

Worship Together
Deuteronomy 12:1-19

Turn to Deuteronomy 12 please. Our God wants people to come together to worship him. Maybe “want” is not the right word. What kind of worship fits our God, or suits our God? Worship where his people come together to worship him.

What kind of worship honours God and glorifies God? When his people come together.

In a few minutes we’ll read from Deuteronomy 12, but before that I’m going to take a detour. I’m going to talk a little bit about how I prepare these sermons. I’ve been asked a few times, including recently, so I will answer.

First, I am a reader of the whole Bible, most days I read the OT enough to turn the page once, and I read the NT to turn the page once. I don’t read to meet God. I read to learn about God, to find out what matters to him and what doesn’t, I read to know his will, to understand him. Sometimes there is a strong personal connection between God and me, usually not.

I have a text for the next Sunday, in this case Deuteronomy 12. On Monday of the week I read Deut 12 over several times, spend 20-30 minutes reading it over and over. I try to pay attention to every phrase, no skimming. I try to notice all the details. I do this several evenings a week, for me it is important to start at the beginning of the week.

This week I noticed something important in Deut 12 *after* reading it 6 or 8 times that I did not pick up at all in those first readings. That’s normal. So read it patiently. Then read it patiently again. Then read it patiently again.

I pray during these times that the Lord will show me what’s really going on in this text, and that through me he’ll say to you what he wants to say to you.

Through the week at other times I think about Deut 12, and what God might be saying in that Scripture, and what I might say to you on Sunday. Deuteronomy 12 was on my mind quite often during the week.

Ahead of time I make sure I have one or two good commentaries on Deuteronomy, and I check them enough to know if I’m on the right track. Then on Saturday evening I take a sheet of paper and make write down an outline, what I’ve come up during my thinking times during the week, and on Sunday I get up early and type up this manuscript.

Two final comments. One, the Bible is not raw material for sermons. It is already a sermon, and my work is to discover the sermon that’s there. Two, this whole process is one of the most satisfying things that I do. When I’m away from it for a while, I get edgy, I want back in.

Detour is over, back to Deuteronomy 12.

Deuteronomy 12:1-8 - *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.* ² *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.* ³ *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.*

⁴ *You must not worship the LORD your God in their way.* ⁵ *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;* ⁶ *there bring your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tithes and special gifts, what you have vowed to give and your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks.* ⁷ *There, in the presence of the LORD your God, you and your families shall eat and shall rejoice in everything you have put your hand to, because the LORD your God has blessed you.* ⁸ *You are not to do as we do here today, everyone doing as they see fit.*

Let's look more carefully: ² *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.*

The Canaanites worshipped all over the place, on high mountains (plural), on the hills (plural), and under every spreading tree. Those shall no longer be worship places. Destroy the worship facilities completely, says Moses to Israel.

³ *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.*

⁴ *You must not worship the LORD your God in their way.*

You shall not worship YOUR God in THEIR way. Moses has said a lot about idolatry so far in Deuteronomy, about worshipping other gods, but this is not about that. This is about worshipping the right God in the wrong way. There are right and wrong ways to worship our God.

What do we know so far about their way of worship? Only that they have many worship places, and that they worship all over the place.

⁵ *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;* ⁶ *there bring your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tithes and special gifts, what you have vowed to give and your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks.* ⁷ *There, in the presence of the LORD your God, you and your families shall eat and shall rejoice in everything you have put your hand to, because the LORD your God has blessed you.*

God's way of worship is that everything happens at one place, and that will be a place that God himself chooses, not a place that Israel chooses.

⁸ *You are not to do as we do here today, everyone doing as they see fit.* More literally, *You are not to do as we do here today, everyone doing what is right in their own eyes.* Was their ever a time when Christian worship had more of this, everyone doing what is right in our own eyes?

Let's make some observations on these eight verses, and they will go over the rest of Deuteronomy 12.

What kind of worship pleases God, what worship fits our God? The biggest problem is that it does not occur to us to ask the question. We know that some people like one kind of worship and others like another. But *GOD*? Does *HE* have an opinion about these things? Apparently he does.

What God wants is NOT what happens when everyone does what is right in their own eyes. In this text that is exactly what we're not to do.

Worship practices are not supposed to come from the people around us. We have to be careful here, music is cultural and how we show respect is cultural, and so on, and that is not wrong. Still, worship practices are not to come from people who do not worship our God, and they are not to come from what each of us thinks is right in our own eyes.

It comes from what God has shown about himself. V4 – you must not worship the LORD your God in their way. V8 – You are not to do as we do here today, everyone doing what seems right in our own eyes.

What is God's way, as opposed to our way and the world's way? Group worship over individual worship. Everyone will come to ONE place, one central place, that God not Israel chooses.

Place is no longer the issue. Jesus said to the Samaritan woman that true worshippers are not limited to Samaria or Jerusalem, but to worship in spirit and truth. But clearly in our text the LORD our God wants people to come together to worship him. The NT letters to the churches support this consistently.

That does not mean that God does not meet individuals when they are in their beds at night, or when they're walking alone on the road, or when two or three are gathered together. That was common already in the OT, which we can get from different stories and from Psalms. It is certainly true in the NT. But almost all of the NT is written to churches, not to individuals.

But the most radical thing in this chapter, to me, is that we shall worship in ways that please God. Worship is what we give him, and so we do it in his way, not what meets our needs or seems right to us.

We rightly assume that worship in God's way, true and right worship, will be good for his people, rich and satisfying – we assume this because we know that much about our God. But we do not begin by seeking worship that is rich and satisfying. We begin by seeking to please God.

Let's read vv8-19 *You are not to do as we do here today, everyone doing as they see fit,*⁹ *since you have not yet reached the resting place and the inheritance the LORD your God is giving you.*¹⁰ *But you will cross the Jordan and settle in the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, and he will give you rest from all your enemies around you so that you will live in safety.*¹¹ *Then to the place the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his Name—there*

you are to bring everything I command you: your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tithes and special gifts, and all the choice possessions you have vowed to the Lord. 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. ¹³ Be careful not to sacrifice your burnt offerings anywhere you please. ¹⁴ Offer them only at the place the LORD will choose in one of your tribes, and there observe everything I command you.

¹⁵ Nevertheless, you may slaughter your animals in any of your towns and eat as much of the meat as you want, as if it were gazelle or deer, according to the blessing the LORD your God gives you. Both the ceremonially unclean and the clean may eat it. ¹⁶ But you must not eat the blood; pour it out on the ground like water. ¹⁷ You must not eat in your own towns the tithe of your grain and new wine and olive oil, or the firstborn of your herds and flocks, or whatever you have vowed to give, or your freewill offerings or special gifts. 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. ¹⁹ Be careful not to neglect the Levites as long as you live in your land.

The 12 tribes of Israel don't even get their own worship place. One place for all the tribes. That means that most of the people who came to the one place did not know each other, probably never saw each other before. But they came to the same place as all the others, because that was the kind of worship God wanted.

Worship has changed a lot from then to now. I don't know exactly how to apply this. God has not changed. All these things are written down to teach us, Paul says in Romans 15:4.

I do feel alarm at Christians who stop meeting with congregations because the group worship does not satisfy anything in them, does not meet any need they can feel. I have some sympathy, I don't know how I would do if I was attending some of those churches.

But I do want to offer this: that we do not worship to get, but to give, to give God honour, and to give God ourselves again, to renew our pledge of allegiance to God and to Jesus his Son.

Some of us come on Sunday to give, I did today, and the song leaders came to give, and that's common reason that we show up with you the group. We give to you, but behind that we're giving it to our Lord, serving him.

I would like to suggest that if we were thinking right, maybe all of us would come first to give to God, to give him honour and to give him ourselves again, to give him thanks. What if we came to give? You say, "but I feel so empty and lost and hurt, how can I come to church to give?"

I can tell you that the people who come to lead you to God are in pretty sorry shape themselves sometimes. Sometime we have to dig very deep, and pray desperately, to do the ordinary things. Come to honour God, to give to him. Then it is easier to ask: what kind of gift would he like?

Rejoice before the LORD. We're talking about what kind of worship pleases God. In Deut 12 God is pretty clear that all the sacrifices and burnt offerings are to be given at the one place that he will choose for his name to dwell.

But there's something else in this chapter about what kind of worship pleases God. It is a combination of a big thanksgiving family gathering, and a family holiday. Picture your whole extended family, parents and children and whoever, going on a trip in fall and having a big thanksgiving holiday there, not just one meal but a few days of it. You did this specifically to thank God for how he had blessed your family that year.

And picture many other families, a few of whom you've seen before, but most of home you've not seen before, but they all worship the same God, and they're gathering for the same reason at more or less the same time.

You'll have to picture a big fair grounds, a huge campground, with the Tabernacle in the middle, or Solomon's temple. God's dwelling is in the middle, and everyone has their thanksgiving family worship holiday at this place.

And what you eat during these days is your tithe. You save a tenth of your harvest for God, a tenth of your goats and sheep, and you take all this to the place God has chosen, and there you eat your tithe in the presence of God and you rejoice before God at how good he has been to you.

THAT is the kind of worship that God wants, everyone coming to the same place and doing THAT.

12:7 - There, in the presence of the LORD your God, you and your families shall eat and shall rejoice in everything you have put your hand to, because the LORD your God has blessed you.

12:11-12 Then to the place the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his Name—there you are to bring everything I command you: your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tithes and special gifts, and all the choice possessions you have vowed to the Lord. 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.

Your male and female servants are separated from their families, or they have no families, so you take them along, they go with you and rejoice with you. And the Levites do not have fields as the rest of you, so they will not have the same kind of tithe to give, so you take them along and they will eat with you.

12:17-18 - You must not eat in your own towns the tithe of your grain and new wine and olive oil, or the firstborn of your herds and flocks, or whatever you have vowed to give, or your freewill offerings or special gifts. 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.

This is not a God who takes, people, this is a God who gives. God blessed them with all their crops and all their livestock, and he wanted them to give him a tenth, and to give him the firstborn sheep or goat or cow.

What do they do with that tenth? They take the whole family, and they go to God's presence, and they eat the tenth in front of God and they rejoice. And dozens and dozens of other families are doing the same thing with their tithes and offerings, all of this with God at the center, all of this male and female servants who have no families, and all of this with Levites who have families but don't have crops and herds.

That is God's worship style: thankful congregational worship that pleases and honours God.

I do not know how much Israel did this, or even if they did it at all. I assume at least some of this did happen. The Psalms talk about people giving God thanks in the congregation. We do know this: God showed Moses that this was the worship that he wanted.

We're having our Communion Meal together today, this is a good way to understand that.

How can we summarize Deuteronomy 12? Hebrews 10:25 – *Don't give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing*. In the verses before and after, in Hebrews 10, this is pretty serious business. *Don't give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing*.

It is not enough to worship God in the way that seems right to us. Let's meet him to give him honour and thanks and give him ourselves again. And we'll celebrate together in his presence, BECAUSE this God is a God who gives, not God who takes, like other gods, but a God who gives.

Amen.