

“Deuteronomy: The Gospel according to Moses”**Sermon 15 – “Worshiping God’s Way”****Introduction**

There are many today, even among relatively conservative evangelical Christians – there are many today who would probably disagree with this assertion, but here it is: it is possible to worship the right God in the wrong way. It is possible – it is all too possible – to worship the right God in the wrong way. Many today think that, so long as you are worshiping the one true God, the God of the Scriptures, that it really doesn’t matter how you actually go about worshiping Him, that God will just accept any form of worship as long as it is sincerely directed toward Him and no other. But as we began to see last week, God is very concerned not just about whom we worship, but also about how we worship. That is the distinction between the First and the Second Commandments: the First Commandment tells us whom we must worship; the Second Commandment tells us how we must worship. While many confuse those two commandments, they really do have distinct concerns. Moses, here in Deuteronomy, has spent all of chapters 6-11 expanding upon that First Commandment, telling the Israelites whom they must worship, God and God alone; and now in chapter 12 he does the same for the Second Commandment, telling the Israelites how they must worship that one God. Last week, we looked at vv. 1-28 and saw that God’s people must worship Him in the place He has commanded; today we will look at the rest of this chapter and see that God’s people must worship Him in the way that He has commanded. The way in which we worship God really does matter to Him. It’s not enough just to get the object of our worship right; we must get the method, the mode of our worship right as well. It is all too possible to worship the right God but in the wrong way and by doing so violate His law and commit sin.

Here in Deuteronomy 12:29-32 (btw, change outline to include v. 32 with Second Commandment) – Here in Deuteronomy 12:29-32, Moses talks about the way in which the Israelites are not to worship God and about the way in which they are to worship God: he first gives them the wrong way to worship God in vv. 29-31, then he gives them the right way to worship God and indicates that it is the only way to worship God in v. 32. So let’s give our attention to these verses now and then spend some time considering how they might apply to our lives. So first, . . .

I. The Wrong Way to Worship God (vv. 29-31)

In a nutshell, the wrong way to worship God is to worship Him according to man’s imagination. The wrong way is man’s way. That’s what we see here in vv. 29-31 (read). Once again, despite how many commentators fail to recognize this, the issue here is not about the proper object of worship, not about whom the Israelites were to worship, but about the proper method of worship, how they were to worship. Moses here warns the Israelites not to ask about the nations they will drive out of Canaan, “How did these nations serve their gods?” not so that they could worship those nations’ gods but so that they could worship their own God in the same way. That’s precisely what Moses says in v. 31: “You shall

not worship the Lord your God in that way.” You see how the concern is not just about whom they worship but about how they worship? It was possible for them to worship the right God but in the wrong way.

In seeking to find out how they were to worship God, Moses first tells them how not to worship God, the wrong way in which they could worship Him. They are not to get their method and mode of worship from men, especially not from the pagan nations around them. They would be tempted to do so: Moses’ words in v. 30, “Take care that you be not ensnared to follow them,” indicate that there is going to be a certain kind of allure to those pagan worship practices, like the bait in a trap, so that the Israelites must be on their guard against them. And as an extreme example of the depths of wickedness to which man’s imagination can take him in devising his own ways of worship, Moses cites the Canaanite practice of child sacrifice in v. 31. The Canaanites devised many immoral methods of worshiping their false gods, but none was more reprehensible than this; and now that I am a father, just the thought of this practice is literally nauseous. How could a man take his own helpless infant child and do something like that, especially in the name of worship? How could they think that would please their gods? The true God says here that He hates it, He abhors it; it’s an abomination to Him. But what is Moses’ point here? That if you try to figure out how to worship from man, that’s where man’s imaginations will take you: to vile, unspeakable acts of wickedness. The wrong way to worship God is to worship Him according to man’s imagination. But thankfully Moses doesn’t stop there: he goes on to give . . .

II. The Right Way to Worship God (v. 32a)

Again, in a nutshell, the right way to worship God is according to God’s command. The wrong way is according to man’s imagination, is man’s way: the right way is according to God’s command, is God’s way. The first part of v. 32: “Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do.” At first glance, this seems like just a general exhortation to obedience to God’s law such as we find in many other places in Deuteronomy. But what is the context? It’s the context of worship, right? The “everything that I command you” is everything that God has commanded concerning His worship: it’s everything, all of the detailed rituals of worship spelled out in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. Moses doesn’t have to repeat all of that here: he just has to remind the Israelites that God has already told them exactly how He wants them to worship Him. They don’t have to try to figure it out for themselves or ask how other people go about worshiping their gods: the right way to worship God has already been given to them by God Himself. The right way to worship God is to worship Him according to His own commands. But Moses takes this even a step further: this is not just the right way to worship God, it is also, thirdly, . . .

III. The Only Way to Worship God (v. 32b)

Notice the second part of v. 32: “Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it or take from it.” The way in which God has commanded His people to worship Him is not only the right way to worship Him: it is the only way to worship Him. Nothing is to be added to His commands, and nothing is to be taken away from them. That second part about not taking away from anything that God has commanded, that part is easy for us to understand: we are not to neglect any

part of what God has commanded us to do in His worship. But that first part is a bit surprising perhaps: we're not to add to His commands, we're not supposed to do anything in God's worship that He has not explicitly commanded us to do. In other words, God is just as displeased when His people worship Him in any way that He has not commanded as He is when they fail to worship Him in any way that He has commanded. God's commands for His worship are sufficient: we are not even to try to go "above and beyond" God's commands in our worship, no matter how well-intentioned such additions might be. There are some Christians who argue that God can be worshiped in any way that is not specifically prohibited in God's Word, that as long as God hasn't explicitly said "Don't worship me like this," then we can worship Him like that. But Moses is more strict here: he says that the only ways in which God can be worshiped are the ways that He has specifically commanded, that only if God has explicitly said "Worship me like this" can we worship Him like that. The way in which God has commanded His people to worship Him is not only the right way to worship Him: it is the only way to worship Him.

All of this that we see spelled out here in vv. 29-32 is what we call the Regulative Principle of Worship: put simply, it is the principle that the Scriptures (what God has commanded) ought to regulate our worship. As our Confession puts it in the first paragraph of Chapter 22, "[T]he acceptable way of worshipping the true God, is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imagination and devices of men, nor the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representations, or in any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures." Notice the allusion to the Second Commandment there? God is not to be worshiped by means of "any visible representations": "You shall not make for yourself a carved image." The authors of our Confession recognized that what was under consideration in the Second Commandment was not so much whom but how we worship: even if we're worshipping the one true God, we cannot do so by means of "visible representations" of Him. But they also recognized a broader principle at work in the Second Commandment, undergirding the specific prohibition of using carved images in worship, and that broader principle is that God is to be worshiped only in the way in which He has explicitly commanded. And you know what is one of the prooftexts cited in support of the first paragraph of chapter 22? Deuteronomy 12:32.

Conclusion/Application

So how, if at all, does all of this apply to us? After all, the way in which the Israelites were commanded to worship God is very different from the way in which we worship God today. NT worship certainly is very different from OT worship, but while the specifics may have changed, the underlying principles have not. Some Christians deny that this Regulative Principle of Worship (can only worship God in the ways He has specifically commanded in Scripture) still applies today. Most of you are probably convinced that it does still apply, but still it might be beneficial to spend a few moments discussing this. To the question, "Does the Regulative Principle still apply to NT worship?" I think the best answer is to reply with several other questions: (1) "Is the Second Commandment still binding in the NT?" Because the RPW is really just an expansion of the principle inherent in the Second Commandment: if the Second Commandment is still binding, so is the RPW. (2) "Is God still sovereign over His worship?" We saw last week that this is one of the fundamental assumptions behind the Second Commandment: the place of God's worship is the place of His choosing (v. 5), and right worship

is a matter of “what is good and right in the sight of the Lord your God” (v. 28). God is sovereign over His own worship, and He therefore has the right to choose how He will be worshiped, to command what is most pleasing to Him. (3) “Has God still given commands about how He is to be worshiped in the NT?” Yes, He has. This is why our worship looks different from the worship of the OT: because God has given new and different commands as to how He is to be worshiped. We are in a New Covenant. Otherwise, we would have no right to change how we worship. We no longer worship God by sacrifices and pilgrimages and detailed rituals of washings and so on. Now we worship God by preaching and singing and praying and giving and baptizing and partaking of the Lord’s Supper, because that is how God has now commanded us to worship Him. The specifics of God’s commands have changed, but the principle remains the same: we worship God how He has commanded us and only how He has commanded us.

So yes, the RPW, the Second Commandment, is still in effect for the NT church. So these words of Moses to the Israelites expanding upon the Second Commandment have much to say to us as well. Let’s close with four thoughts in application:

1. We too must be on guard against to allure of man’s ways of worship. Again, Moses’ warning in v. 30: “Take care that you be not ensnared to follow them.” Man-made forms of worship do have a certain appeal to them. Think about even the Canaanite child sacrifices: as abhorrent as they might seem to us now, what would have been their appeal to the Israelites? Well, perhaps they could have thought along these lines – God has commanded us to sacrifice animals to Him: if He is pleased with animal sacrifices, why don’t I go one better and sacrifice something I care about even more than my goat. Surely that would please God: He would see that I love him so much, that I honor Him so much, that I’m willing to give Him even my little baby. And so, perhaps even out what might have been a good and sincere desire to please God, someone may have been tempted to worship God in a way that was actually an abomination to Him.

Now, granted, not many of us will be tempted any time soon to try to worship God by sacrificing one of our children; but there are many other forms of man-made worship out there, all sorts of things that human imagination has devised, and some of them certainly may seem to have some wisdom to them, might strike us as rather appealing. And this can go in one of two directions, toward one of two extremes. On the one hand we have things like the Charismatic movement or the Emergent Church movement that emphasize forms of worship that are touted as being more “genuine” or more “authentic” because they are more “spontaneous.” Rather than the rigid, liturgical format of traditional Christian worship, they emphasize creativity and freedom in worship; and you can see how that could be appealing to many in our modern society. On the other hand you have the Roman Catholic church with its many long-standing extra-Biblical traditions and practices of worship. The appeal there is toward antiquity and authority: much of their worship has that aura of mystery and majesty. The candles and the beautiful buildings and the ornate furnishings and the elaborate, intricate ritual – surely God must be honored by such things. Those are the two extremes, but there is much in between as well. Even today we are not beyond the pull, the allure of man-devised worship: many even from good Reformed churches have given into that temptation. Just as much as were the Israelites, so we too need to “take care not to be ensnared to follow them.” I love that Moses uses that word “ensnared,” because it conjures up the image of a trap set with bait: once one gives in to the temptation of the bait, he is

trapped. So it is with man-made worship: it may promise greater freedom – after all you’re not limited to worship only in the narrow way God has commanded. But once you take that bait, you actually lose your freedom, for then you are bound by the commands of men rather than of God, commands that they have simply devised from their own wicked imaginations. We too must be on guard against the allure of man-devised methods of worship.

2. We must believe that God’s way of worship is best. Man’s ways may seem to be more genuine or more authentic, more mysterious or reverent or honoring to God. But who knows better what is pleasing to God? Man or God? If God has commanded us to worship Him in a certain way, why would we think that any other way is more pleasing to Him? In His worship God is not pleased with laughing uncontrollably or speaking in gibberish or rolling around in the aisles or lighting candles or bowing to statues of saints or sacrificing infants or anything else that He has not commanded in His Word. He is pleased with singing and praying and giving and preaching and baptizing and partaking of the Supper. And you know how I know He is pleased with those things? Because He has told us He is pleased with them. Even if those things seem to us to be too weak or too ineffective or too simple to be worthy of the majesty of God, they are the things that God has commanded us to do in His worship, and we are not to add to them or take from them. Even if we think we could come up with something far better, we must believe that God’s way of worship is best.

3. We must strive to keep our worship of God as pure as possible. And by pure, I mean conforming to the instructions of God’s Word. Question and Answer 55 of the Baptist Catechism reads, “What is required in the second commandment?” “The second commandment requireth the receiving, observing, and keeping pure and entire all such religious worship and ordinances, as God hath appointed in His Word.” We as your pastors will strive to do so; but each one of you as well need to be on the alert to make sure that the worship of this church conforms to the commands of Scripture, neither adding to them or neglecting any part of them. We must strive to keep our own worship of God as pure as possible. Sadly, though, we know that in this life, while we are still encumbered by our sinful natures, our worship will never be perfectly pure, and so . . .

4. We must look to Christ to perfect what is still lacking in our worship and make it acceptable before God. Ultimately, pure as we strive to keep our worship, it can only be cleansed from all impurity, all defilement of imperfect performance and of sinful motivation, by Jesus Christ. We have all failed to render to God that pure and perfect worship that He has commanded, and so we are all of us violators of His Covenant and therefore deserving of its curse. But Jesus Christ did obey even this Second Commandment perfectly on behalf of all who believe in Him, and He suffered on the cross to remove the guilt of His people’s imperfect worship. So as we continue in worship today, and whenever we come before God in worship, let us always come trusting in Jesus Christ to perfect what is still lacking in our worship and make it acceptable before God; and let us look forward to the day when He will finally and fully cleanse us from all sin and we will be able at long last to render to God the pure and perfect worship that He has commanded of us.