13:15 that we should, “Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.” That sounds like an all-encompassing kind of whole life worship of the God who has redeemed us from our sins through the blood of Christ. True worship is not compartmentalized to a gathering of God’s people which ends as soon as you exit the door of this building. True worship of the Lord is seen in every aspect of your life – it is an all-encompassing and comprehensive concern to faithfully obey God and honor God and show the glory of God in all of life.

**6. Deceitful (30) vs. True (4, 31-32)**

- a. The sixth comparison is that false worship is deceitful while fitting worship is true. In verse 30 Moses tells them that they are not ever to look into or investigate the practices of these wicked idolaters they are going in to dispossess. Specifically he means that they are not to open their mind at all to the possibility that those practices might help them in their worship of God in some way. It sounds good doesn’t it? And in fact, that is exactly what some professing Christians are saying today. That we should redeem some of the practices of world religions in our worship of the Lord because it enhances the experience. So, we should use the principles of transcendental meditation to clear our minds and open them up to God in new ways. Or we should practice yoga in a Christian way so that we can experience God in a fresh and whole body kind of way. Or we should use the arts in a redeemed way to help us worship God. Beloved, you can’t just take a practice used in the worship of a false god and baptize it by bringing it into the church and now call it Christian. God’s concern is not just that he is the One being worshiped, but also that He is being worshiped in the way he prescribes. It does not just matter who you worship but it also matters how you worship. False worship deceitfully lures us into its lair with the promise of a new experience of God and then it slams the door shut and devours us with flesh-driven practices which are despicable to God.
- b. But God is to be worshiped in truth. And by that the text means that everything he has ever said is true and everything he has asked of his people is driven by that truth. His worship reflects his word and his character, and these two are always true and never deceitful. And to worship God in truth is to worship God according to His prescribed means of worship. So, for the New Testament church that is the regular gathering of the body for the purpose of being devoted to His Word, to prayer, to praise, to the remembrance of the Lord’s Table, to the observance of baptism, to the fellowship of the saints around the truth of God,

and to the building up of one another in this most holy faith. Fitting worship of God is always immersed in the truth of God because God is true.

#### 7. Abominable (31) vs. Acceptable (27-28)

- a. Lastly, the final comparison is that false worship is abominable and fitting worship is acceptable. Verse 31 is a strong command to them to not worship God in this way. Why? Ultimately because God hates it entirely. These wicked and immoral and deceitful and destructive worship practices are the very reason God is using the nation of Israel to remove these peoples from the land. They are under God's condemnation and they are about to be removed. Eventually, it will be these very practices in about 700 years which will bring about the removal of the 10 northern tribes into exile. 2 Kings 17 will make clear that because they offered their sons and daughters in sacrifice they will be judged through exile into a foreign land. In other words, this whole issue is of great importance to the Lord our God. He cares about how we approach him. He has a strong opinion about what is done in his name and for his glory. You cannot and you must not glibly and thoughtlessly throw around the idea of worship and call anything that makes you feel closer to God worship that is acceptable to Him. Not all worship of God is acceptable to God.
- b. But worship that is all of these things we have listed today is acceptable to God. He delights in it and as verse 28 says, he continues to bless those who are so concerned to do what is right and good in his sight. May that ever be true of us individually and corporately!

**Conclusion:** So, how about your worship today? Is it customized to you as an individual or is it corporate in nature, unifying you with God's people? Is it immoral or holy? Is it life-wrecking or life-giving? Is it joyless or joy-filled? Is it compartmentalized to just this moment with these people, or is it complete and thorough touching every area of life? Is it deceitful or true? Is it abominable to God or acceptable before Him? May all we do and say this week glorify God as we love Him in every way. Let's pray.