

Ruled by a Gracious God: Worship Isn't About the Music

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It sounds plausible, doesn't it? All the religions in the world are ultimately different ways of worshiping the same divine essence. The object of our worship is the same. We just go about it in different ways. Some worship like this. Some worship like that. The important thing is to discover what expressions of spirituality work for you.

After all, no single religion has the corner on the truth, which means we all stand to learn something from one another. And if we could focus on learning from one another instead of disagreeing with one another, we could peacefully coexist. Religious pluralism is the air we breathe. But there are major problems with that way of thinking, friend. I'll mention two.

The first is the problem of contradiction. The way we worship God, the way we seek to please him, invariably reflects who we believe he is, what we believe he's like. For example, if I choose to engage with God by spending time in nature, I'm reflecting my belief that God is one with the natural world. He doesn't exist outside the cosmos. He's part of the cosmos. The way I worship reveals who I believe God fundamentally is. He's not a person. He's a spiritual essence. He's Mother Nature.

Now, what if I choose to engage with God by physically killing his enemies as an expression of his righteous judgment? I'm still saying something about who God is, namely, God is not one with the natural world. He's a person who stands above the cosmos, to whom all are accountable, and who inflicts his judgments through the human power of the sword.

What if I worship God, give him his due so to speak, by being a good neighbor? Don't worry about going to church. Loving people is what counts. And God knows none of us are perfect. So just do your best and everything will work out. What am I doing? I'm reflecting my belief that God doesn't really judge anyone. Maybe Hitler and other cultural "Bad guys." But toward most people? He's a sympathetic grandfather who responds with a wink, a smile, and "Boys will be boys."

What's the problem? God cannot be what all those various ways of worshiping him declare him to be. They completely contradict one another! You can say, "All religions worship the same God, just in different ways", but the different ways we worship him

reflect utterly incompatible definitions of who he is. They cannot all be true. Religious pluralism sounds nice, but it's riddled with contradictions.

Here's a second problem. This is what ultimately undermines the entire pluralism enterprise. **It's the problem of revelation.** The God with whom we have to do has not left it up to us to decide who he is, what he's like, and how to please him as a result. He has revealed himself to us through his Word. Throughout his word, Deuteronomy 12 included, God himself makes something crystal clear. **He may only be worshiped in the way he requires and makes possible.**

Deuteronomy 12:4, "You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way." Verse 8, "You shall not do according to all that we are doing here today, everyone doing whatever is right in his own eyes..." Verse 14, "But at the place that the LORD your God will choose in one of your tribes, there you shall offer your burnt offerings, and there you shall do all that I am commanding you."

That phrase, "The place that the LORD (or the LORD your God) will choose," shows up six times in this section – verses 5, 11, 14, 18, 21, and 26. The focus, in many respects, is less on the place and more on God's sovereign right to choose! And it's the first issue Moses addresses as he begins his third sermon to Israel on the plains of the Jordan. **God may only be worshiped in the way he requires and makes possible.**

Remember Israel is about to enter the promised land of Canaan. The place is saturated with pagan idols. The number of ways they worshiped them were as numerous as the number of green trees. But they all have something in common. They're all the invention of man. They're human concepts fashioned in the mines of human wisdom, which is why the gods of Canaan looked and acted a lot like the Canaanites.

Not so with the God of Israel. Israel did not invent Yahweh, carve Yahweh, or choose a preferred way of worshiping him. Yahweh made himself known to Israel through words. Unlike the idols of Canaan, he spoke. And he still speaks because he's the living God! So like faithful pastors today, Moses doesn't begin with his ideas about God. He begins with what God has told us about himself. Deuteronomy 12:1, "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..."

In other words, Israel, this is what an obedient response to God's gracious work of redemption looks like. It starts with worshiping God in the way he requires and makes possible. So what does that kind of worship look like? We discover three critical answers

in verses 2-28. The structure of Moses' sermon resembles a circling plane. He makes the same points five times, adding more detail with every pass. We're going to spend most of our time in verses 2-14, making connections to the latter half as we go.

1) TRUE WORSHIP IS EXCLUSIVE

Look at verse 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." The Canaanites worshiped nothing more than what their own hands had made, which is why it was all a fruitless striving after the wind. Their gods were not the Creator with whom we have to do. They were created things – pillars, Asherim, carved images – human attempts to grasp and control the spiritual realm in ways that made sense to them.

So what must Israel do? Look at verse 3. She must tear them down. Dash them in pieces. Burn them. Chop them down. "Destroy their name out of that place." The violent language in verse 3 points to two enduring necessities for the people of God.

First, putting sin to death requires strenuous action. "Pastor, I prayed for God to deliver me from pornography, or deliver me from pride, and nothing's changed. Jesus didn't work." Friend, did you expect a quick and painless rescue? Hebrews 12:4, "In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood." Putting sin to death takes work. It's hard. It's messy. It's bloody. It's a fight for your life.

Second, putting sin to death requires removing occasions of sin. Doing verse 3 entailed a ton of work and they didn't have backhoes. "So how about this, Moses? We won't remove the high places. We'll just ignore them. We'll just keep reminding ourselves to not go there. I'm sure we can manage the temptation just fine." Friend, if you hold onto the option of sinning, you will invariably give into it. That opportunity you keep available – that idol, that drug, that relationship no one else knows about – will slowly and surely lead your heart away from the living God.

Notice Moses' primary concern in Deuteronomy 12 isn't a wholesale rejection of Yahweh. It's the more sinister threat of syncretism. We're not worshiping false gods, Moses. We're still worshiping Yahweh. We're just employing a new means, doing it in a more culturally acceptable way, a way that opens up a few more lifestyle options, a few more hills, a few more mountains, and all sorts of very convenient green trees. Isn't loving Jesus enough, pastor? Who says I have to do it in a particular way? After all, what works for you might not work for me.

Look at verse 4. “You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way.” What kind of way? A way that’s consistent with human wisdom, human understanding, instead of the clear instruction of God’s Word. And that can happen very subtly: “Pastor, I know worshiping God means loving my family. So don’t be surprised when family activities keep me from consistently gathering with the church on Sunday morning.”

Is that a problem? Absolutely. Why? Because you’re trying to “Worship” God in a way that’s inconsistent with what he requires. Hebrews 10, “Do not neglect to meet together as is the habit of some.” You’re not worshiping God or loving your family if you fail to lead your family in gathering with the assembly of the local church. God tells us how to worship him and it means gathering with the assembly of the local church!

I’ll give you another example. “Pastor, I found a counselor who says they’re a Christian. They say they’re committed to worshiping God and want to help me worship God. That means whatever they encourage me to do must be good. They said I should leave my spouse because they’re not meeting my emotional needs. So it must be ok.” Not so fast. You must use Scripture to test not just **WHO** they are encouraging you to worship but **HOW** they are encouraging you to worship.

If the how, (what they are encouraging you to think, feel, or do) is not consistent with who he is, what he’s done for us, and what he requires as a result in his Word, then you are not worshiping God no matter how much you plead otherwise. You are worshiping a god of your own making who is content with whatever actions will help you feel better or make your problems go away. That is most certainly not the God with whom we have to do! True worship is exclusive. It means having no other gods before him, including versions of the Lord that are nothing more than gods of our own making.

2) TRUE WORSHIP IS CHRIST-CENTERED

Look at verse 5. If verses 3-4 are the put off, what’s the put on? “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 and there you shall bring your burnt offerings and your sacrifices...”

Where must we go to encounter God? Where is God found? Do we reach him by doing good works or living a moral lifestyle? Do we discover him through emotional experiences when the music is just right, when the worship leader on Sunday “Ushers us into the presence”? Is it when we’re sitting on the beach and “Feel” his power in the wind and waves. Do we find him in Christian community and conferences? Do we

encounter God through amassing a wealth of sound doctrine? Maybe you like to engage with God through acts of service. Plenty of Christians have told me this ministry or this leadership role is how they worship God. You better not ask me to step down, pastor. Don't you know that's how I worship God?

Brothers and sisters, there is one place and only one place where God has chosen to put his name, to reveal the splendor of his character, and make his presence known. If you want to engage with God, if you want to encounter God, if you want to worship God, this is where you must go. This is where you must look. **You must look to Jesus.**

John 1:18, "No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known." Hebrews 1:2–3, "In these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature..." John 14:6–7, "Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

What's the place Israel must worship according to verse 11? It's the place God would choose "To make his name dwell there," to manifest the glory of who he is. For Israel, that place eventually became the temple in Jerusalem. Today, the place is no longer a building. It's the person of Jesus Christ. Why? Because the Son of God incarnate is the one in whom God has most fully revealed himself.

If you want to know God, my friend, you must know Jesus. If you want to hear God, you must listen to Jesus. If you want to encounter God, you must come to Jesus. And if you want to please God, you must wholeheartedly trust and obey Jesus. We do not choose a preferred way of engaging with God and invite him. He makes a way and invites us to come.

What has Jesus done to bring us to God? He died in our place, for our sins, so God could justly forgive us. And he lived in our place, he perfectly obeyed God's law, so God could declare us righteousness. Approaching God requires both the absence of sin that separates, our filthy garments taken off, and the presence of the righteousness that welcomes us with clean garments put on. Only Jesus offers us both of those things. Only Jesus can restore your relationship with God. Only Jesus can bid you draw near to God as an adopted son or daughter.

There is no other way for us to truly worship God except through faith in Jesus! True worship is not centered on our good works, our church attendance, our financial generosity, our emotional experiences, the splendors of nature, knowing all the “Right” doctrines, or doing a certain kind of Christian ministry. True worship is centered on Jesus. That is the worship God requires. If you’re not worshiping Jesus, you’re not worshiping God. He’s the One in whom God has made himself known. There is no other mediator between God and man.

Here’s the really good news. God not only chose and provided a place for Israel to worship him. He brought Israel to the place. Look at verses 8-9. Notice why Moses says Israel has yet to worship God in the way he requires. “You shall not do according to all that we are doing here today, everyone doing whatever is right in his own eyes, for you have not as yet come to the rest and to the inheritance that the LORD your God is giving you.”

That’s still our fundamental problem, isn’t it? Verse 8 is how we roll. We go with however we feel like worshiping God instead of worshiping God in the way he requires. We rely on doing good works, being a decent person, getting sober, cleaning up our life, or going to church, to make us right with God instead of trusting and obeying Jesus.

What needs to happen? God must work in our hearts and lives. He must act to give us salvation rest in Jesus. He must act to bring us into his place through faith and repentance. It’s his work, his activity, that ENABLES us to worship him in the way he requires. Verse 10, “But when you go over the Jordan and live in the land that the LORD your God is giving you to inherit, and when he gives you rest from all your enemies around, so that you live in safety, then to the place that the LORD your God will choose, to make his name dwell there, there you shall bring all that I command you...”

God who provides a place for us to worship is faithful to lead us to his place. He delights to open our eyes to see Jesus, transform our heart to trust Jesus, and give us a new will to serve Jesus. 2 Corinthians 4:6, “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” True worship is Christ-centered. God provides a way for us to engage with him and he brings us to that place by leading us to Jesus.

3) TRUE WORSHIP IS SACRIFICIAL

God required more of Israel than showing up to the right place to worship. She had to do what God required at the place he chose. She had to bring the right sacrifices and

offerings with her. Look at verse 6, “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.” Moses repeats the same instructions in verses 11, 13, and 26.

What’s the main point? True worship requires sacrifice. The place God chose, the place he set apart where Israel could confidently engage with him, was not any old place. It was a place of sacrifice, and that in two senses. **First, worship requires a sacrifice of atonement.** Why do burnt offerings head the lists of sacrifices in Deuteronomy 12? Because watching an animal be entirely consumed by fire on the altar reminded Israel of something very important, something she needed to remember whenever she approached Yahweh. She didn’t deserve to be there.

Nor do you, Christian. You deserve to be consumed by God’s wrath on account of our sin. But we’re not. Why? Because every burnt offering, every sacrifice of atonement for her guilt and shame, pointed forward to the once-and-for-all sacrifice of Christ. It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin. But it’s not impossible for Jesus. Because Jesus was consumed by the wrath of God in your place, he can remove your sin as far as the east is from the west! Without the gospel, there would be no worship because there would be no perfect sacrifice to deal with the sin that separates us from a holy God.

And that’s a significant part of why the Lord takes pains in the second half of the chapter, especially verse 15, 23, 24, and 25 to command Israel to “Not eat” the blood. Why were they forbidden to eat blood? Why did they have to pour the blood of slaughtered animals “On the earth like water” (verse 24) if they were set apart for regular food consumption, or on the altar (verse 27) if they were a holy thing reserved for the Lord? It’s not a random ordinance. Blood represents life. Verse 23, “For the blood is the life.”

All life, animal life included, is a gift from the Lord and should not be used apart from his good purposes. Then and now, it’s not a commodity for us to exploit at leisure. It’s a gift for us to steward. And all the carnivores in the room said, “Amen!” Pouring blood on the ground when an animal was slaughtered for meat was a way of saying, “Lord, the life I just took to nourish my own comes from your hand. Thank you.”

And if it was an animal reserved for the Lord, pouring out their blood on the altar was a way of saying, “Lord, thank you that because this animal died, I don’t have to die. Because you provided this sacrifice, I can be forgiven and welcomed into your presence. By regulating how Israel treated animal blood, God preserved blood in the national mind

as a sacred thing, a set-apart thing, a gift from him reserved to make atonement for sin. Hebrews 9:22, “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.”

But the place God chose wasn't only a place of sacrifice in the sense of atonement. **It was also a place of sacrifice in the sense of consecration**, a place where gifts, tithes, vow offerings, and freewill offerings expressed the worshipers' devotion to Yahweh. The same principle is carried forward under the New Covenant. Only in the New Covenant, animals are not the sacrifice of consecration. We are. Romans 12:1, “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.”

Friend, this may be the most important thing you hear me say this morning. **True worship isn't about the music.** Nor does it start at 10:00 AM on Sunday morning. **True worship is about devoting your entire life to making much of Jesus.** Worshiping God means his honor and renown is the great cause that compels all you think, feel, and do from dawn to dusk. Are you living for yourself or living for God? For your priorities or his purposes? God demands all of you, Christian. Your entire body. Your entire life. 1 Corinthians 10:31, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”

Yes, Jesus provided the only sacrifice necessary for you to draw near to God with confidence! But his mercies, his amazing grace toward us in Jesus, compels and empowers us to gladly consecrate our lives to him in response. That's what faith in Jesus looks like! That's what worshiping God through Jesus requires! We become a living sacrifice of wholehearted obedience in every area of life.

Many people say with their mouth, “Of course I worship God. I love Jesus.” But they're not doing it in the way God requires. They are doing “Whatever is right” in their own eyes (verse 8). In the words of verse 13, they make burnt offerings “At any place” that works for them. “I might be sleeping with my girlfriend, but at least I don't have another girl on the side. I may never read my Bible, but at least I don't watch porn every night. I might rarely gather with God's people for worship, but at least I put some money in the offering whenever I do.”

We decide, “I think I'll please God in this way. I'm not so keen on pleasing him in that way. But on balance, I know I'm still worshiping God.” We spin it as a modern take on Christianity. “I'm not rejecting the faith, I'm just shedding some conservative, cultural expressions of love for Jesus.” Trust me, I still love him. Friend, you neither love him nor worship him if you are not ordering your life in accordance with all he commands you in his Word.

We don't get to negotiate the terms of our worship with the Holy One. He hasn't given us freedom to decide how we want to worship him, like some sort of customized personal pizza. He tells us exactly how we must worship him through the commands he has given us in his Word. Daniel Block says it well. "Worship must be designed to please the object of worship, not the worshipers... True worship involves an audience with the divine King and transpires in God's place by God's invitation on God's terms." And the terms are nothing less than every area of your entire life.

Here's what that means. If there's even one area of your life where you are stubbornly saying, "I will not do what God commands me to do in his Word," then you are not worshipping God, no matter how many other "Good things" you can point to. You're still refusing to do what is right in his eyes. You are still doing whatever seems good in your eyes. You're calling the shots, which means you're ultimately worshipping yourself.

CONCLUSION

True worship is exclusive, Christ-centered, and sacrificial. That's what it means to worship God in the way he requires and makes possible. If time permitted, we could add to the list! True worship is corporate. Did you notice how everyone in Israel – including groups that were easily overlooked or marginalized – is commanded to worship God together? We experience as much on Sunday morning, don't we?

True worship is also joyful. Three times in this chapter, Moses commands Israel to "Rejoice" before the LORD your God! Why? Because true worship isn't our duty. It's an experience of fellowship with God. The command in verse 7 to "Eat before the Lord your God" is a loud statement of God's heart to satisfy us with the life-giving joy of his presence. That's the very kind of relationship God offers us through faith in Christ, a relationship where we enjoy sweet fellowship with him around his table. It's what we'll experience next Sunday when we share the Lord's Supper together!

The worship God requires and makes possible is ultimately what is best for us. Verse 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..." The Lord tells us how to worship him for our good, brothers and sisters. He's not being picky. He's being gracious. So be careful.

Be careful to worship God in the way he requires and makes possible. That means, more than anything else, that our worship must be focused on Jesus and make much of Jesus. Worshipping God demands our whole life. But the living sacrifice we bring is only possible because of what God has done for us in Christ and Christ alone.

Hebrews 13:15-16, “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.”