

"The LORD Your God Has Not Appointed Such For You"

If you look at the different religions in the world, there are some common aspects in most of them. Most world religions have a desire to *speak* to God and to *hear* from God. In the case of the polytheistic religions, that's just applied to more than one god. These different religions show that there is a common desire to in some way to relate to the god or gods of their faith. It's this desire to relate to the divine that has been the cause of many of the rituals and practices associated with different religions; sacrifices, for example, in many religions, look to try to appease the gods in some way in order to gain their attention or good favor.

People who recognize the divine, in one way or another, generally want to have some relationship with the divine. They want to hear from God. They want God to hear them. Now this is not true for every single world religion. But it is certainly representative of a number of faiths out there. And yet this passage reminds us that just because so many religions share this desire, does not mean that they know the right solution.

In the Old Testament, we learn with great joy that the one God of the universe does indeed want to be in relationship with us. He wants to speak to us. He wants to hear from us. He wants to relate to us. For Israel, under the Old Covenant, God officially facilitated this relationship through the priests and the prophets. You'll notice that this passage today is a sort of interruption here in Deuteronomy from talking about the offices of prophet and priest. Last week's passage talked about the office of priest. The next passage talks about the office of prophet. This passage is appropriately placed in between because it basically describes the pagan attempts at religion. It shows the pagan attempts to solve for the very thing that God provided through the priests and the prophets. And so today we'll spend some time contrasting the world's ideas at that time for relating to God, with God's provision for Israel to relate to him. As we think about how God called the saints of old to relate to him, we'll see how this looks forward to the new covenant. We'll see how the worship and service in the old covenant looks forward to how we worship and relate to God in the new covenant. This is obviously important for us to consider, because we have the same sort of threat Israel did. They had the temptation to try to relate to God in the wrong ways the world did. We have the same sort of temptation today, and we must be on guard against all the ways Satan will try to tempt us in this important area.

Well, let's begin then by looking at what this passage says about the world's ideas back then for relating to their gods. Verse 10 gives a list of all sorts of pagan practices at the time. This is a long list. The reality is that this list gets pretty specific at points and we're not entirely sure exactly what some of these things are anymore. Some are certainly more clear than others. The English translation you have will usually make some interpretation for you to help get at the general idea. But even if we don't today know the details of every one of the rituals and practices mentioned here, the big picture stands out. You have in this list some things where the pagans try to hear from their god. You have some things in this list where pagans try to speak to their god. You have some things in this list that try to appease their god in some attempt to relate to their god. Often

this attempt to relate to their god is so they can make use of divine power in some way.

And so look at this list. The first thing talks about sacrifices. It was a pagan practice back then for some to sacrifice a child in the fire. That turns my stomach just thinking about it. This was to propitiate their god in some way, to please them, to gain their favor in some way. Then you have in this list several items that are essentially looking to hear from the divine in some way. Things like omens, are basically different kinds of fortune telling in this list. The consulting with the dead was essentially for the same purpose; to somehow learn about the future. They are essentially looking to know about the future from either the divine or the spirit world. Then you have those who would employ different kinds of magic, and witchcraft, and sorcery here. The idea behind these things is to somehow communicate with either a god or a spirit and get them to influence people or events according to your request. So all these practices involve pagans looking to interact and relate to the divine or spirit world in order to know the future and influence it.

But look at God's assessment of it. It's pretty straight forward. God says it twice; they are an abomination, verses 9 and 12. We've talked about this word plenty of times before. It's appalling to God. It's one of the strongest ways for God to express displeasure against something. These pagan practices are in God's list of sins that are an abomination to him. He especially sees these pagan's false attempts to religion and spirituality as an abomination. That should be humbling because so often today people want to think that God honors any heartfelt attempt to please him or relate to him. But that is not what the Bible says. And certain practices in that area are especially displeasing to him. They are an abomination. God wants us to worship him and relate to him in the ways he tells us.

But God's assessment doesn't stop there. He says that these things invoke God's judgment. That's verse 12. These abominable practices are the reason it says here why God would use Israel to bring judgment on these nations. I like the subtle little extra commentary given in verse 14 about all this. Moses points out that these nations did in fact listen to soothsayers and diviners. These nations that they would destroy employed all these pagan rituals to supposedly find out and control the future. But guess what? It wouldn't help them. All of their divinations and witchcraft wouldn't help them to foresee and stop the invading Israel armies. I think of Psalm 2 when I read this verse. Psalm 2 describes God laughing in heaven when the pagan nations try to stand against him. All the magic and omens in the world are powerless against the almighty judgment of God. Why then should Israel entertain these things when they enter the Land? If these things didn't help the pagan nations who were there before them, why would they ever give them any time of day? If God showed himself to be more powerful than these things, and he did it through Israel, why would Israel ever turn to these futile things?

It was an abomination for these pagan nations to do these things. And look at what verse 12 says. If the Israelites start doing these pagan rituals, they would be an abomination as well. Notice it doesn't say that they would start to perform abominations. It says they would be an abomination. The result would be that they would be under divine judgment. God would ultimately come and bring his judgment upon them, just as he would use Israel to bring judgment on these nations.

So all of these details are to flesh out God's command from verse 9. Israel is not to learn to follow these pagan practices. They aren't to imitate these things. They are to be different in how they worship their God. They are to hear from their God, and speak to their God in a wholly different way. This leads us then to our second point. Let's look next at God's provision for Israel. Let's look at how God does want Israel to relate to him.

Well, simply put, the entire law of the covenant describes this. The whole Torah is a law book on how Israel is to relate to God. But in the context of this chapter, we can be a bit more specific. I've already mentioned at the start of this message that the context of this warning is smack dab in between the passages about priests and about prophets. It's the very function of priests and prophets in the old covenant that accomplished the sort of things, in some sense, that these pagan nations were looking for. Of course, don't misunderstand me here. That's a rather simplistic statement. Certainly the pagans had a very wrong view of their gods in the first place. The attitude it seems many of these pagan had were to try to manipulate their gods into their own selfish goals. But nonetheless, you can see some parallel between what God has his priests and prophets do, with what these pagan nations are trying to accomplish.

Often we think of the priests as the people to go to in the Old Testament in order to speak to God. And often we think of the prophets as those in the Old Testament who spoke on behalf of God. That has some general truth to it, though a bit simplistic.

Priests had quite a few different roles in support the worship and relationship of God with his people. The priests in the old covenant administered all the sacrifices and offerings, but not just any kinds, but specifically the ones required by God, according to the instructions given by God. That's important, since this passage tells us that there were some sacrifices, i.e. sacrifices of children, that God did not require. Since you'd come to the priest to have him offer your sacrifice to God, it would be your way to speak out to God and relate to God, through the priest. Most sacrifices, for that matter, had some aspect of atonement to it as well. And so this would be God's provision for atoning for your sin under the old covenant. Priests also were charged with teaching the people the laws of the covenant, so they also had an aspect of their ministry in which they spoke for God. The priests were also entrusted with the Urim and Thummin which was some way that you could inquire of God for certain questions as well. And so through the priesthood, the people both heard from God and spoke to God. They had opportunity to bring atoning sacrifices to God, in order to become reconciled to God in light of their sins. The priesthood represented God's normal ways of relating to the people.

And yet God also appointed prophets from time to time. Moses himself was a prophet. Other prophets would come. The main function of the prophets was to be a spokesman for God. Often their words would refer to things to happen in the future, but that wasn't always the case. They were the ones to really coin the phrase, "Thus says the LORD." When God's people were breaking the covenant, they'd usually be the first one on the scene. Obviously for Moses to be a prophet, God was using him to deliver the special revelation of the law and covenant. The later prophets would deliver judgments against the people as they broke the covenant. And yet what the prophets are best remembered for is the way they served God's plan of redemption. Not only would God have the prophets speak out future judgments. They'd also speak out future blessings. These are blessings that would talk about how the

people would be restored in their relationship with him, despite their sins. These are blessings that of course looked ultimately to Jesus who would come and save God's people from their sins.

Now realize that not everyone was a prophet or a priest in the Old Testament. Instead, it would be through the ministry of these offices that the people would hear from God, and speak to God, and relate to God. The people had to go through these officers to worship God and relate to him. This was God's provision for them. You see this brings us back to verse 14. There were ways God had appointed for them to worship and relate to him. That's what they were supposed to practice. Nothing else. They were not to be presumptuous and start worshipping God in other ways. That especially included not worshipping him in the ways that the pagans did. That's the clear directive of verse 14. This is again the Regulative Principle of Worship that we've mentioned a number of times before as we've studied Deuteronomy.

Let's turn to our third and final point now for today. God's provisions in the Old Testament have ramifications for us in the New Testament. There are wrong and right ways to hear from God. There are wrong and right ways to speak to God. There are wrong and right ways to relate to God. We are reminded of that here in the Old Testament. God's provisions in the Old for how the people were to relate to him, become the basis for how we relate to God in the new covenant.

In terms of the offices. We mentioned last week how the priesthood finds its fulfillment in Christ who is the Great High Priest that offered himself as the ultimate sacrifice for our sins. His priesthood makes us eternally right with God. We mentioned that he then makes us all priests, able to draw near to God in service and worship. Next week we'll consider the office of prophet more. We'll see how the office of prophet finds its fulfillment in Christ who is the chief spokesman of God that speaks forth God's Word, not just as an authorized messenger, but as God himself come in the flesh. We'll also see how we too have become prophets, with the Spirit of God now poured out on us, so that we all know God. It's by this same Spirit that we know understand God's Word that's been spoken to us.

So let's apply this a little further, by more specifically thinking about how we hear from God, how we speak to God, and how we relate to God. In the new covenant, the way we now hear from God is his Word. You see the canon is complete. We do not expect to receive anymore Scripture. We believe that we have been given the complete Word of God. We don't expect to get any more books of the Bible or to receive any more prophets. Why? Well, it's put simply for us in Ephesians 2:20. It says there the foundation for our faith has already been laid. That foundation it says is the prophets, the apostles, and Christ Jesus as the chief cornerstone. You see, God has spoken through prophets, the apostles, and Christ Jesus. But this foundation is already laid. There's no more revelation to be given, because we are at the end. We but await the final return of Christ. We instead are called to send out the delivered Word of God to the world. So, in the new covenant, how do we rightly hear from God? Well, simply said, we hear from God through his Word, with the Spirit at work inside us to explain and confirm the Word in our hearts and minds. Pastors and teachers proclaim it. We study and meditate on it individually. But this is how the Bible says we hear from God in the new covenant. We hear from him in the Word, by the power of his Spirit.

So then in the new covenant, how do we speak to God? Well, remember, we are all priests. And so we can all speak to God *directly*. We don't need someone to speak to God for us; we are each priests! We certainly don't have some pagan intermediary conjure up the dead for us, or anything like that as the pagans did in the past. And so as priests, we speak to God both individually and corporately. As individuals, we should pray without ceasing, all the time lifting up our praises and requests to God our father. Our corporate prayer should be in our homes with our families and at church with the people of God. In the same way, we're told to sing psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs to God. All of this is how the New Testament instructs us to speak to God. In prayer and song we speak to God individually and corporately, boldly drawing near the throne room of grace.

In terms of relating to God, obviously talking about speaking with God and hearing from God, all describes how we relate to God. But realize that we can do these things only because we've entered into a real relationship with God. And realize that the only reason this is possible is because of Christ's sacrifice. The Bible says that we used to be enemies to God, but that we have now been reconciled to God. The Bible says that reconciliation happened because the sacrifice of God's Son for us. Jesus died in our place, and then rose again, to satisfy God's wrath that was due upon us. God provided this sacrifice for us so we could be in a real relationship with him.

By the way, this gives us some insight into why God finds it so deplorable that people would sacrifice their child in the fire to somehow get right with God. God doesn't want that, because his plan was to sacrifice his son for us. Father Abraham told Isaac in Genesis 22 that God would provide the sacrifice. Well, God ultimately did provide that sacrifice in Jesus, so that none of us would have to sacrifice our children or ourselves. You see the principle in verse 13 stands on its own as God's holy law. God's holy law demands perfection. We must be blameless before God. But that's a standard we each have fallen short of. So God has provided the one sacrifice of his son to solve this problem. We are now reconciled to God if we turn to Christ in faith. If we believe in Christ, if we turn our life to him, then that means Christ has offered the sacrifice of himself, for yourself.

And so as priest, Christ restores our relationship with God. And as prophet, Christ reveals God to us, that we could truly know him. Now we can hear from God. Now we can speak to God. Now we are in a real relationship to God. This of course has even broader ramifications than just the few things we've said so far. As Christians now, we are enabled to worship God and serve God in all the ways he's told us in Scripture. We won't be able to exhaustively talk through all these things today. But we have the Scriptures that tell us how to worship and serve God. This passage today reminds us that we must approach God in these ways only. We must beware any of the world's ways that try to relate to God in ways not described in his Word.

You see, today we have the same warning as they did back then. God doesn't want us to imitate the pagan practices and rituals of the world. He's not pleased in these false ways to relate to him. He sees them as an abomination because they sidetrack us from the right way to truly know the one true God!

Now, of course, if we look at our culture today we're going to have a different list than what they had in verse 10. And yet the list may be different, but the concern is the same. What kind of list could we come up with today? What would be in our list of pagan attempts to hear from God or

to speak with God? Child sacrificing isn't too common anymore, thankfully. But a number of these items still would be in our list today. You still have various forms of witchcraft and magic and séances today. Add to this list astrology, and horoscopes, and various eastern spiritual practices such as mantras and transcendental meditation. The list can go on and on of real practices people do today to try to relate to the divine. People want to hear from God; or at least know the future, whether it be from the stars or the spirits of themselves. They want to find some greater power and unleash it for their personal benefit. But we must worship in Spirit and truth. God is not pleased to follow pagan rituals. We must be discerning.

I think most Christians can hear the surface level of this and agree to it. I think the difficulty comes with how we actually deal with real problems that come in our life. When you are faced with a tough decision in your life, how do you discern God's will for your life? Most of us probably wouldn't put too much stock in horoscopes to make big decisions in life. And yet it's far too easy for subtle little pagan practices to creep into our Christian practices. The result can be that we "Christianize" something that's actually a pagan practice.

For example: praying to deceased saints. If you study history it sure looks like the practice of praying to deceased saints, instead of praying directly to God, is an example of a sort of Christianizing of a pagan practice. In the middle ages the pagans prayed to the dead, and so the next thing you know you see Christians praying to dead saints asking for help.

Well, that might not be something you personally do. But let's think of some things that might be closer to home. For example, do you roll the dice when you read Scripture, doing the pray and flip method? Then you find that random passage, read it out of context, and decide this is God's message for you? Is that really reading the Bible, or is it treating the Scriptures more like a fortune cookie?

Or worse maybe, do you spend some time praying God would show you direction in your life, then go out to eat at the Chinese restaurant, and open your fortune cookie, and find that the message has meaning to you? Do you then Christianize that fortune cookie and say, well, this is just God answering your prayer because you prayed for direction and here it comes through a fortune cookie? It'd be easy to justify. We could say that God's in control of everything; he had to be in control so that you picked this specific fortune cookie; there's no such thing as coincidences. Do you see how easy it would be to try to convince yourself of this? But, if we believe God doesn't speak through fortune cookies, that God doesn't want us to seek out omens and things like that, why would we assume our prayer for direction would suddenly sanctify our fortune cookie? Don't you think Israel of old could have used that same logic with these pagan practices described here?

Another example is turning our Christian meditation into something more like Eastern meditation. Apart from the same word in English, they are really two very different things. The meditation promoted in the Bible is about engaging our mind in thinking through and applying Scripture. It's a prayerful way to really wrestle with God's Word. Eastern meditation usually involves quieting the mind, looking to get beyond our normal thinking into a deeper state of spiritual awareness. But this is very different than Christian meditation, so don't blend the two.

These are maybe a few examples that may or may not hit home for you. But the thing we have to take caution in is to not try to Christianize a pagan practice in an effort to find new ways to speak to God or hear from God. God has told us how to relate to him. Use these things. They may seem too simple for you. But trust that he will work through them. He tells us that he will. He tells us not to imitate pagan practices, even if we try to stamp this with some Christian flavor. The God of heaven and earth, of the living and the dead sacrificed his son on the cross for you. He did this so that we could be in relationship with him. Don't you think he will provide all that we need to truly know him? To know how to live by faith in this life as his child? Yes, brothers, and sisters, trust in what he has given us. He will not disappoint us.

Amen.

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