

AT THE PLACE GOD WILL CHOOSE

Deuteronomy 12:1-13:18

Key Verse: 12:18

Instead, you are to eat them in the presence of the Lord your God at the place the Lord your God will choose--you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, and the Levites from your towns--and you are to rejoice before the Lord your God in everything you put your hand to.

Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919), the 26th U.S. President, was a Christian (The Teddy Bear got its name from him). He would walk six miles on Sundays to attend church. A man said to him, "I can worship in the fields or anywhere else." Roosevelt replied, "Yes, but no one will ever suspect you of it!" Still other people told him that they could find God anywhere—in the woods or on the golf course. He answered, "Yes, I know all the excuses. I know that one can worship the Creator ... in a grove of trees or by running brooks, or one's home, just as well as at church. But I also know, as a matter of cold fact, the average man does not thus worship or thus dedicate himself."

Today's passage teaches us how to worship the Lord in the right way. God told Israel to worship him at the place he will choose. They should not follow the way of the Canaanites who worshiped their gods in many different places. Moses also told them to decisively deal with the idol worship and those who tempt them to worship idols. Let us think about how these teachings apply to us today so that God may be in the most important place in our hearts.

I. ONE PLACE OF WORSHIP (12:1-32)

The Israelites were about to enter the land of Canaan that was a hotbed of idol-worshipping culture. How decisively were they to deal with the idols and their places of worship? Look at verses 1-3. *These are the decrees and laws you must be careful to follow in the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has given you to possess--as long as you live in the land. Destroy completely all the places on the high mountains, on the hills and under every spreading tree, where the nations you are dispossessing worship their gods. Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and burn their Asherah poles in the fire; cut down the idols of their gods and wipe out their names from those places.* Notice that Moses used verbs such as "break down," "smash," "burn," "cut down," and "wipe out." He knew how prevalent the idol worship culture was in Canaan. If the Israelites would compromise just a little bit with the culture, sooner or later they would be worshiping the idols. It would be like leaving a few cancer cells intact during surgery. So God told them to destroy completely all the places of worship and cut down the idols and wipe out their names from their places. Their spiritual conquest of the land was even more important than the military conquest in order to live as a holy nation people.

God wanted his people to establish true worship in the Promised Land after purging the idols. In verses 4-14, Moses outlined the ways to worship the Lord. A key point of his teaching was that they should not worship the Lord in the way of the

Canaanites. Look at verse 4. *You must not worship the Lord your God in their way.* The Canaanites worshiped their idols in their ways. For example, to placate their gods, they sacrificed their own sons and daughters. God called it a detestable thing to him. Moses told them to worship the Lord in God's way. And to establish God-centered worship, he told his people to assemble in a central location to worship the Lord. Look at verse 4. *But you are to seek the place the Lord your God will choose from among all your tribes to put his Name there for his dwelling. To that place you must go.*

God told them to seek the place he would choose. Look at verses 13-14. *Be careful not to sacrifice your burnt offerings anywhere you please. Offer them only at the place the Lord will choose in one of your tribes, and there observe everything I command you.* For the population of more than 2 million people, we can imagine it would not be easy to gather in one place to have a worship service. It would be very inconvenient if all Americans have to travel to Washington D.C. to worship the Lord. And in New Testament, when a Samaritan woman asked about the place of worship, Jesus answered, "Believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem... God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth" (Jn 4:21,24). So why did the Lord tell the Israelites to worship in one central location? At that time, his people were about to move into a new neighborhood. If everyone did everything as they saw fit, there would be a chaos. It would be very difficult to establish God-centered worship. So we can see the wisdom in this command. The Canaanites had many alters of worship scattered in the region. God wanted his people to gather in one central place, first Shechem, then Siloh, and then Jerusalem, to avoid the corruption and influence of the idol worshipping culture.

Let us fast forward Israel's history to look at an example. After King Solomon died, the kingdom of Israel was divided into two. The kingdom of Judah in the south was ruled by Solomon's weak son Rehoboam. The northern kingdom of Israel was ruled by a former king's errand named Jeroboam. The first thing this man did when he became king was to tell his people not to go to Jerusalem to worship the Lord. Instead, he set up two golden calves, one in Bethel and the other in Dan, and said to the people, "It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt" (1Ki 12:28). He also built shrines on high places and installed priests from all kinds of people who were not Levites. Thus, he led the ten tribes of Israel to worship other gods. Their identity as God's chosen people was lost.

Let us fast forward further about 1,000 more years. A couple from Galilee, Joseph and Mary, along with their 12 year-old son named Jesus, made a long journey to Jerusalem to worship the Lord at the Festival of the Passover. It took several days for them to walk the distance (they didn't have an SUV), but it was a joyful trip for them. And Jesus called the temple in Jerusalem "My Father's house" (Lk 2:49). These examples teach us the importance of worship in a central location in Israel's history.

But the most important point of this teaching is that his people should worship the Lord in God's ways, not in their own ways or the ways of other people. Moses says in verse 8: *You are not to do as we do here today, everyone doing as they see fit.* God

wanted them to worship him in God's ways, not as they saw fit. I believe this principle applies to us today. It is easy for us to worship the Lord in our own ways and in the ways of the popular trend of this world. But God wants us to come to him in his ways and in his terms. We are to worship him in God's ways. Some people today try to worship God in their own ways. Some even say that they don't have to go to church. They'd rather stay in their room and log on to a website to listen to music and sermon. But we know that God wants us to worship together in church as a community. We may worship the Lord in different buildings with different styles of worship, but we know that he wants us to be united as his people under the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

What else can we learn from this passage about worship? **Thanksgiving** should be an essential part of worship. The Israelites were to bring burnt offerings and sacrifices, tithes, special gifts, freewill offerings and firstborn flocks (6,11). We also must worship the Lord with a thankful heart, bringing our thanksgiving offerings to him. Their worship was to be **joyful**, families eating together and rejoicing, remembering God who blessed them (7,18). We also should worship the Lord joyfully, praising the Lord from our hearts with a joyful fellowship meal. Their worship was to be **inclusive**. Look at verse 12: *And there rejoice before the Lord your God—you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, and the Levites from your towns who have no allotment or inheritance of their own.* The whole community was to come together to worship the Lord, including male and female servants. We are all forgiven sinners. There shouldn't be any human barriers among forgiven sinners. God loves everyone regardless of their social status. We are to worship the Lord joyfully together, overcoming all kinds of social barriers.

Meat was apparently an essential part of Israel's diet, as it is true for us, and it was also part of fellowship meal at the church. And many people apparently craved meat, saying, "I would like some meat." Moses told them that they could eat meat as much as they wanted. Many of them had to travel far to worship the Lord at the place God chose (21). But as far as eating meat was concerned, they were allowed to slaughter animals and eat in their own towns. Both the ceremonially unclean and clean people could eat meat. Even as they enjoyed the freedom of eating meat, however, they still had to follow some basic spiritual principles. They were not to eat the blood as it represented life itself (16; Ge 9:3-4) Also they were to eat certain food (dedicated to the Lord) only in the place of God's choosing, not in their own towns (17-18).

Moses also told them not to neglect the Levites (19) who were priests in charge of worship services. They did not receive any land allotment or inheritance of their own (12). The Israelites were to take care of the servants of God who did their priestly duty.

Finally, Moses warned them about temptations to worship idols once they settled in Canaan. They would be ensnared if they flirted with the culture, saying, "How do these nations serve their gods? We will do the same" (30). The Canaanites did all kinds of detestable things Lord hates in worshipping their gods, even burning their babies in the fire as sacrifices to their gods (31). The Israelites might be curious about the culture. Moses was telling them, "Curiosity killed the cat. Don't be like Lot

who pitched his tent outside Sodom. Don't be like the bugs that are attracted to bug-zappers!" Why shouldn't we be interested in other gods with intention of worshiping them? Some people today are interested in other religions of the world such as New Age movement, trying to find a god away from the Lord God. This kind of curiosity is dangerous. Let us read verse 32. *See that you do all I command you; do not add to it or take away from it.* We must have an absolute attitude toward the word of God if we don't want to be a victim of the idol worshiping culture.

II. WORSHIPING OTHER GODS (13:1-18)

In Chapter 13, Moses continues to warn his people about the danger of worshiping idols in the Promised Land. Look at verses 1-3. *If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a sign or wonder, and if the sign or wonder spoken of takes place, and the prophet says, "Let us follow other gods" (gods you have not known) "and let us worship them," you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. The Lord your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul.* Suppose a cult member approaches us and says, "Our leader predicts that the stock market will crash in October next year." And suppose that the market indeed crashes as he foretells. Should we listen to the cult member if he says, "See, our leader was right. Let us worship him"? No, God is testing us whether we love him with all our heart and with all our soul. It is the Lord our God we must follow and worship. We should keep his commands and obey him, serve him and hold fast to him (4).

What if temptations come from someone very close to us, such as our own brother, son or daughter, or the wife or husband we love, or our closest friend? What if they invite us to join a cult religion? We must deal with them decisively, not yielding to them or listening to them. We should show them no pity, as this is concerned with our eternal life. Moses told his people put them to death as the tempters tried to turn them away from the Lord God (9-10). The point is that we should not compromise with idol worshipers. There is no end in compromise. We should embrace sinners as we are forgiven sinners, but have to draw a line, based on the word of God. What would you do if a close friend of yours invites you to a football game on Sunday, saying it would be much more fun than attending church? I hope your answer will be, "My friend, I worship the Lord, not football."

What if a whole town abandons God and entices God's people to go and worship other gods? This is a more serious offense to the Lord than a person who falls into idol worship. Moses told his people to investigate it thoroughly and if found true, they must deal with the town decisively, burning it down (12-18). This is a painful measure, but he didn't want any seed of compromise to remain that could ensnare his people again. God would be pleased with his people if they deal decisively with idol worship. Look at verses 17b-18: *Then the Lord will turn from his fierce anger, will show you mercy, and will have compassion on you. He will increase your numbers, as he promised on oath to your ancestors--because you obey the Lord your God by keeping all his commands that I am giving you today and doing what is right in his eyes.* The Lord God will certainly bless us when we purge idol worship from our community and obey the Lord by keeping all his commands.

In conclusion, today's passage teaches us how we should have God in the center of our heart and our life. It reminds us of the first and second commandments of the Ten Commandments ("You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below" (5:7-8)). We must deal decisively with people and system that tempts us to turn against the Lord and worship idols. And we must worship the Lord God in his way, not our own way.