

“Worship Enemies”
Deuteronomy 12:1-32
March 2, 2014

INTRODUCTION:

One of the most well-known statements in all of Christian literature is Augustine’s eloquent expression at the beginning of his *Confessions*. “You made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it find rest in you.” Worship of the one true God lies at the very core of what it means to be a human being. When we get this right and learn to surrender ourselves to God’s purpose for us in loving and worshipping him, life makes sense and is filled with meaning. Jesus taught this when he told his followers to **“Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you”** (Matt. 6:33). The things he is referring to that will be added are the everyday things of life, summarized by our need for food and clothing. Students, the best thing you can do for your schoolwork is to worship God. Husbands and wives, the best thing you can do for your marriage is to seek God first. To miss worship as the central purpose of life reduces us to nothing more than so much matter taking up space in the universe. Little else will be right in our lives if we go astray at this fundamental level. It’s like having a leak in the roof of your house that goes unrepaired. It may not seem like much of a problem at first, able to be addressed by keeping a bucket under the leak to catch the water. But if the leak continues, it will spread and eventually the whole house will be destroyed.

So the book of Deuteronomy, together with the rest of the Bible, emphasizes the fundamental importance of worship. The first four of the Ten Commandments speak of our relationship to God and our duty to worship him. Today’s chapter is the first in the main body of Deuteronomy, and it is all about worship. We know that worship is the theme of this entire chapter because the author uses a Hebrew literary device known as *inclusio* to show this. This is a bracketing device in which the same theme is mentioned twice, once at the beginning and again at the end of the chapter, indicating that everything in between is also about this same theme. The theme is the purity of Israel’s worship, a purity which has in mind several enemies that need to be countered if such purity is to be maintained. Let’s consider now three worship enemies Moses speaks of.

I. The Enemy of Syncretism

Syncretism is the attempt to blend two belief systems that cannot be blended. Like oil and water, they cannot be successfully mixed. We heard last week at our missions conference that Hindus will often receive Jesus as one of their Gods. But they will not get rid of other gods and worship Jesus alone.

That is syncretism. Jesus cannot be added as one God among many because he claims to be the only God. Moses warns Israel about the dangers of syncretism with Canaanite worship. They are to make sure they don't worship the true God in a Canaanite way. Instead, they are to destroy all the places where the Canaanites worshiped their gods, as well as all the worship paraphernalia used by the Canaanites in their worship.

Canaanite worship was very pragmatic. They wanted good harvests so they would have ample food to eat. And as farmers have long recognized, good harvests are very dependent on factors beyond the control of the farmer, factors such as weather and pestilence. The response of the Canaanites was to attempt to manipulate their gods to grant the conditions necessary for fruitful harvests. One such manipulation involved a ritual of sexual intercourse to show the gods how fruitfulness came about. Cult prostitutes were used in this endeavor. Another Canaanite practice, mentioned at the end of this chapter, was child sacrifice. Possibly these were the children born to the cult prostitutes, and they would be offered back to the gods in an attempt to get the gods to send conditions conducive to abundant harvests. God tells Israel here to make sure they don't attempt to incorporate even the smallest part of this Canaanite worship into their own. They are to destroy every part of this worship and not even use the same places that the Canaanites used.

A clarification is needed here. Israel was a theocracy in a way that is no longer the case for the church today. The church is scattered throughout the world, and the part of the world in which we find ourselves is blessed with freedom of religion. As those who live in such a nation, we are no longer to destroy the idols of other religions that our outside the church. The pastor in Florida a few years ago who very publicly burned the Koran was mistaken in doing so. We fight idolatry today in two ways. First, we fight it with the gospel, seeking to rid the world of idolatry through repentance and faith, not through the sword. Second, we are to fight against idolatry by destroying all idolatry inside the church.

Before an idol that has found its way into the church can be destroyed, it has to be found. It's usually easier to spot syncretism in other places than in ourselves. It is easy for us to see Israel's need to completely root out all traces of this Canaanite religion in their midst. But it is not so easy to see the way we blend the idols of our age with our Christianity. One of the sobering results of syncretism is some form of child sacrifice. That is, when we bring the idols of our culture into the church, we end up bringing harm to the weakest among us, our children. Money is an idol in our American culture. How many children have been harmed by parents putting pressure on them to make good grades in order to get a good job and make money, rather than to bring glory to God? Or how many children have been hurt by the priority their parents place on making money to the neglect of their children. Sports is a big idol in our state. How many children have grown up in our churches feeling second class because they are not athletically gifted? Leisure is another big idol in our

culture, where everything is sacrificed for weekend fun. Children growing up where such an idol is worshiped learn to be self-centered and are ill-equipped to live the kind of self-sacrificial lives that Jesus' followers are called to.

It needs to be pointed out that none of these idols are sinful in themselves. There is nothing wrong with money, sports or leisure. All are gifts of God given for our joy and enrichment. It is when we use these things to fill that God-shaped hole in our hearts that they become idolatrous. So the application is to hunt out the idols of our heart and destroy them. To paraphrase verse 3, tear them down, dash them in pieces and burn them with fire.

II. The Enemy of a Self-Focused Attitude

Verses 4-5 say, **“You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way. 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.”** Everything about God's directions regarding worship challenge our native self-centeredness, beginning with the command to worship in only one place. The place was where the tabernacle and, later in Israel's history, the temple were located. For a long time after Israel entered the land, the tabernacle was located in Shiloh, where it stayed until David brought it into Jerusalem. There Solomon built a permanent building, a temple. It was only at the temple that sacrifices were to be offered and God was to be worshiped. Such a practice would have been inconvenient to all but those living nearby, but God's reason for this requirement of worship in only one place was clearly not the convenience of the worshippers.

What was God's reason for requiring worship in only one place? This requirement looked forward to Jesus as the fulfillment of all temple worship. Just as there was only one place where the full worship of God could take place in the Old Testament, so in the New Testament there is only one means by which we can draw near to God in worship, and that is through Jesus.

This passage very clearly challenges the religious pluralism of our day. We are told that no one religion has all the truth, but that all of them together add up to that which is true. The story of the three blind men describing an elephant is often brought up to show this. Each blind man feels only one part of the elephant and insists that the part he feels, one the trunk, one the ear and the third the leg, captures the essence of the elephant. But those of us who see know that all three are right in what they experience of the elephant, but all three are wrong in claiming that their experience captures the whole essence of the elephant. We are then assured that all religions are like those blind men trying to describe the elephant. Or some use another metaphor and say that the world's religions are like the different choices Wendy and I make about the routes we take when driving somewhere. Wendy likes the scenic routes that make her feel good, and I always choose whatever route I think will

get me there the quickest. But we both end up at the same destination. Such pluralism as this is completely self-centered, because it leaves us in control.

Worship is not about self-fulfillment, but about self-sacrifice. Paradoxically, it is only when we surrender completely to God that we find ourselves fulfilled. Even the forms of Old Testament worship show this. Verse 6 gives a brief summary of the different ingredients of worship in the time before Christ. It involved burnt offerings, sacrifices, tithes, vow offerings (which we refer to as pledges), freewill offerings and the giving of the firstborn from flocks and herds. Whatever you worship, you give your all to that object. And as humans, we are inevitably worshipping creatures. Those who worship money give their lives for money. Those who worship a hobby give their lives for that hobby. We worship rightly now by offering our bodies as living sacrifices to God, renouncing self in all forms and living for God with our time, our money and our hearts.

What the passage teaches us not to do in our worship is to craft our worship with our desires and preferences in mind. For example, some say, "I prefer worshipping God through nature. I don't need the church because I feel closer to God in the open air than I do in church." But to follow that path makes no sense. How can you say you worship God by staying away from church when the God you want to worship tells you not to forsake church attendance? You want to worship God without listening to God. Others say, "I don't need church in order to be good. I'm just as good as those who go to church." All of these are nothing but excuses to allow a person to do what he wants to do, and that is exactly the opposite of what it means to worship God. True worship is not about us, but about God.

III. The Enemy of Safety

Worship of the true God is dangerous. There is no telling where it might lead. I see at least three areas in this chapter where it spills out in ways that challenge us. First, it spills into the everyday areas of life. We like to keep our lives in safe little compartments that are easy to predict and control. If we can limit our worship to what takes place during the hour every Sunday morning when we gather for worship, then that is easily manageable. This passage counters that tendency by spending quite a few verses addressing the area of how animals are to be butchered in preparation not for worship but for normal eating. In Leviticus 17, God had told Israel during their time of wilderness wandering that the blood from all animals, whether used for sacrificial purposes or just for eating, was to be brought to the tabernacle for the priests to throw on the altar. But now that they were taking possession of the land, such a practice would no longer be possible because of the distances involved. So Moses authorizes the slaughter of animals for eating outside the tabernacle and later the temple. But he does maintain one requirement. The blood must not be eaten, but poured on the ground. What is the meaning of this requirement? The Old Testament was very clear that the life of the animal was

in the blood. This pouring out of the blood on the ground emphasized the truth that life belonged to God. He was the giver of life, and now it is symbolically being given back to him. So there was an element of worship and thanksgiving in the everyday practice of eating. All life is to be worship. Some would characterize this as fanaticism. If so, then I want to be a fanatic. I want to get up in the morning with a heart of gratitude and praise. I want to do even the most mundane of my daily tasks with a worshipful attitude. The great English poet George Herbert said it like this: “All may of Thee partake; Nothing can be so mean, Which with this tincture, ‘For Thy sake,’ Will not grow bright and clean. A servant with this clause Makes drudgery divine; Who sweeps a room as for Thy laws, Makes that and the action fine.”

There is another way in which true worship is dangerous. It pushes past our intellect into our hearts. We can see that here in the command, **“You shall rejoice”** (v. 7, 12). This emphasis on rejoicing before the Lord is a common theme in Deuteronomy. We Presbyterians are famous for attempting to keep God at a safe distance by making our worship simply an intellectual exercise. But you cannot worship God only in the mind. It must extend to our emotions too, and one of the chief emotions that is appropriate in the worship of God is the emotion of joy. Isn’t that interesting? One of the ways we can see that in this text is the joining of eating before the Lord with joy. In ancient, agrarian economies, the fear of famine was never far removed. So a time of eating and feasting was seen as a time of great joy. That tells us something about our communion service, a time when we eat a meal with the Lord and celebrate joyfully all he is to us. Let me make an application for parents before we move on. Do you think it would make a difference in your children’s lives if they saw in you that worship and church were sources of great joy?

One final way worship is dangerous is that it moves us out to people who are different than us. Worship brings people together as equals who are not always seen as equals outside the church. Notice how this is expressed in verse 12. **“And you shall rejoice before the Lord your God, you and your sons and your daughters, your male servants and your female servants, and the Levite that is within your towns.”** Worship is to be socially inclusive, not just a fraternity of those who are alike. The New Testament often mentions this, condemning any effort that excludes people seen as a little different.

CONCLUSION:

The movie *Chariots of Fire* tells the story of Scotsman and sprinter Eric Liddell. He won the gold medal and then went on to become a missionary to China. He was noted for his unusual posture when running. He would run straighter than normal, with his head lifted to heaven. That posture reflected his heart for God, where everything was done with a heart of worship. May it be so for us as well!