



FIVE QUALITIES OF TRUE WORSHIP

Deuteronomy 12:1–16:17

Worship today in our churches differs in many ways from worship in Old Testament Israel, but the guiding principles of Israel's worship are a helpful guide for the modern-day church. Some essential qualities of true worship are outlined for us in Deuteronomy 12–16.

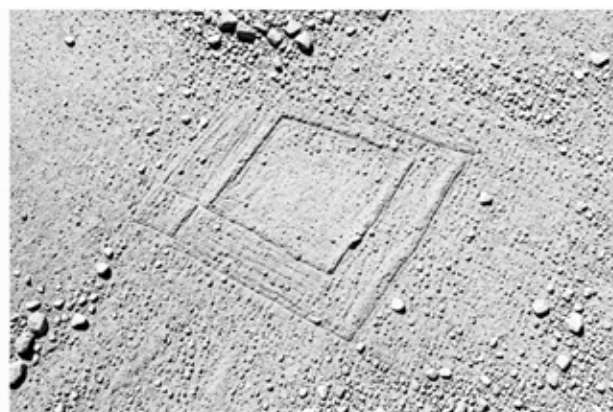
This Wisdom Journey focuses on the theme of worship, and we're going to discover five important qualities of true worship.

First, in Deuteronomy chapter 12, Moses teaches Israel that *true worship is focused only on the God of Israel*. As they look forward to the conquest of the promised land, Moses reminds the people here in verse 2, "Destroy all the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess served their gods." Then in verse 5 he adds, "You shall seek the place that the LORD your God will choose."

Throughout this chapter you will notice the repetition of God's name. Back at the burning bush more than forty years earlier, God introduced Himself to Moses as "I AM WHO I AM" (Exodus 3:14). The name Yahweh is derived from the verb for "I am," and it indicates He is ever-present. And here in Deuteronomy 12, Moses uses the name Yahweh twenty-two times.

And seventeen times Moses tells the people to worship only in the "place" where the Lord puts His altar. For example, we read in verse 14:

"At the place that the LORD will choose in one of your tribes,



Remains of an altar structure on Mount Ebal

there you shall offer your burnt offerings, and there you shall do all that I am commanding you."

More than fifty times Moses points at the people and says, "You." He's talking to every person in the nation of Israel!

Why all these specifics? Moses wants Israel and the watching world to understand that true worship involves the right people, in the right place, worshipping the right God—the God of Israel.

I meet people all the time who want to tell me about their worship experience—how spiritual they are.



The trouble is, their experiences have nothing to do with the God of Israel. My friend, any worship of any god other than the God of the Bible is just playing games without any true meaning—and certainly without any true worship.

And that leads me to this second quality of true worship: *true worship will not tolerate imposters*. The Lord delivers a warning beginning here in chapter 12, verse 29, and continuing clear through chapter 13.

Moses brings up three different dangers. In verses 1-2 of Deuteronomy 13, he warns of a “prophet or a dreamer of dreams” who appears with “a sign or a wonder” and tries to persuade Israel to worship other gods. Such people may be charismatic and eloquent, but Israel must not be fooled by their signs and wonders and dreams.

Then in verses 6 and 7 Moses warns against a family member or close friend who “entices you secretly, saying, ‘Let us go and serve other gods.’” Israel must be very cautious—as we should be—because even friends and family members can lead you away from the Lord.

Then finally, in verses 12-13, Moses warns of “worthless fellows” who have “drawn away the inhabitants of their city” into idolatry.

Are these serious dangers? You better believe it. In fact, here in this chapter, Moses assigns the death penalty for anyone attempting to lead someone away from God. Let me tell you, the severity of God’s judgment shows us how important it is to worship God alone.

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The third quality of true worship is this: *true worship begins with holiness*. Chapter 14 begins with Moses telling Israel, “You are the sons of the LORD your God.” Then in verse 2 he says: “You are a people holy to the LORD your God, and the LORD has chosen you to be . . . his treasured possession.”

Israel is viewed here as the children of God. And like moms and dads today, God wants His children to behave—not so that they can *become* His children, but because they *are* His children. Holiness is nothing more than acting like God your Father, demonstrating that you’re different *from* the world and devoted *to* Him.

Moses mentions here staying away from cutting themselves or shaving their heads to mourn the dead. These are practices associated with the false gods of the Canaanites.

Moses then reminds Israel of the kinds of food that will cause them to become ceremonially unclean and unable to worship in the tabernacle. He says in verse 3, “You shall not eat any abomination,” and down in verse 21, “You shall not eat anything that has died naturally.”

The distinctions between clean and unclean food restate much of what we learned back in Leviticus chapter 11. Israel’s food laws certainly protected them physically, but more importantly, they reminded them of their relationship to the Lord.

The fourth quality of true worship shows up as Moses teaches the nation that *true worship includes loving others*.

Here in verses 22 through 29, Moses gives some instructions about tithing. A tithe is a percentage of a person’s income—which includes grain, wine, oil, and firstborn animals—that’s to be offered to the Lord in worship.

And we’re told in verse 29 that every three years the tithe was to be given to “the Levite . . . and the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow.” All these people were dependent on the generosity and compassion of people who desired to worship God by loving others.



And there's more here. In chapter 15, Moses spells out the Sabbatical Year. Imagine this: every seventh year, all debts are to be canceled. All loans are to be forgiven—the books wiped clean.

This was designed to keep the people from becoming indebted to one another. It also promoted an attitude of sharing. I mean, just imagine how you would feel if your neighbor wanted to borrow some money from you during the sixth year. You know if he cannot pay it back, on the seventh year you will have to forgive the loan. Would you loan him the money?

Well, this sabbatical principle reminded the people that God owns everything anyway. In effect, God is saying, "I want you to use what I have given you to bless the lives of others. So, don't hold back." In fact, in verse 4 the Lord says, "And there will be no poor among you; for the LORD will bless you in the land."

In chapter 16 Moses teaches Israel what we will call the fifth quality of true worship: *true worship involves corporate celebration*.

Moses reminds Israel of the three annual feasts that will bring the whole nation together. After reviewing the various instructions concerning these feasts, Moses says in verse 16:

"Three times a year all your males [with their families if possible] shall appear before the LORD your God at the place that he will choose: at the Feast of Unleavened Bread, at the Feast of Weeks, and at the Feast of Booths."

They are going to come together in celebration of God's goodness. This is like combining the state fair with the Fourth of July. The nation would sing and feast and worship God as they celebrated His grace and faithfulness to them as a nation. We can imagine how this corporate worship encouraged every one of them.

The church is not Israel. But these qualities of worship can certainly be applied to the church. And if these true worship qualities do not describe your church, don't complain. Don't start gossiping. Just start praying. And start bringing these qualities, like generosity and love, in your own heart to your worship with others.

God just might use you—a true worshiper—to change, not only your heart, but your family, your church, and maybe even the world around you.

What life-circumstances or heart attitudes can distract you from truly God-focused worship? How could distracted worship affect your ministry to fellow believers and unbelievers? How might John 4:23-24 help you overcome your distractions?

When can generous giving actually be sinful? When can withholding from others actually be a wise choice in giving? How does a healthy, daily relationship with the LORD help navigate our heart through opportunities to give to others?

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