

The Ordinary and the Sacred

Deuteronomy 12:13-32

Some people will say rather freely, “I don’t need to come to church because I can worship God anywhere.” Some, of course, use that as an easy and hypocritical excuse to avoid attending church altogether, while others, perhaps more sincerely, genuinely understand that all of life can and should give honor and glory to God. But still they miss an important distinction, that between what is ordinary and what is sacred.

Sacred means “set apart.” At its root level, it is the word for holy. Separate. Or more descriptively, “special.” And the unfortunate consequence of saying that all of life is worship is that you lose the sense of just how special our worship of God is designed to be. It is, indeed, sacred. Set apart from everything else you do in life.

Again, some people like to emphasize that all of life is sacred, everything in life is sacred, but again the unfortunate consequence of that thinking is that, really, nothing is sacred. If everything is special, then, really, nothing is special. It is all ordinary, common.

That really is a loss. The loss of the distinction between the ordinary and the sacred really is a loss, because God so consistently emphasizes that he is special above all everything else in this world. And that our worship of him, our giving to him the sacrifices and offerings of our praise and thanksgiving really is sacred! The presence of God in worship really is special, sacred. And as we studied last week, that is why the “place” of that worship was so crucial in the Old Testament time. As I emphasized last week, it is not that God’s omnipresence was denied in the Old Testament. It’s not that his presence was

somehow limited to a particular place, but in the preparatory shadows of the Old Testament, as the revelation of God unfolded, it does stand out clearly that God would make himself known only in a particular place, the place of his own choosing, the place he identified. And the identity of that place was of great importance and great encouragement to all of his people. Thus, as a principle that continues to be valid to this day, the central reality of public worship is the presence of God.

So we read,
v.5

And the fault of the people, the warning God gave them through Moses, was clearly stated in,
v.8-11

And so we come this morning to,
v.13-14

I don’t want to repeat my emphasis from last week, but rather this morning I want to stress this big picture, that,

I. WORSHIP IS A SACRED ACTIVITY.

Set apart from the rest of life, as is the day of worship established in God’s law, the sabbath day. I want to stress the positive emphasis of all of this, not simply the prohibition that I just read from verse 13. The point is not in the prohibition. The point is not in the negative restriction or regulation, but rather in what which that regulation represents. There was a reason why the people of Israel were given that warning,

v.13 “Take heed to yourself that you do not offer your burnt offerings in every place that you see; 14 but in the place which the Lord chooses...”

The reason was that worship, corporate worship, God's people gathered together in his presence to offer him the sacrifices and offerings of their praise and adoration, that activity was the most important activity of all of life. That activity was set apart as holy, distinct from the rest of life. And it isn't that the rest of life was wrong or sinful, it isn't. We offer the whole of our lives as a living sacrifice to God.

1 Cor. 10:31 "Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

All of life is intended to give honor and praise to God. But the ordinary, common affairs of life are still a very different thing from the exalted glory of God's people gathering together in his presence to offer their worship to God.

It's like Christmas for a little child! You can't convince a little child that everyday is Christmas, not if he has seen anything of the distinctiveness of that day from a child's perspective in our culture and normal experiences. So Christian worship, corporate worship, is sacred. Set apart by God's own laws and regulations. We read of that again in,

v.17-19

Even the Levites demonstrate that worship is a sacred activity, as they were set apart for that service, to provide for all the matters related to worship in the Old Testament. And they, therefore, received no actual inheritance in the land. Their whole life and existence was to demonstrate that worship is a sacred activity.

Only in that context can we really understand,

A. The importance of God's regulations for sacred worship.

His regulations are important because worship itself was important. His regulations are important because of how easily we are led astray, how easily we come to worship other gods. Thus,

v.29-30

Sinful human beings tend to be followers. We tend to go along with the crowd. We tend to give in to the temptations of peer pressure, to conform. And that's why these regulations are so important. Not to restrict us, not to constrain us or diminish our joy, but to give us confidence and assurance that our worship is, indeed, pleasing to God! So,

v.13 "Take heed to yourself that you do not offer your burnt offerings in every place that you see."

v.8 "You shall not at all do as we are doing here today—every man doing whatever is right in his own eyes."

As this whole chapter concludes, then,

v.32

In the ordinary part of life, in the common, everyday experiences of life, we are free to do whatever we want, as long as God has not forbidden it. We have Christian freedom. In every ordinary area of life. Whatever God has forbidden is permitted. But when it comes to the high and sacred activity of worship, we are not permitted to add or take away what God requires of us. Thus, when we worship, we only do those things were God has specified. In the OT, then meant certain animals, along with certain days, and, of course, a certain place. Now, in the NT, that regulation means that the elements of our worship are established by God's word. We sing, we pray, we confess our faith, we make commitments with our vows, we give offerings, we listen to the word read and preached, and we observe the sacraments. That's what God has defined for our worship, and

according to verse 32, “you shall not add to it nor take away from it.” Historically, that has been called the regulative principle of worship.

Let me stress again, though,

B. The joy of sacred worship.

These regulations are not dull and dreary, although to observe some people who believe in this regulative principle, you might think that God doesn’t permit us to be joyful as we worship. I once had a young man new to the church tell me that I was the only person who smiled in the church. I don’t think he was exactly accurate, but I believe his point was well made! Indeed, many people reject this more traditional worship in the pursuit of modern and contemporary excitement. That really shouldn’t be the choice we have to make. Just look at,

v.18

That is what worship is all about, “you shall rejoice before the Lord your God in all to which you put your hands.”

Just one example among many from the Psalms,

Ps. 68:3 “But let the righteous be glad; Let them rejoice before God; Yes, let them rejoice exceedingly. 4 Sing to God, sing praises to His name; Extol Him who rides on the clouds, By His name Yah, And rejoice before Him.”

Last week we looked at,

v.7 “And there you shall eat before the Lord your God, and you shall rejoice in all to which you have put your hand, you and your households, in which the Lord your God has blessed you.”

And,

v.12 “And you shall rejoice before the Lord your God, you and

your sons and your daughters, your male and female servants, and the Levite who is within your gates.”

Let there be great joy as you consider the goodness and mercy of God, especially in your salvation and in the hope of eternal life. And with that joy, as an incentive to it, not Moses’ emphasis here upon,

C. The blessings of sacred worship.

Speaking of restraining from eating any blood, we read in, v.25

That is a repeated phrase, “that it may go well with you.” Not necessarily the freedom from worldly sorrow, but in the midst of everything life has to throw at you, those who are true worshipers of God will know this blessing. As with all of the law, there is a goodness attached to it. A blessing of joy and gladness, a blessing of wellness attached to the regulations,

v.26-28

God’s regulations are good! They are not burdensome. Indeed, they become a delight to the heart who truly loves God. And the blessing is ours when we recognize that this whole matter of corporate, public worship is sacred, the most special time of the week, when we have the great joy and privilege of enjoying God’s presence.

Sharon and I enjoyed the presence of all three of our daughters this week. Just their presence. And we now look forward to the next opportunity we might have for that same joy. In a very small way, that’s the sense of the joy of God’s presence as the blessing of our sacred worship.

Let me step back a moment now, and look at the contrast

between sacred worship and ordinary life. And I want to do so with a sense of,

II. THE BLESSINGS OF ORDINARY LIFE.

I don't want to ignore that reality. Or even call it into question at all. Because in this context of recognizing the ordinary and the sacred, there is joy even in the ordinary!

v.20

That's just a delightful verse! Eat meat, as much as your heart desires. Eat turkey! And gravy. And sweet potatoes. And pumpkin pie. Eat as much as your heart desires! That's what we do for the Thanksgiving holiday, isn't it? The blessings of ordinary life. And in that context, there is the blessing of freedom.

A. The joy of Christian freedom.

In this chapter so well known for regulations upon our worship, the joy of ordinary life is not overlooked at all.

v.15

Again, meat. And in the advancement of the New Covenant, we are, of course, permitted to eat all meat. There are no longer any dietary restrictions to separate the people of God from the people of the world. There are no longer clean and unclean foods. No longer any special days above any others. Here is the joy of that Christian freedom fully expressed,

Col. 2:16 "So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, 17 which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ. 18 Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, 19 and not holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is

from God. 20 Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations— 21 "Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle," 22 which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men? 23 These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh."

So in the ordinary course of life, if God hasn't forbidden it, enjoy the freedom to indulge! Even in the context of the Old Covenant, this chapter includes some very,

B. Practical freedoms.

God is not harsh. Even his regulations allowed for mercy, and freedom.

v.21-22

The point is that God's regulations for our worship are intended to give us the hope and experience of great joy in the blessing of his presence. It's not a matter of looking good, or self-righteous hypocrisy that the Pharisees became so good at. It's not a matter of pride or arrogance. It's a matter of delighting yourself in the Lord, delighting yourself in the glory of his presence, and delighting yourself in offering to him the worship that he has prescribed for himself. With all the blessings and freedoms that he has attached even to his commandments.

Then there is one final point for emphasis here in this chapter. Something of the matter of "why." Why these regulations, specifically with reference to blood. And here we begin to understand the very center and focal point of your faith, with reference to blood.

In the Bible, blood represents life. The shedding of blood represents the loss of life. So we have here in this chapter an emphasis upon,

III. THE SANCTITY OF LIFE.

It is that shedding of blood, that loss of life, that defined all the specific sacrifices of the Old Testament. And that same principle of the shedding of blood abides as the very definition of our Christian faith. That principle is embedded in all of these regulations for worship. They were arbitrary, to be sure. So we read,

v.16

Then, with further explanation,

v.23-24

Blood is the life, so you do not eat the life. And the question is, Why? What is the point? And what do we learn and understand from all of that? I have a very easy and simple answer.

A. Blood (life) is sacrificed for the atonement of our sins.

And that is what this worship of God was always about. The atonement of our sins. The sacrifice of blood to satisfy the wrath and justice of God, so that our sins, yours and mine, could and would be forgiven!

So there was a reason for the restriction against eating blood. It was to emphasize and proclaim the sanctity of blood, the sanctity of life. Specifically, the life of the sacrifice was set apart to God for that very purpose, to atone for sin.

Lev. 17:10 “And whatever man of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who dwell among you, who eats any blood, I will set My face against that person who eats blood, and will cut him off from

among his people. 11 For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul.’ 12 Therefore I said to the children of Israel, ‘No one among you shall eat blood, nor shall any stranger who dwells among you eat blood.’”

1 John 1:7 “But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.”

Col. 1:13 “He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, 14 in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.”

Rom. 3:22 “For there is no difference; 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, 26 to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

Heb. 9:11 “But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. 12 Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. 13 For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, 14 how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your

conscience from dead works to serve the living God? 15 And for this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.”

Heb. 9:18 “Therefore not even the first covenant was dedicated without blood. 19 For when Moses had spoken every precept to all the people according to the law, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water, scarlet wool, and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, 20 saying, “This is the blood of the covenant which God has commanded you.” 21 Then likewise he sprinkled with blood both the tabernacle and all the vessels of the ministry. 22 And according to the law almost all things are purified with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no remission.

The blood of the new covenant is, of course, the blood of Jesus.

One further thought that I will simply mention at this point, a thought that has obvious and grievous relevance to the day in which we live as well, and that is a particularly heinous form of worship practiced by the Canaanites, in which the blood that they offered was actually the blood of their own children. So we read, v.31

Surely that is the most horrific aspect of all that the Canaanites practiced, as Moses so clearly emphasizes,

B. The abomination of sacrificing human life.

Innocent human life, as in the life of children. As an act of worship. An act of worship continued in our day, in which innocent children, still in their mother’s womb, are sacrificed. And

that so-called right to choose is all but enshrined in the modern political and social culture in which we live today. And in that way, above all others in terms of emphasis and severity, we as God’s people today ought not to partake in nor approve of that abomination that the Canaanites actually incorporated into their worship of their own false god they named Molech.

Don’t forget the point of all this. God has provided the blood sacrifice of his own son. And it is that blood of the New Covenant which is the central theme of our worship today. And that blood takes its rightful place in our worship as we observe the Lord’s Supper, in which you and I proclaim the Lord’s death for our sins. In Jesus’ own words,

Mat. 26:27 “Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you. 28 For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins. 29 But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father’s kingdom.”

So this is a sacred moment, special above all the other moments of our lives here on earth. In the symbolism of the New Covenant sacrament, we actually eat and drink of that blood, by faith. By that same faith, we know and believe that Jesus is here, at this table, and our fellowship is with him.