

"There You Shall Go"

If you're going to buy a gift for someone special in your life, there are a couple common mistakes you need to avoid. First, you shouldn't get them something that's really a gift for yourself. A common example you see in a sitcom is the husband buying his wife a drill. Now that's not true in every household, but in probably most homes, a drill would be more a gift for the husband and not the wife. But a second mistake you need to avoid when buying a gift, is getting a gift that you'll *assume* they will like, but without having done your homework to find out if your assumption is really correct. Take for example a husband buying his wife some flowers. Women generally like flowers; sounds more promising than a drill for her, right? But let's say the husband buys these flowers for his wife, only to find out that she's allergic to them. Well, that could have been an honest mistake. But if it's something he *should* have known about her, then again the husband hasn't done a very good job in getting a gift for her. You see, a good gift will be one that the other person will really want, one they'll be delighted to receive. A good gift will generally involve doing some work on your end to learn more about the person for whom you're buying the gift, and then only after that, making the actual selection.

Well, I'm giving this analogy today to help us think about worship. How we worship God, how we praise him, is in some sense, a sort of gift to God. It's a gift, an offering of praise and thanksgiving to him. And so when it comes to worshipping God, shouldn't we want to worship him in ways that please Him? Not in ways that are solely for our own pleasure, or entertainment. Nor should we worship God in ways that are just our own good ideas that might not actually be what God desires. No, instead we should worship God in the ways that God actually tells us!

This is all the more important when we remember that worship is more than just an optional gift we give to God. True heartfelt worship, should be offered to God like a gift to him, but ultimately it's more than that. It's something God calls us to. We're called to worship him. He commands us to worship him. In all God's laws, it's important that we look to obey them as best as we can. That's true especially in how we worship God. And so today we're going to think about some specific ways God calls Israel to worship him. By extension, we'll be thinking about how this informs our own worship under the new covenant.

And so let's begin by looking at what this passage tells Israel about how they are to worship God. The main thrust of this passage is simple and repeated in several ways. God was going to provide a central place of worship for them once they arrived in the Promised Land. That's where Israel was to perform all their main acts of worship in the Promised Land. Look at verse 5. "But you shall seek the place where the LORD your God chooses, out of all his tribes, to put his name for his habitation; and there you shall go."

And so God's promising them a centralized place of worship once they get into the Promised Land. Look at what will be the significance of this place. Verse 5 summarizes it. First, this will be a place of God's choosing. God will choose the place. Again, God dictates how he is to be worshipped. God

tells us what pleases him. Under the old covenant, it would please to God to have his people assemble in one specific place to worship him. Second, verse 5 says that this is where God would place his name. Of all the many places throughout the Land, amidst all the tribes, God would be pleased to specially place his name at one particular place. The third significant thing about this place in verse 5 is really the central one. It would be God's place of habitation. God was choosing this place to put his name because it would be God's special place of habitation among the people. In other words, in some wonderful way, God would dwell with his people at this place. His abode would be in this specific place. God's presence would be at this place in a special way. Now obviously God is omnipresent. He is everywhere. God doesn't just live here or there like we humans do. But God's providing a way here for the people to more fully experience him. He's going to set up a place in the Promised Land that the people in some wonderful, mysterious, way can go to meet the Lord. And so this provision of a central place to worship God, held out the promise that God was providing a way for his people to have access to him and his presence.

This explains several of the references we find in this passage. There's a distinction made in verses 15 and 22 between the clean and the unclean. Back at their homes they could eat their ordinary meals whether they were clean or unclean. What's being assumed here is that when they go to this central place of worship, that they needed to be ceremonially clean to give their offerings and have their sacred meals. This draws to mind the book of Leviticus, which is a book about worship in the old covenant. Leviticus that Israel had to be ceremonially clean to come before God's presence. This is also why in verse 26 God mentions that it's the "holy things" that they are to take to this central place of worship. The ordinary things could be used or consumed at their homes. But if something was to be sacrificed to God, that would be a holy thing, and so it must be brought before God's holy presence. His holy presence would be made available to the people in a cultic way in this central place of worship.

This is also why in ordinary meals it says here that they could pour the blood of the meat on the ground, but in the sacred meals they had to pour it out on the altar at this central place of worship. You see, all these different references are distinguishing between the ordinary things they would do, from the acts of worship that they would do. These specific cultic acts of worship were to be brought before God in the place of his choosing. That's where his presence would be in a special way among his people. They were to go after that place and present their holy offerings there as a way to draw near to God. And so when you read the book of Leviticus and learn about all the ways they were to worship God, and see how it describes ceremonial cleanness, etc, all of this was to take place at this holy place God would choose in the Promised Land.

And so this is all part of the significance of this place God would choose in the Promised Land: God would provide a way for his people to draw near to him in this special place of worship. But what sorts of things was Israel to do in its worship? What were they to do in this place of worship? Well, I mentioned all the details given in the book of Leviticus. We see connection with that book right here in this passage. You see, this passage doesn't describe many details of the worship that's to happen at this place. It just summarizes. One of the main things it summarizes is all the sacrifices and offerings that are to be brought here. At least four times it mentions here that this will be the place to offer the sacrifices and offerings to God; verses 6, 11, 17, and 24. These verses list and repeat all sorts of

sacrifices; this is why I mention Leviticus, because that book explains the details of these different sacrifices. And so there were different sacrifices and offerings in the old covenant for different purposes. Burnt offerings, sacrifices, tithes, voluntary contributions described here as heave offerings, offerings to fulfill vows, etc. All of these cultic practices were to happen at this central place of worship.

Of course all of this foresees the people settling down in the Promised Land. Prior to that, this wasn't really an issue. Up to this point, they were all together. The people were wandering through the wilderness as one big camp, and the tabernacle was moved along with them. They in a sense had a central place of worship in the wilderness, because they were all moving together. But this provision for a single place of worship assumes that one day the people would find "rest." Verses 9 and 10 talk about God giving the people rest in the Promised Land. When the people come to rest in the Promised Land, this will affect their worship. As they people come to rest in the Land, God will come to rest in the Land with them. That's a beautiful picture, and one that should draw to mind Revelation 21:3 that foresees the day when after Christ returns that God will make his dwelling with his people together in the New Jerusalem. But here in the old covenant that great day is seen in advance through types and shadows. When the people settled into the Promised Land, at first this central place of worship was at Shiloh. Later it became Jerusalem. The tabernacle which was a tent even eventually became a fixed structure when the temple was built. All of this showed that God had chosen a place to put his presence among the people. As God gave rest to his people, he would rest with them in the Promised Land. There they were to seek him. There they would go to worship him.

All of this is part of a bigger principle. It's part of a bigger principle known as the regulative principle of worship (RPW). This says we should worship God in the ways he wants, and only in those ways. It's the principle summarized in the Second Commandment. The Second Commandment tells us not to worship the one true God via idols. We see that same principle here in verse 4. Moses says, "You shall not worship the LORD your God with such things," referring to all the wrong ways that pagan nations worshipped their gods. The pagan nations worshipped their gods in many places, especially on high mountains, thinking they were close to their gods, and under fertile trees, thinking their god's blessing must be in that fertile spot. The pagan nations worshipped their gods with many things; altars, pillars; wooden images; carved images, etc. These things had been tainted by their worship of false gods, and so they must not be co-opted or commandeered for worshipping the one true God. They must be destroyed. The end of this passage brings home this same message. It even says that God finds the worship of these pagan nations as an abomination before him. They did horrific things, like even sacrificing their children as an act of pagan worship. None of these things pleased God. But understand what Moses is getting at here. Moses is not concerned here about Israel worshipping their false gods in these ways. That obviously would be very bad too. But the command is as I read in verse 4. And it's again in verse 31. Don't worship the LORD in that way. Don't worship the one true God in these ways. It would be bad to worship false gods in these ways. But a danger they have to protect themselves from is worshipping the one true God in these wrong ways.

This is the regulative principle. It's summarized nicely in verse 32. "Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it." In other words, when we worship God, we must be careful to worship him in all the ways he tells us, and *only* in those ways.

We're not free to drop some elements, and were not free to add new elements. This is a principle that still applies to us today. Though Christian worship has undergone some significant changes based on the fact that we are under a new covenant, this doesn't mean that this principle has changed. The underlying principle is what we call the regulative principle. We worship God only in the ways he tells us. God is zealous for his right worship. In that light of all this, God makes this clear command to the people here in verse 4: Seek this place. There you shall go. Go and worship God in the place he would choose. There bring your sacrifices and offerings.

Well what about us in the New Covenant? How does this command to go to the central place of worship apply to us? Well, as you might expect, we see a great fulfillment of this in the New Covenant with the coming of Christ. I'd like to think about this fulfillment in three aspects. First, and chiefly, with regards to Christ's one sacrifice for sin. Second, to think about how this central location of worship relates to our location of worship. Third, concerning how the many sacrifices and offerings mentioned in the Old Testament relate to us, beyond their chief fulfillment in Christ.

First, understand that all the sacrifices for sin in the Old Testament that were to be given at this central place of worship find fulfillment in Jesus Christ. As Hebrews 9:24 tells us, that this Old Covenant practice was a picture of what Christ would do once for all. Christ did not enter into an earthly temple in an earthly city with an animal sacrifice. No, it says that Jesus entered into the heavenly throne room before the presence of God with the sacrifice of himself. This sacrifice was not something that needs to be done over and over. No, it happened once, because this sacrifice was more than sufficient to cover the sins of God's people.

This is ultimate fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrifices offered at the temple. They looked forward to Christ who would bring the ultimate sacrifice to the real heavenly temple. In the old covenant, the worshippers did this to find forgiveness and grace from God. When they offered these things in faith, they looked forward to the real sacrifice to come in Jesus. We as Christians have found this forgiveness and grace in Jesus Christ. This is my urge to all of today. Trust in Jesus Christ. Believe in him. If so, then the ultimate sacrifice has already been offered in the presence of God on your behalf. This is the chief fulfillment of this passage.

Second, let's think about how this centralized place of worship relates to our location of worship as Christians. We know that we don't live in the Promised Land, but are we supposed to make some regular trek to Jerusalem? Well, the New Testament says no, but it does help us to see how there's an underlying principle here that still applies to us. We see this as we witness a conversation Jesus had with a Samaritan woman in John chapter 4. There this Samaritan woman brings up a controversy of their day. There were Samaritans, who were basically part Jewish that were trying to live out this chapter from Deuteronomy. They worshipped on a mountain in Samaria. They believed that was the centralized place where God would have them to worship. The Jews instead believed Jerusalem was the divinely selected place. This woman asks Jesus to weigh in on this debate. She probably suspects he'll say Jerusalem. But his answer is surprising. He said, "The hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father... the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship him."

And so God still has a chosen location for believers to worship. But the location has changed. In the old covenant, when they entered the Promised Land, he picked a place of rest in the Land for his place of worship. But since the rest of the Promised Land looked forward to a better place of rest, this place of worship could at best be temporary. With the coming of Jesus, he has now given us spiritual rest. We already have this spiritual rest. And so it makes sense that there is a new central location of worship. That location is said to be in spirit and in truth. Of course, the truth aspect of this in many ways boils back to that regulative principle of worship we discussed. We are to worship God in the location of truth, meaning at least in part, that we worship him according to the ways he wants us to.

To understand how we worship in the location of the spirit now, let me give one other passage from the New Testament to help flush this out. 1 Peter 2:4-5. It calls us to come to Christ "as to a living stone," and then goes on to call us also, "as living stones... being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." You see, the New Testament picture is that believers have together become a temple of God. That together we make up a spiritual temple in Jesus Christ. The idea is that God has drawn near to us now by his Holy Spirit. He has placed his name upon us. He has chosen to abide with us, to make his habitation in our hearts. And this picture in the New Testament always takes on the most fullest expression when saints come *together* as a body of Christ to worship together.

And so as 1 Peter says, we become a spiritual place of worship as we come to Jesus Christ. So this is part of the fulfillment of this passage as well. When verse 4 tells Israel, "There you shall go," we in the new covenant are told to go somewhere as well to worship. Except we are told not at first to go to a place, but a person. "There you shall go," becomes for us what Jesus said, "Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Jesus calls us to the rest that is in him. As we rest in him, then we find that this becomes the place we worship as well. We worship God by the Spirit of Christ living inside us. And this especially is the case as we gather together as God's people.

The third way in which we find this passage fulfilled for us, concerns the many sacrifices and offerings mentioned in the Old Testament. Certainly the sacrifices find their chief fulfillment in Christ as we mentioned already. And yet the New Testament goes on to use the language of sacrifices and offerings in many different ways as part of our Christian life. Here's a survey of a few of these uses, in order of their appearance in the Bible. Romans 12:1, speaks of presenting of our whole bodies as a living sacrifice to God in our service to him. In Philippians 2:17, Paul describes his sufferings for Christ as a sacrifice, while at the same time describing the Philippians' faithful service as a sort of sacrifice. In Philippians 4:8 Paul describes the Philippians' monetary gift as a sacrifice. In 2 Timothy 4:6, Paul describes his life as a drink offering. In Hebrews 13:5, we're called to give the sacrifice of praise continually, and in Hebrews 13:16 it says that doing good and sharing is a sacrifice.

In other words, all these New Testament references change how we look at the sacrifices. Certainly with regard to atoning for sin, there is only one sacrifice. But the old covenant had all sorts of different kinds of sacrifices and offerings, many of which included different sorts of freewill offerings given to thank God for all that he had done for them. These were given as a way to praise and worship God. The atonement aspect of all the

sacrifices has been fulfilled in Christ. But the New Testament can still talk about different ways we can give sacrifices and offerings to God. Basically, any ways that we give of our time, talents, and money is a way we can worship God now under the New Covenant. The emphasis here on taking care of the Levites in this passage of course has a related application today to taking care of the needs of pastors and missionaries as well. The ways that we provide for those whose full time labor is in service of the church, is part of the offerings we give under the new covenant. All of this is a response of praise and thanksgiving to God. We give of our time, talents, and money as a way to worship God. And when we do that out a Spirit-filled heart for Christ's glory and according to his revealed will, then we offer these sacrifices and offerings in the correct place: In spirit and truth as an aspect of worship.

Brothers and sisters, I have one final application for us today in closing. Here you have in this passage a very specific contrast given. It's given both at the start and end of this passage. It says that the ways that the world worships their false gods is not to be a model for how you worship the one true God. That was true back then. That was relevant back then. That principle is still relevant today. It so common today in our area to have this universal sort of faith, to say that people of every different sort of religion are basically all worshipping the same God. That we should rejoice in these different modes and expressions of worship. Many from a Christian background might even try to incorporate some aspects of these other religions and modes of worship into their worship. But do you see what God thinks about that here? God is not pleased with that.

Now this doesn't mean that when we meet people of this perspective in Marin that we should be arrogant or mean-spirited or something. Actually we should approach them in great love and humility. The same is true when we meet others from other religions. But if we believe what the Bible teaches, then God is not pleased with the ways other religions are trying to worship. That's why God has called the church to make disciples of all the nations. And part of what that discipleship will teach is how God wants to be worshipped. Of course, the most important thing that discipleship will teach is that there is forgiveness and grace in Jesus. That Jesus is reaching out to people who maybe even in apparently good intentions have sought their creator in wrong ways. That he is offering not only forgiveness, but a real relationship where they can truly know God and experience his presence in their life.

And so let's not try to win others from other religious by trying to incorporate their practices and worship into our own. Let's instead shine as lights as those who strive to live and worship according to the teachings of God's Word. Let's live as those who have tasted of the grace of Jesus Christ; who have been brought into God's family. Let's live as those who now have God living inside each of us by his Spirit. Let's introduce others to this Spirit that can live inside each of them as well. May that even be how we worship God, as we give our whole lives for his service.

Amen.

Copyright © 2010 Rev. W. Reid Hankins, M.Div.
All Rights Reserved.