

Worship Marked by Grace

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Preacher: Rev. Aaron Roberts

[0 : 00] Let's pray together. Father, would you open our hearts to hear your word this evening. In Christ's name, Amen. Right then, so we are looking at that passage of Scripture, Deuteronomy 12.

A reminder to you first though, so the whole book was written around 3,000-ish, very-ish years ago. And Deuteronomy as a book is made up basically of three sermons.

Three sermons that Moses preached to the people of God just before they were about to cross the Jordan and enter into the promised land. In Deuteronomy 12, that's part of the second sermon.

And at this point in the sermon, which is the longest one in Deuteronomy, lots of scholars say that Moses is unpacking the Ten Commandments. He's slowly working through the commandments and explaining what they mean on the ground in real-life situations.

Now, many of you will know that the first two commandments are love God and don't have other gods, don't have idols in your life. Chapter 12, this one, seems to be unpacking some aspects of those commandments for us.

[1 : 14] Now, if you're the kind of person that before a sermon or talk, you like the big picture. So let me give you the big picture first. You could summarize this whole chapter like this.

Worship God only and worship Him the way He requires. Worship God only and worship Him the way He requires. And Moses makes it quite easy for us in chapter 12.

He says, So that's going to be the structure of my sermon this evening.

So we've got the big stuff. We've got the structure. Let's dig into chapter 12 here. And we'll start with what Moses says. Say no. Say no to these things. And the first thing he says is say no to idolatry. Let me remind you just of a couple of verses there. Verses 2 and 3. You shall surely destroy all the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess serve their gods. On the high mountains, hills, under every green tree, you shall tear down their altars, dash them to pieces, burn the ashram, chop down the carved images of their gods, destroy their name out of that place.

[2 : 31] Like I know, right? I know. Wowsers. If there was ever a scripture to rattle modern sensibilities, it's, I mean, it's this one.

It reeks of colonialism and it's so iconoclastic and imperialistic. I mean, do they really have to destroy? Do they really have to destroy the statues? At the very least, why not do what Western museums have been doing for decades?

Just steal them and put them on display and charge people to see them and refuse to return them. Anyway, that's probably a bit off topic. Look, let me make a few comments about these first few verses here.

Why destroy the idols? Well, I mean, if you keep reading in this chapter, you get to verse 31. In verse 31, God outlines, you know, one of the reasons he hates these pagan idols.

Verse 31. The Lord hates what they have done for their gods. They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods. So they're killing their children. They're sacrificing their children to their gods.

[3 : 34] The Canaanite religion, folks, was completely abhorrent. And so God says, wherever you find remnants, wherever you find remnants of that faith, little wooden idols, destroy them.

But even if they weren't killing their kids, it was still abhorrent because God has revealed himself to his people. And idolatry is a rejection of that.

It's stealing glory away from God. And as crazy as these, you know, like these religions might seem, these pagan religions might seem, Moses knew his people would be tempted to look into them.

Especially the super sexually focused pagan variants. I mean, the things mentioned in this passage, the Ashram, etc. These are actually like phallic idols and stuff, right?

So he's saying, just get rid of this stuff. Get rid of it, God says, because they'll draw you in later on in this chapter in verse 30. And I read from the message version. I like this version here. It says, don't get fascinated with their gods thinking, I wonder what it was like for them, worshipping their gods. [4 : 38] I like to try that myself. Don't do this to God, your God. Get rid of it. Get rid of it all, Moses says. Get rid of it like a recovering alcoholic would get rid of all the alcohol in the house.

And just one more thing about this idol destruction. Place. Place. Place. P-L-A-C-E. Place is a really, really important idea in Deuteronomy.

The place. The place. The place. It's a super common little phrase. Way, way, way back in the days when God made these immense promises to Abraham, way back in Genesis, the elements of that promise were not just God is going to have a people.

It's God and people in a particular place. God with embodied people dwelling in a place.

So this purging of idolatry, it's God calling his people to sanctify the place he's called them to be his people. And also what it does is it points to this time when God would restore the whole world, where the whole world would be united under God.

[5 : 52] And there's a lot more to say about that. But we need to move on. Let's just talk about what this means for us today. What does this first bit mean for us today? Well, it doesn't mean we take a hammer to the decorative Buddha statues we find in garden centers.

Of course not. We live in a democracy. But we are asked to purge the idols of our life. To purge the idols from our life.

You know, I was speaking to a guy the other day. He's not a Christian. And he was saying how he used to check the stock market every couple of minutes. And this is not his job.

He works in education. But he had money and shares. And he said, I was just checking it constantly, constantly, every couple of minutes. And he said to me, I just had to stop.

It was overtaking my life. I mean, even he recognized the power of idols. Folks, if there are things in your life that are drawing your trust away from the Lord, be brutal with those things.

[6 : 55] Get rid of all hints, all remnants of them. There is only one God worthy of our worship. Only one who can bear the weight of that responsibility.

Okay, let's keep moving. In Moses' theology of worship, what else do we say no to? Verse 8. Moses says, You shall not do according to all that we are doing here today, everyone doing whatever is right in their own eyes.

And verse 13. Take care that you do not offer your burnt offerings in any place that you see, but at the place that the Lord will choose in one of your tribes.

So, Moses is addressing a particular problem here. The people of God were getting a bit willy-nilly about their worship.

They were doing it however they wanted, wherever they wanted. For them, when it came to worship, what was happening is, you know, what mattered the most was personal preference.

[7 : 55] And what Moses says here very clearly is no. He says no to that. He says, worship must be practiced in a way that, how do you say this?

Like, the priority of worship is, does it please the object of the worship? I'll say it again. The priority of the worship, does it please the object of the worship?

Every now and then, I'll have a discussion in Vancouver with someone, and we're talking about staff, and it moves towards religion, and, you know, and I'll say something along the lines, do you go to church?

And they'll say something along the lines of, yes, I go to church. It's called hiking, or it's called kayaking, or it's called painting, or something like that. You know, like I go and be by myself, and I do this thing, and it's rejuvenating, it's very spiritual, and that's how I, you know, do church.

And great, fantastic, paint, go hiking. These things are gifts from God to us, especially the hiking, right? Like, you're being in God's good creation.

[8 : 57] It's so, so good for us, and we can meet with God there, and we can pray with God there. It is brilliant, but it is not a replacement for the gathering of God's people.

I think the problem with this is that, and this is one of the things that Moses is pointing to, we don't get to worship God just on our own terms.

When it works, you know, we don't get to worship God on our own terms when it works for you, when it fits your schedule, when it's most sort of convenient. We worship God the way He says, and thankfully, He hasn't left us blind to His thoughts on that, and we'll get there shortly.

Now, a few caveats here. Of course, there are going to be cultural expressions of worship, which will vary. What I'm trying to say is we just need to be a bit careful and make sure we have what the Lord wants from our meetings with Him, because that's what matters the most.

Let me come at this from a different angle, just so it's very, very clear. In the passage, and actually throughout the book of Deuteronomy, there's a lot of things that God chooses.

[10:11] Right? He chooses Israel. Later on, the people say, let us choose a king. God says, no, I will choose a king. I'll give you a king. Chapter 18, He chooses priests. And in this chapter, He chooses where they are worshiped.

Interestingly, the place is not actually named, because what's important and what Moses wants us to focus on is the fact of God's choice.

God has the right to choose. And ultimately, what He chooses is always best for us. Compare this to the Canaanite religion, right? They're clearly going to be finding idols just everywhere, right?

And they chose places which they probably felt were very spiritual. Like, let's chuck a temple high up on a mountain. Or let's, this big willow tree, let's put a little temple under this willow tree.

They chose places that felt spiritual and invited their gods to come to that. Now, Moses says the opposite, doesn't he? God chooses the place and God invites you to come to it.

[11:13] So in summary, worship Him the way He says. Our preferences, they come down the list of importance. There are sort of a long second to what the Lord requires from our worship.

All right. That was sort of like the first sort of section here. So right then, where are we? When it comes to true worship, there are things we say no to. We say no to idolatry. We say no to making personal preference the key factor in worship.

We say no to these things and we say yes to some things. So let's get to the yes things. The things we say yes to first. And I'm going to go through these things quite quickly. First, from our passage, the first thing we say yes to.

Let me start like this. We're constantly reminded in this passage of what God has done. And our worship is response.

It is a response to that. Here's what I mean. When you go to the movies, you feel stuff. It's great. You have an experience that's positive, hopefully. Maybe you're inspired.

[12:18] It's wonderful. In worship, say worship gathering, we're not trying to put the elements of the service together just to make you feel good.

We're not simply trying to curate a positive spiritual experience, like the kind of experience you'd have at the movies. In worship, servants, we're trying to remind each other of all the things that God has done for us.

He's called us by name. He's saved us through Christ. He's forgiven us. He's called us to new life with Him. Our worship is a response to that.

In Deuteronomy, the passage constantly talks about all the things God has done because worship is a response to the things that God has done. So what's the yes?

Worship is just a giant yes to something God has done. Worship is a giant yes to something God has done first.

[13:23] Okay. Secondly, what else do we say yes to? When describing who should come to a worship service, it says, I love this line here, you and your sons and your daughters, your male servants, your female servants, and the Levite who's within your towns since there's no portion or inheritance with you.

Who comes? Everyone comes. Everyone is there. It's a gathering. Even the people on the margins are scooped up and invited in. So true worship is social.

We do it together, which is why this physical distancing thing is so hard for us. Of course, we spend time together by ourselves with Jesus, but primarily the biblical vision of what it means to be a Christian is you're part of a family.

You're part of a family. So true worship is responsive. True worship is social. True worship is costly. Costly.

Verse six. You shall bring your burnt offerings, your sacrifices, your tithes, and the contribution that you present, your vow offerings, your free will offerings, the firstborn of your herd and your...

[14:34] That's a lot of offerings. Worship's costly. It costs time. It costs resources. It's an inconvenience to your life. But the gatherings are so important. We make these sacrifices because when we consider what God has done for us, His Son on the cross.

I mean, no cost is too big. So true worship is responsive. It's social. It's costly. Next, it's joyful. Look at verse seven and verse 12.

And there you shall eat before the Lord your God and you shall rejoice, you and your households, and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God. The gatherings actually sound amazing, don't they? You know, they have a massive grill. You know, all the sacrificed animals here. Just so you know if you're sort of new to the whole Christian thing. Mostly, those were eaten. Mostly, they're eaten by the people.

It's a giant. It feels more like a party than a really dura sort of, you know, church service. It's a banquet in the presence of God and with each other, everyone enjoying the goodness of God and being together.

[15:37] Now, our services have got to bear the weight of whatever we bring to the service as well. So we might come with lament. We might come with great sadness in our life.

But even in the midst of great difficulties, there are always reasons to be grateful to God, always reasons to praise God. And it can simply be that the pain you are feeling will end someday because God has promised us He will wipe away every tear.

So true worship, what we say yes to, it's responsive. It's social. It's costly. It's joyful. And lastly, true worship is marked by grace. Verse 10. Go over the Jordan and live in the land that your God is giving you to inherit.

And when He gives you rest from your enemies around, all around you, you will live in safety. God is giving peace and a place and a way for His people. I mean, it's a great deal, isn't it?

All the stuff that God is giving them. And for us, in this new covenant with Christ, we can say no less than this. God chose us and called us by name because He loved us and He wants to bless us.

[16:49] Folks, it's all grace. It is all a gift. He chose you because He loves you. And you can't go further back in that equation, right? He just chose you because He loves you.

Grace should be the mark of all our gatherings. Let me finish here. Finish-ish here. We're living, you know, a few millennia after this was written.

The big principles of this passage are still relevant. Some of them are going to look a little bit different, perhaps today. But so let me give you a couple of examples that might look a little bit different.

For example, God gave His people in Deuteronomy so much, He gave them a place to worship, a place that He especially dwelt, this temple. In the New Testament, God gave us Jesus.

Jesus was not a person that God especially dwelt in. He was God. Instead of giving us just a place, He gave us Himself. Himself. He gave us Jesus.

[17:51] He gave us the perfect image of Himself in Christ. So today, our worship is Jesus-focused. And just one more example. You know, we no longer have this elaborate sacrificial system.

Romans 12 says, it looks different now. Romans 12 says to Christians that our bodies are a living sacrifice. Instead of offering animals, we offer ourselves, our lives, our bodies as living sacrifice.

So the sacrifice we offer is the way we live our entire life, all of our resources, all of our decisions. We live them for Jesus. That's what the sacrificial system is now.

That's just a couple of examples. But when it comes to, you know, it comes to worship, some things have been reframed because of Jesus. But most of what Moses says here remains the same.

We are to be ruthless about purging idols from our life. When it comes to worship, our personal preference comes a distant second to what God requires from us.

[18:58] And our gatherings are going to be costly. We shouldn't begrudge that. And they should be marked by community, by joy, and by grace.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.