



The Right Place to Worship

SERIES: *Turning Point: Start Fresh/Stay the Course*

In the video we just saw, the difference between what Johnny Cash did in that studio and what Sam Phillips was trying to get him to do can be summed up in one word: worship. Just because you sing a song with the right words and the right tune doesn't mean you're worshipping God. So, when it comes to worship, how do we bring it home? This is an important question because there is nothing we do as a church as important as worship. Worship is more important than reaching the lost. It's more important than studying the Bible. It's even more important than loving one another. But the sad fact is worship is a weak spot in most churches today. Twenty-seven years ago A.W. Tozer said worship is the "missing jewel" in the modern church. It's still true.

This morning in our study of Deuteronomy we come to chapter 12. We're still in Moses' second sermon. But in chapter 12 he reaches a turning point in this sermon. For eight chapters he's been encouraging the Israelites in a general way to love God and keep his commandments when they enter the Promised Land. Now he starts applying this to specific areas of their lives. And the first specific area he addresses is how they worship. There is a reason worship is the first thing on his list. It's first because it's first. He wants them to know the right approach to worship and he says four things about that.

I. Worship should take place in the right place.

First of all, worship should take place in the right place. This may sound strange to us today because we know that we can worship any time and any place. It doesn't have to be a church building like this. You can worship in a home or in a school or even in a bar. But there was a reason Moses made this an issue with the Israelites as they entered the Promised Land. Look at vv.1-5.

"These are the statutes and the judgments which you shall carefully observe in the land which the LORD, the God of your fathers, has given you to possess as long as you live on the earth. You shall utterly destroy all the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess serve their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. You shall tear down their altars and smash their sacred pillars and bum their Asherim

with fire, and you shall cut down the engraved images of their gods and obliterate their name from that place. You shall not act like this toward the LORD your God. But you shall seek the LORD at the place which the LORD your God will choose from all your tribes, to establish His name there for His dwelling, and there you shall come."

Moses says to utterly destroy all the places where the Canaanite tribes serve their gods. They're to tear down their altars and smash their sacred pillars. We say, "What ever happened to religious tolerance?" But we have to understand Canaanite religion was morally corrupt, physically brutal and socially destructive. Not only did it involve both male and female prostitution, but skip forward to v.31. **"You shall not behave thus toward the LORD your God, for every abominable act which the LORD hates they have done for their gods; for they even bum their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods."** You can see how corrupt they were. No wonder he says to destroy their places of worship. As long as they were there, they'd be tempted to act like that.

Instead, they were to seek the Lord and worship at the place God chose for his name to dwell. When they started out, Mt. Sinai was that place. All through the wilderness wanderings that place was the portable tabernacle they took with them where God chose to meet with Moses. And then later after they became established in the land they built a temple in Jerusalem and that became the right place to worship God. So God seemed to always have a place.

We might wonder if the same thing goes today. Is there just one place where we can worship God? Is there some holy temple where we meet with God? Is it wrong for us try to worship God in just any place we want? This issue came up when Jesus encountered the Samaritan woman at the well. She raised the issue of place because the Samaritans worshipped at a place called Mt. Gerazim. She said to Jesus, **"Our fathers worshiped in this mountain, and you people say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship."** Jesus changed all the rules when he responded, **"Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, shall you worship the Father...an hour is coming, and now is, when**

the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

Jesus seems to say that place doesn't matter any more. At least not a physical place. What matters is spirit and truth. In a sense, Jesus is talking about a spiritual place. You see, we, too, have one central sanctuary where we can worship God. It's not some building made with human hands, it's a person. It's the person of Jesus Christ. He's the place where God has chosen for his name to dwell. John wrote of Jesus, **"And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth"** (Jn.1:14). When it says that "he dwelt among us" that word literally means "he tabernacled among us." Jesus also spoke of his body as a new temple where God and people would meet (Jn.2:19-21). He said of himself, **"Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."** And then John adds, **"The temple he had spoken of was his body."**

The place we meet God today for worship is not a physical place but a person; the person of Jesus. He is the name above all names. There is no other place to worship. This excludes a lot of places. There are a lot of people today who say, "Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, we can all worship together. We're all worshipping the same God; we just get there by a different pathway." God's word says, "There is only one pathway; there is only one place, there is only one name, that's Jesus.

II. Worship should take place in the right way.

But not only do we have to worship in the right place we have to worship in the right way. He said at the end of v.5 about the place where he's chosen for his name to dwell, **"and there you shall come."** And look at what he says in v.6, **"There you shall bring your burnt offerings, your sacrifices, your tithes, the contribution of your hand, your votive offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herd and of your flock."** And then he adds in v.7, **"There also you and your household shall eat before the Lord your God."** So the right way to worship was to come to this place and to offer sacrifices and to eat. The burnt offering would be offered to God in its entirety. Other offerings were such that part was offered to God and the rest was offered to the priests or the people to eat. They were also to bring tithes and offerings. You get this sense here that worship isn't so much about receiving something from God but offering something to God.

This is where we're all mixed up today. We've been too influenced by a culture of entertainment. So when we

come to church, we expect to watch something that impresses us and makes us feel good; we expect to receive something. But the right way to worship is to come to give something rather than to get something. Our goal is not to laugh or cry or feel better when it's all over, but rather to offer something to God. Far too often we come to worship with the roles turned around. We come thinking that we're the audience and so we're there to receive something. Like a good audience, we applaud or complain depending on how the performers do. The performers are those who lead the service: the preacher, the worship leader, etc. But if we're to worship in the right way we'll see ourselves as the performers. You ask, "Who is the audience?" The audience is God. We're here to offer worship to him. The worship leaders are simply the prompters that help us to do that. If this were our perspective, think of how it would revolutionize our worship! The question we'd be most concerned about when we left is not how the pastor did or how the worship leader did, but rather how did I do? How was my performance today? Did I give to God what he's worthy of?

You might ask, "Well, what are we supposed to offer to him? What are the sacrifices we bring?" We bring our tithes. We bring what Scripture calls a "sacrifice of praise." But the most costly offering is our bodies, our whole selves. That's what Paul had in mind when he said in Romans 12:2, **"I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship."** Look at how Paul defines worship! Worship is a "spiritual service." We're not being served, we're serving! We offer something to him; not dead animals but a living body (ourselves). We do this because we've experienced his mercy. So, yes, it started with him giving something to us, his grace and mercy, but worship is what we do in response. It's our giving back to him.

III. Worship should take place with the right spirit.

But not only do we have to worship in the right place and in the right way, we also have to worship with the right spirit. Look at v.7. **"There also you and your households shall eat before the LORD your God, and rejoice in all your undertakings in which the LORD your God has blessed you."** The right spirit is a spirit of rejoicing. This is so important that you see the same thing two more times in this passage. Verse 12, **"And you shall rejoice before the Lord your God."** Verse 18, **"you shall rejoice before the Lord your God in all your undertakings."** We normally think of Old Testament worship as very dower and formal and serious. But Moses says you've got to rejoice. The Hebrew

word used here means to celebrate like football players do when they score a touchdown.

Worship is meant to be a celebration; the celebration of God. Ron Allen writes, "As a thoughtful gift is a celebration of a birthday, as a special evening out is the celebration of an anniversary, as a warm eulogy is a celebration of a life, as a sexual embrace is a celebration of a marriage—so worship is a celebration of God." In worship we celebrate his goodness, grace, power and love.

Sometimes we come to worship and we're having a hard time rejoicing because of something going on in our lives. What do we do? Do we paste a smile on our face and pretend to be happy? I don't think so. But when we purpose to worship God in the midst of the mess that our lives sometimes seem to be, our perspective can be transformed and joy can spring up even in the hardest times. It's like when a father came one day to discover that the kitchen he had worked so hard to clean only a few hours before was now a terrible wreck. His young daughter had been busy cooking and the ingredients were scattered all over the counters and even the floor. He wasn't in a mood for rejoicing. But then he looked a bit closer and found a tiny note on the table, clumsily written and smeared with chocolate fingerprints. The message was short: "I'm makin' sumthin for you, Dad." It was signed "Your Angel." In the midst of the mess and despite his irritation, joy sprang up in that dad's heart. His attention had been redirected from the problem to the little girl he loved and the fact that she was makin' sumthin for him. The same is true in worship. So often we come to worship and life looks real messy; we can't find a whole lot to rejoice about. But worship is a time to look closer and see that the Lord is behind it all, makin' sumthin for us. When we see that and believe that, we'll rejoice.

I believe in order for us to really rejoice here on Sunday morning we have to cultivate our relationship with God during the week. It's almost like Sunday is game day, but our performance on Sunday will largely be determined by how we practice during the week. Are you stretching and working your muscles in private worship during the week? Are you in the Word? Are you finding fresh ways to connect with God so when you come here on Sunday you know what you're celebrating? I'll tell you I couldn't have made it through this week without God's help. I had some challenges this week and I spent a fair amount of time begging God for help. In the midst of that God gave me Psalm 112:6-8, "**For the righteous will never be moved; he will be remembered forever. He is not afraid of bad news; his heart is firm, trusting in the Lord. His heart is steadfast; he will not be afraid...**" I tend to be afraid of bad news and so this meant a lot to me. I used that to worship this week. And that makes a difference as I come here to

worship with all of you on Sunday morning. I'm much more joyful and am less prone to take God for granted here today because of how he's encouraged me out there.

IV. Worship should take place with the right people.

But here is one more thing. Worship should take place in the right place and in the right way and with the right spirit, but also with the right people. Verse 7 says "**you and your households shall eat before the Lord your God...**" And back then often times your household included not just your immediate family but your servants. Look at v.12. "**And you shall rejoice before the LORD your God, you and your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, and the Levite who is within your gates, since he has no portion or inheritance with you.**" He includes Levites as well because Levites had no inheritance of land to pass on from generation to generation. They were dependent on the offerings of the people. Verse 19 stresses this again, "**Be careful that you do not forsake the Levite as long as you live in the land.**"

We usually think of worship as exclusively vertical. It has to do with me and God or even us and God. But there is also a horizontal aspect to worship. You can't claim to love God and at the same time exclude those who God loves. So we're called to be inclusive and compassionate in our worship. We invite anyone to worship our God along side of us. They might have looked down on their servants and wanted them out of sight when they worshipped, but God says to include them. We may not have servants but we have people we might think are lower than us. Maybe they don't have the education we have or the income or the right address. It's kind of like when you go to a wedding. There may be all kinds of people at the wedding, but you don't mind being together because you're all focused on what they have in common—the bride and groom. So you have people dancing and toasting and eating with one another who would never do this outside the wedding.

Jesus talked about this horizontal aspect of worship. Remember what he said, "**If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering**" (Mt.5:23-24). That's talking about worship. Offerings were made as part of temple worship. So you go to church and you're singing the songs and offering praise to God and you remember that your brother or sister in Christ has something against you. Notice it doesn't say that you have something against them but they have something against you. What do you do? Jesus says stop singing and go deal with the issue. Try to be reconciled and then go back to

worship. I sometimes think if we all took this seriously we would have an empty church! Talk about people coming late to church; we would have more people leaving early!

Paul wrote about this. He wrote to the Corinthian church about some issues they were having in their worship, especially around the Lord's Supper. He said, **"But in giving this instruction, I do not praise you... For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you..."** Paul says he's not going to pat them on the back because when they come for worship they're divided. They've got the "have's" over here and the "have nots" over there. He goes on, **"Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper, for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God, and shame those who have nothing?"** (1 Cor.11:17-22). Back then the Lord's Supper was part of an actual meal; they brought their own food and all ate together. But it seems that some people brought fine wine and filet mignon while others had nothing. Paul says, "You call that the Lord's Supper but it's not. You call that worship but it's not. You may as well just go home and eat. You can't treat people like that and worship at the same time!"

CONCLUSION

This morning we're taking communion and this of course is an act of worship. We've seen in this passage how worship is often connected to eating a meal together. Deut. 12:7: **"There also you and your households shall eat before the LORD your God, and rejoice in all your undertakings in which the LORD your God has blessed you."** It's a meal where we offer thanksgiving to God. It's a meal we eat with joy and with one another. And it's a meal made possible by what Jesus has done.

There's a wonderful film called *Babette's Feast* that's about a strict, dour, fundamentalist community in Denmark. They are ultra religious, judgmental and without joy. The main character, Babette, works as a cook for two elderly sisters who have no idea that she once was a chef to nobility back in her native France. Babette's dream is to return to her beloved home city of Paris, so every year she buys a lottery ticket in hopes of winning enough money to return. And every night her employers demand that she cook the same dreary meal: boiled fish and potatoes, because Jesus said, "Take no thought of food and drink."

One day the unbelievable happens: Babette wins the lottery! The prize is 10,000 francs, a small fortune. And because the anniversary of the founding of the community is approaching, Babette asks if she might prepare a French dinner with all the trimmings for the entire village. At first the townspeople refuse: "No, it would be sin to indulge in such rich food." But Babette begs them, and finally they relent, but the people secretly vow not to enjoy the feast and instead to occupy their minds with spiritual things, believing God will not blame them for eating this sinful meal as long as they do not enjoy it.

Babette begins her preparations. Caravans of exotic food and drink arrive in the village. Finally the big day comes, and the village gathers. The first course is an exquisite turtle soup. The diners force it down without enjoyment. But although they usually eat in silence, conversation begins to take off. Then comes the wine—the finest vintage in France. And the atmosphere changes. Someone smiles. Someone else giggles. An arm comes up and drapes over a shoulder. Someone says, "After all, did not the Lord Jesus say, love one another?" By the time the main entrée of quail arrives, those joyless, pleasure-fearing people are giggling and laughing and slurping and guffawing and praising God for their many years together. This pack of Pharisees is transformed into a loving community through the gift of a meal. One of the two sisters goes into the kitchen to thank Babette, saying, "Oh, how we will miss you when you return to Paris!" And Babette replies, "I will not be returning to Paris, because I have no money. I spent it all on the feast."

Can you think of anyone else who gave his all to make us a loving, worshipping community through the gift of a meal? That's what Jesus Christ did. Jesus makes true worship possible. He's the right place; He showed us the right way when he offered his own body a living sacrifice; He gives us the right spirit when he said, **"These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full"** (Jn.15:11). And he's surrounded us with the right people to reach out to in love and forgiveness.

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