

Joyful Giving
Deuteronomy 12:1-14

The people of Israel were about to go into the Promised Land, the land God was giving to them. But there was a problem. There were already people living in the land – pagans who worshipped gods like Baal and Asherah, gods who represented the life forces of the natural world. But instead of telling the people of Israel to get along with their new neighbors, instead of encouraging them to live and let live, God told His people to wipe out every trace of pagan worship from the land. This doesn't sound very tolerant, does it?

And God is very specific about this. Not only are the people forbidden to worship any other gods, they are also told to destroy all the places where those gods were worshipped – all the altars and pillars, all the mountaintop worship sites, all the shady groves of sacred trees. Even though these were probably places of stunning natural beauty, God wanted to remove any possibility that His people would be tempted to worship those false gods.

But verse 4 gives us another reason why God wanted all these sites of pagan worship to be destroyed – He didn't want His people to “do so unto the Lord your God.” This means God didn't want His people to worship Him in the ways that the pagans worshipped their false gods.

Okay, it's obvious that God doesn't want us to give our devotion, our attention to any other god but Him. That's fair enough – after all, He is the One Who made all human beings, and He did make us for His own glory, after all. But what was so bad about the ways that the pagans worshipped their gods?

Well, here's how pagan religion worked. The people of the land were farmers and ranchers and herdsman, and so they needed the rain to fall and the sun to shine in order that their crops and pastures would grow. They needed their cows to have lots of calves and their sheep to have lots of lambs. And they wanted to have lots of children to help them take care of their flocks and herds and to help them plant and harvest their crops. In short, they needed the forces of nature to cooperate with them in order for them to prosper.

Pagans also thought that each of the natural forces of the world was controlled by a different god. Although the different nations had different names for these gods, they all worshipped a god of storms, and a god of the sun, for example. And in order to appease these gods, in order to get these gods to send them the right amount of rain and the right amount of sunshine, they offered sacrifices to them. Just like modern people sometimes give gifts to powerful

politicians to get the laws passed that they want, pagans tried to bribe their gods to insure that the forces of nature would help their crops and flocks and herds.

And it just stood to reason that the bribe should match the gift. Pagans thought that if they wanted the rain god to make it possible for their wheat to grow, well, they should offer the rain god some wheat. If they wanted the fertility god to make sure that their cows had lots of calves, they should offer up a calf, killing it and burning it up on one of their altars. And it just stood to reason that if you wanted more children, well, what would be more motivating to one of these pagan gods than the death of a baby? It's no accident that most of the pagan religions of the world involve human sacrifice in one way or another.

No, for all its emphasis on the natural world, pagan religion is corrupt at its very heart. It is a cynical attempt to bribe or manipulate false gods in order to ensure the prosperity of the worshippers. In designing such a religion, the worshippers were really saying that their gods were just as corrupt, just as selfish as they were. It's no wonder that the God of Israel didn't want to have anything to do with that kind of worship.

But some modern preachers, even some who call themselves Christians, sound a lot like pagans, don't they? "Send me \$50 and God will send you a new car! Support this ministry and you will be miraculously healed!" I hope none of us would ever be so cynical, trying to bribe God to get what we want. Whenever people think in this way, their focus is, of course, completely on themselves and on what they want, not on God. That kind of thinking is obviously not worship at all.

But there are more subtle ways of falling into this trap of pagan thinking. Do we ever find ourselves feeling proud of what we have done or of how much we have given, believing that somehow we can earn favor in God's sight? Conversely, do we ever feel guilty about how little we have to give, wondering if God will somehow love us less because of our lack of ability or our lack of means? Either way, we are thinking like pagans, imagining that God is more interested in our stuff than in ourselves, that God is more interested in our participation in rituals than He is in our relationship with Him.

So, how can we protect ourselves from paganism? How can we get our focus off of ourselves and off of our things and really worship God? Ironically, one of the best ways to do this is to do something very similar to what pagans do – offering gifts to our God.

That's why in the very same chapter that God condemns pagan offerings He also commands His people to bring their offerings to Him. God is not being contradictory – instead He

wants His people to offer gifts to Him for a completely different reason than the pagans do. Verse 7 tells us that God's people are to make their sacrifices not out of greed to gain more things, but out of joy, the joy of the bounty God had given them, the joy of the success God had brought to the work of their hands. Their sacrifices were not to be seen as ways of earning God's favor or as attempts to manipulate God to do what they wanted. Instead, they were to give out of hearts full of thanksgiving, grateful that God had given them gifts that they could return to Him.

And isn't that the way that we should make our own offerings? Isn't that the reason we should give our gifts? For what had God given His ancient people? What reasons did they have to be grateful?

Verse 9 says that God was going to give them rest from their wanderings in the wilderness. God was going to give them an inheritance. And verses 1 and 10 make clear what that inheritance would be – a land of their own, a place where they could live as the people of God. This would be a place of safety from their enemies, a place where they could worship God without fear.

Well, what about us? Hasn't God given us modern Americans similar gifts? Sure, our local economy isn't much to talk about and our whole country is teetering on the edge of a double-dip recession. There's plenty of room for improvement all around us.

But the fact is that none of us are worried about where our next meal is coming from. All of us have beautiful clothes to wear and warm beds to sleep in. God has given each of us a measure of health and strength so that we might come together to worship Him today. And we can worship God in a large room filled with light from beautiful glass windows, instead of hiding from our persecutors in a dark room or a cave as many of our Christian brothers and sisters around the world have to do today. Truly, we have many reasons to give thanks. In fact, we have many more material reasons for gratitude than the people who first heard Moses' words.

So, how did God want them to give? What sorts of gifts did God want them to bring? Some of their offerings would of course not be appropriate for us. In verse 11, they were commanded to make animal sacrifices and to offer whole burnt offerings as a way of making atonement for their sins. We don't have to do that anymore because Jesus Christ has come to make the perfect sacrifice. The Lamb of God has been offered up on the cross once for all, to pay the sin debt for all who trust in Him.

And that, by the way, is the reason that God is so particular about the people just making their offerings in one place. In verses 5-7, again in verse 11, and again in verses 13 and 14 God makes it clear that the people were only to offer their burnt offerings at the tabernacle, the visual

representation of God's presence with His people. The tabernacle was a symbol, a foreshadowing of Jesus Christ, Who would be God with us in the flesh. That's why we don't have to travel to the tabernacle or the temple any more to offer burnt offerings – Jesus Christ is now with all His people all the time, living in our hearts through His Holy Spirit. Because Jesus Christ is God with us, we can worship God through Christ wherever we are.

But God didn't just tell His Old Testament people to make burnt offerings. Those weren't the only gifts that would be appropriate to express their gratitude to God. Verses 6 and 11 say that the people should also bring their tithes, a tenth of all their income. The book of Leviticus explains that these tithes were to be used to support the Levites, those people who had no land of their own but were instead devoted to the maintenance and support of the worship of God.

Now, just as we don't have just one tabernacle or temple, we don't have Levites anymore. But it still costs a lot to promote the worship of God. When we give funds to the Sertao Project, our partners in northeast Brazil are able to support pastors and missionaries who are organizing new congregations that are unable to pay their salaries. When we support schools like Belhaven or Chamberlain-Hunt or CEF, we are making it possible for students of all ages to hear the good news in academic settings. And of course it costs a lot to heat and cool this space and to keep it in good repair, no matter how careful the elders and deacons are with their expenses.

Now, I know that some people think the concept of tithing is old-fashioned, and as we have already seen, it is completely inappropriate to think that the amount that God loves us is dependent upon how much we give. But do we really think that we modern Christians should give less than God's Old Testament people did? After all, we have an even clearer picture of the great sacrifice God would pay for us in Jesus Christ – should we be less zealous about spreading the good news than they were? Moreover, through their tithes they were just trying to support the worship of God in one nation, but we have been told to spread the gospel to all the world, a world that will this year have 7 billion people in it. So, should we think that giving ten percent of our income is a ceiling? Or should we perhaps look at it as a floor, just a place to start?

But the people of Israel weren't just told to bring their tithes. Verse 6 also talks about freewill offerings. The first time these are mentioned in the Scripture is back in Exodus chapter 35, when Moses was preparing to have the tabernacle of the Lord constructed for the first time. On that occasion, the people were so full of thanks to God for His mercy, they were so anxious to participate in the establishment of God's worship that they brought so much linen and thread and yarn and gold and silver and wood and bronze and animal skins that Moses had to tell them to

stop. Through their grateful generosity, they had already given more than enough to build the tabernacle.

Well, what about us? Is that the kind of thanks we feel? Is that the kind of generosity we show? Are we that anxious to support the proclamation of the gospel here and around the world? Do we really consider all we are and all we have to be devoted to the service of God and the advancement of His kingdom?

And if we aren't there yet, if we still dare to imagine that some of the things God has given us don't really belong to Him, perhaps we should take another look at these simple instructions God gave to His Old Testament people. Don't try to bribe God like the pagans do. Instead, give God His tithes and your freewill offerings with a joyful heart, knowing that your gifts make it possible for others to hear the good news and share the joy of trusting in Christ alone as Lord and Savior.