

*Worship (Deuteronomy 12)*

As a teenager, I got involved in something known as the “worship wars.” I was not a particularly aggressive soldier in the battle, but I did think that churches, in general, needed to adopt contemporary musical traditions and promote emotionally intense singing times. To join the battle, I taught myself to play guitar and learned some simple worship songs. I watched my congregation buy its first drum set. The thought of getting acoustic drums was a little much for some folks, and we compromised with a digital set with the volume set rather low. What was I after in all of this? It was one-part personal preference to be sure; yet it was another part desire to work with others in my church to establish true worship.

**Every Christian should care about establishing true worship.** What we do in corporate worship does not exist for the sake of generating good feelings or arousing childhood memories. We aren’t here to remind ourselves about all the good deeds we are supposed to go out into the world to do. We do not gather to think beautiful thoughts and listen to beautiful music. **True worship is all about connecting with our God in and through the ministry of the Spirit.** It is head and heart coming together for the glory of God. We gather to be God’s people and sing God’s praise. We must pursue true worship together.

Establishing true worship is not about playing guitar or training a choir or singing Fanny Crosby or Chris Tomlin songs. True worship is about so much more than any one of these things taken on their own. How then can we truly worship God? The answer lies in what our Presbyterian tradition has called the **Regulative Principle of Worship. Worship, to be true worship, must be undertaken in accordance with Holy Scripture.**

The Israelites were poised to claim their inheritance in the land of Canaan. If they were to come into the fruitfulness and blessing that the Lord intended for them, they had to establish true worship. The chapter which we read this morning was a part of the second speech of Moses. The speech began with a recounting of the Ten Commandments. Then came several chapters of

exhortation to faithfulness. With the twelfth chapter, Moses began to transition to the next section which continues all the way to chapter twenty-six. In this section, the law of God was developed and explained as it applied to various situations that the people would face as they settled into life in the land. Moses' priority in this development and application of the law was true worship.

As we consider this text, we see that there are **three broad categories** to be considered in the effort to establish true worship: **the negative, the positive, and the neutral**. The Israelites had to learn how to say no to some things, yes to others, and maybe/maybe not to a final group of practices. Let me show you these things from the passage.

1. **Negative.** The Israelites were called to say no to all the idolatrous practices of the Canaanites. In vv. 2-4, Moses calls on the people to tear down the altars found throughout the land. The problem is not just the potential violation of the first commandment but also the potential violation of the second commandment. The true God is not to be worshipped with practices learned from the Canaanites. Other negative commands follow. In v. 8 the people are instructed to stop doing the things that they had been allowed to do during the wilderness time. It seems that God had allowed the people some irregular practices which were suited to an extended time of wandering, including the ability to build personal or tribal altars of earth or stone (see Exodus 20:24). Now that they were entering their inheritance, they were to have a centralized place of worship. Sacrifice was only to happen in the place where the tabernacle was set up. In v. 13, this is made explicit - "Take care that you do not offer your burnt offerings at any place that you see..." Verse sixteen is a reminder to not consume the blood of animals killed for either food or sacrifice. Vv. 23-25 repeat in an extended form this negative command to not consume blood. Verse seventeen states that no food item given as an offering is to be consumed away from the centralized place of worship. If it is an offering, it must be brought to the tabernacle. Verse nineteen features a command to not forget the Levite but to provide for them as their ministry requires that they have no inheritance of land. Vv. 29-31 is a final reminder to not worship God through the forms of Canaanite worship, particularly through the

abominable act of child sacrifice. In all these things, we see the application of a strong negative. If true worship is to be established as the people claim their inheritance, then they must say no to some practices.

2. **Positive.** There are also practices to which the Israelites must learn to say yes. The most clearly repeated command of this section is the call to maintain a centralized place of worship and sacrifice. Vv. 5-7, 10-12, 18, and 26-27 all contain reminders to go to the place that the Lord will choose for the worship of his people. Why this insistence that sacrifice and liturgy take place in one location? First, it is an application of the simple love command. “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (6:4-5). One place would help foster love for the one God. Second, it is an application of the Ten Commandments. If there is one location, then all opposing deities can be banned from its place. If there are local altars, however, other gods might slip into the sacred space. Or the people might violate the second commandment by using local religious practices to worship the Lord. Almost certainly, the people would then violate the third commandment because the local liturgies would associate the name of God with other gods or with abominable practices, which degrade the name of God and thereby violate the commandment. And why they’re at it, they might as well adjust the schedule and worship at the time which they consider right. Once the first four commandments fall, the final six cannot be far behind. Hence, the upkeep of a single place of worship - the location of the tabernacle and later the temple - would provide some hope of spiritual cohesion and some incentive to covenant faithfulness. The Israelites must learn to say yes to the worship practices that God desires for them.
3. **Neutral.** Finally, there are matters that permit flexibility. In our passage, the people are permitted to eat meat in the location in which they see fit. Meat could be consumed freely without any religious significance attached to the slaughter. We find this freedom granted in vv. 15 and 20-22. The eating of meat did not need to be managed by the priests and Levites of the centralized place of worship. If all proper

Levitical offerings were carried out in the proper location and if no blood was consumed, then killing animals for food was treated as a neutral practice. The people could say maybe/maybe not to the consumption of meat throughout the land.

**Negative. Positive. Neutral.** Moses gave the people a **blueprint for establishing true worship**. We do well to follow a similar pattern when we think of establishing true worship in our own lives and in our church. Whether we say no, yes, or maybe, we must do so according to Holy Scripture. This is the Regulative Principle of Worship. In the Sermon on the Mount, for example, Jesus says that his people must avoid all self-righteous displays of piety when fasting, giving, and praying. No follower of Jesus should be calling attention to themselves when leaving their offering. This is an application of the negative. There are positive instructions in the Bible as well. Jesus gave us the sacraments of baptism and Lord's Supper to be carried out for the remainder of history. The Word of God must be taught to believers. We must sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. We must keep meeting together. These are all positive instructions found in the New Testament. Finally, some things deserve a maybe/maybe not approach. The early Christians were not uniform in their views and practices. We know, for example, that there was some disagreement about if meat which had been offered to idols could be eaten by a Christian (see 1 Corinthians 8). Paul seems to have had no personal qualm eating this meat as these pagan deities are not real. He simultaneously, however, recognized that some in the church still attached religious significance to the action thereby making the act a kind of sin against God. Paul accepted that both sides could have their own practice. His only rule was that we should not cause one another to stumble with our own decisions. **In our own worship, we must accept that a wide range of things (even things which are personally important) fall into this category:** choice of clothing, musical instrumentation, and length of sermon all fall into this category.

Beyond this teaching on the nature of true worship. One other very important point must be developed from our text. The Israelites, to claim their inheritance, were to offer sacrifice in one place. This is the place where God's name would dwell. In the sweep of redemptive history, we find that we also can only offer God worship in a single place. **According to the New**

**Testament, Jesus is the “place” in which God’s presence dwells, the “place” in which you and I can truly offer worship to God.** Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). There is only one way to God. The Christian faith is here making a radically exclusive claim. And yet the invitation to come to this way and this truth goes out freely to all. The call to come to Jesus is radically inclusive. It doesn’t matter what you’ve done or not done, how much money you have, or what job you hold. It doesn’t matter if your family traces its roots to Ireland or Nigeria. The ground before the cross of Jesus is level. If you don’t know Jesus – if you don’t know what it means to come to the Father through the way opened by Jesus – then I invite you today to come. Confess your sin. Turn from your unbelief. Believe in the death, resurrection, and lordship of Jesus. Give your life to him.