

## Deuteronomy 12. Don't be a Copycat!

It can be embarrassing to copy others. On one occasion a guest was having dinner with US President, Calvin Coolidge. At one point in the meal the President quietly poured some coffee from his cup into a saucer. The guest, not wanting to breach etiquette, decided to do the same, also pouring coffee from his cup into a saucer. Then the President added milk and sugar to the coffee in the saucer. So the guest did the same. Then the President bent and placed the saucer on the floor, for the cat under the table that the guest had never seen.

Sir George Grey was the former High Commissioner of South Africa, former Governor of South Australia and former Prime Minister of New Zealand. George Grey stuttered when he spoke. On one occasion, early in his political career, he was approached by a reporter, George Kingswell, who also happened to have a stutter. Grey asked him, "Are you G-G-George K-K-Kingswell?" "Yes," Kingswell replied. "A-a-and are you G-G-George Grey?" Grey, assuming that Kingswell was making fun of him, punched him in the face.

As the end of Deuteronomy 11 reminds us God's people are about to enter the land of the Canaanites. Deuteronomy 12 finishes with God saying, "*You must not worship the LORD your God in their way, because in worshipping their gods, they do all kinds of detestable things the LORD hates. They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods*" (v31). Canaanite religious practices were crimes against God.

It's not good to be called a copycat, someone who imitates or mimics others. You've heard of copycat crimes, when someone mimics a crime he has been exposed to through the news or through watching crime movies.

Do notice those words: "*You must not worship the LORD your God in their way.*" You will also find these same words near the beginning of Deuteronomy 12. So in verse 4 Moses tells God's people, "*You must not worship the LORD your God in their way.*" These words have to be repeated because God's people are in danger of committing copycat crimes.

An exact translation of the Hebrew, as in the King James, goes like this: "You shall not do so to the Lord your God" or "You shall not behave like this towards the LORD your God". Since the prohibited behaviour has to do with false worship the NIV captures the sense with its rendering: "You must not worship the LORD your God in their way." But the raw translation of the King James is more powerful.

Say the family is sitting around the table and one of the kids stays speaking in a very rude way towards his or her mother. The father might eyeball the child and say, "Don't you dare act like that towards your mother! Treat her with respect!" That's the idea here: "Don't you dare behave like this towards God!" In other words, this is totally unacceptable behaviour. Just as the behaviour of a child insulting his mother has no place in a Christian home so worshipping God using idolatrous sacred sites and objects has no place in the community of God's people.

"You shall not behave like this towards the LORD your God" or "*You must not worship the LORD your God in their way*" means don't be a copycat. Research shows that most people who perform copycat crimes already have a criminal record or a history of violence or of severe mental health problems. God's people have what we might call a criminal record. That is, they already have a history of practising idolatry. God's people do not enter the land with neutral hearts. They certainly don't enter the land with a bias towards obeying and loving God. No! They enter the land with a bias towards doing the very same things that the Canaanites are already doing.

A few days ago news broadcasts were informing us that Victorians are losing close to \$7 million a day on poker machines, or more than \$2.5 billion a year. Poker machines are not neutral. Did you know that your heart is like a poker machine, that it has a built-in bias? Many gamblers convince themselves that they can beat the odds. That's why gamblers are such losers. In the same way, many convince themselves that the dice of their hearts is loaded in their favour, that they are capable of living a good life. Many bet with their lives that on the day of judgment the money will come pouring out of the machine; that God will declare them "winners". Such people too are real losers. They fail to understand that our hearts have a built-in bias which is pitched not for us but against us; that our hearts lead us not *to* God but away *from* God.

Look again towards the end of Deuteronomy 12, verses 29-30:

The Lord your God will cut off before you all the nations you are about to invade and dispossess. But when you have driven them out and settled in their land, and after they have been destroyed before you, be careful not to be ensnared by inquiring about their gods, saying, 'How do these nations serve their gods? We will do the same. You must not worship the LORD your God in their way... (vv29-31a).

Moses knows full well what God's people are like. The words "*You must not worship the LORD your God in their way*" involve the recognition that God's people are copycats. But we all know what curiosity does to the cat. Yes, and curiosity also kills the copycat. Moses knows that once the people are in the land they will want to find out about the gods of the land. Moses knows that they are in real danger of being ensnared, of putting their foot in the bear trap.

Let's understand the way ancient people thought about territory and gods. As a lead in consider Frank Peretti's book, *This Present Darkness*, which sold 2.5 million copies and portrayed angels and demons fighting to control the citizens of a small town named Ashton. There are many Christians, influenced by this book, the teaching of Peter Wagner and a misunderstanding of such passages as Daniel 10, who sincerely believe that there are different demonic powers who control particular towns, countries and geographical areas, so-called territorial spirits. This ends up in crazy land with Christians spiritually mapping the world, prophetically identifying the name of the spirit controlling particular territory and adopting various strategies to defeat the territorial spirit concerned, including what is called *prayer walking*. Do you know how the Jesus March started? With a woman named Barbara Pymm who claimed that in May, 1987 she had a vision of two angels over London with swords raised and crossed over the city, waiting for the "word" to release them and their armies to fight against the demonic forces controlling London. The founders of the Global March for Jesus saw the Jesus Marches as spiritual warfare against territorial spirits.

This approach to spiritual warfare perverts biblical teaching. It is primitive thinking. It's a modern version of extended animism. Ancient people thought that the world was filled with all sorts of different gods and, typically, these gods were territorial gods. Not only in the Ancient Near East but also in ancient India, China, Tibet, indeed, in almost all ancient societies gods were considered to have power only within certain geographical limits.

Do you see the danger that faced God's people as they entered new territory with the intention of settling there and growing crops and starting families? It was natural for ancient people when entering a new territory to try to find out about the gods who controlled the area and then try to get on their right side. God's people are told that they must not do this under any circumstances: "*be careful not to be ensnared by inquiring about their gods, saying, "How do these nations serve their gods? We will do the same"*" (v30). The God of the Israelites is the only living and true God. These other gods are fictions, lies. It is God who controls the entire universe, including the land of the Canaanites. If God's people want to enjoy life in this territory they need to have nothing to do with the territorial spirits worshiped by the Canaanites, but simply depend on God.

What do you do when you enter a new situation in life? How do you make yourself feel secure? What do you find yourself depending on to set yourself up in this new phase of life? What local

sources of power and security do you find yourself depending on? Is your God really the Lord of this new situation? Are you leaning with all your weight on him?

How does one prepare God's people for entering this new land when they have an in-built bias for worshipping other gods and will be naturally keen to plug into the local sockets of spiritual power, inquiring after the territorial gods previously worshiped by the Canaanites? Moses tells the Israelites that when they enter the land the whole edifice of spiritual worship used by the Canaanites must be completely leveled to the ground, smashed to pieces, destroying all the spiritual electric wiring and every spiritual power socket. That's the thrust of the opening verses:

Destroy completely all the places on the high mountains and on the hills and under every spreading tree where the nations you are dispossessing worship their gods. Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and burn their Asherah poles in the fire; cut down the idols of their gods and wipe out their names from those places. You must not worship the LORD your God in their way (vv2-4).

There are sacred places "on the high mountains and on the hills and under every spreading tree" because at these locations are to be found - so the Canaanites believed - the local gods or spirits that controlled the territory concerned. God's people are told to destroy all such places, to break down the altars, smash the sacred stones and burn the Asherah poles. Canaanite worship was a perverted way of trying to make sure that their farming land would be fertile and that they would have lots of kids. They worship on high mountains, hills and under spreading trees, that is, they practise a nature religion, trying to make contact with the forces of nature. Indeed, they try to make very intimate contact with these natural powers as shown by the reference to their sacred stones and Asherah poles. The sacred stones were shaped like a man's penis. The Asherah poles were associated with female genitals. The Canaanites had a perverted understanding of human sexuality. Among their detestable practices was the practice of men having sexual intercourse with so-called sacred prostitutes and sometimes even women having sexual intercourse with cultic male prostitutes. The Canaanites believed that through such abhorrent practices they could plug into the spiritual powers behind fertility of the land and the womb.

The gods and goddesses worshiped in the ancient world were like people projected into a spiritual realm. They too engaged in petty politicking and they too had sexual relations with each other. Our God is utterly different. He is totally unique in the ancient world for he is **not** a sexual being. He created us as sexual beings and we know that everything created by God is good and to be received with thanksgiving. But as the Creator of sex God insists that this gift be used in the way he intended in creating us. God detests the way the Canaanites abused this precious gift and he detests the way the people of the society around us so consistently pervert this wonderful gift. As Christians we must have a God-centered understanding of sexuality and distance ourselves from the pornography and sexual promiscuity of the heathen world around us. In many ways the sexual conduct of modern people is even more despicable of that of the Canaanites. At least the Canaanites though sex was sacred even if their way of showing this was utterly repulsive. By contrast people today often treat sex as though it is anything but sacred and behave not like glorious people created in God's image but more like brute beasts driven by instinct.

Look at the first time those key words - "*You must not worship the LORD your God in their way*" - are used in the chapter at verse 4. These words are sandwiched by territorial words concerning *place*. God's people are to utterly destroy "all the places" used by the Canaanites for their foul worship (v2). By contrast, verse 5 orders: "*But you are to seek the place the LORD your God will choose from among all your tribes to put his Name there for his dwelling.*"

Get the point? There aren't lot of different gods and goddesses controlling different territories within this great land God's people are entering. There is only one God and he controls the entire length and breadth of the land. No part of it is outside his control. So there is need for only one place in the land where God's people as a community need to go to worship him. Eventually Jerusalem became pre-eminently that one place where God put his Name. But as Jesus told the

woman of Samaria, the time has now come when we no longer worship on this mountain or in Jerusalem or anywhere else. For now Jesus himself is the one on whom God has put his Name. He is the Temple of God in whom God dwells. He is the centre to which all of God's people go.

Every year millions of Muslims make the pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia so that they can circumambulate the Kaaba, the holiest Islamic shrine and, if they can get close enough, either touch or preferably kiss the black stone located there. For most Muslims they only get to make the pilgrimage once, if that. But every Christian in the world can come to our pilgrimage centre, to Jesus, every day in the year and indeed every moment of every day.

Structurally speaking, verses 8-11 are key verses in this chapter. Note carefully what they say:

You are not to do as we do here today, everyone as he sees fit, since you have not yet reached the resting place and the inheritance the LORD your God is giving you. But you will cross the Jordan and settle in the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, and he will give you rest from all your enemies around you so that you will live in safety. Then to the place the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his Name - there you are to bring everything I command you...

What condition must be met before God's people go to the place chosen by God for worshipping him? Rest. Peace. When God's people are settled in the land and enjoy rest from their enemies and are able to live in safety then they are to go to the place God has chosen. What is the precondition for us to be able to go and worship God in Christ? Rest. Peace. Look at Romans 5:1-2: "*Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.*" The end of Romans 4 reminds us that it is through the death and resurrection of Jesus that we now have a right relationship with God, that is, peace with God. Plutarch said, "Rest is the sweet sauce of labour." Yes, but for we Christians rest is the sweet sauce not of our labour but of the work of Christ. Before we placed our faith in Jesus, trusting in what he accomplished for us, we lived with a huge threat hanging over our heads, the terrible prospect of having to face an angry God, because of all the detestable things we have said, thought and done. But because of Jesus' agonising labours that threat has now been removed. As a totally forgiven people we are at peace with God and in and through Christ we enter the presence of God and experience his grace and goodness.

Helen Hayes said "If you rest you rust." No! "For Christians "If you rest you trust!" Horace Greeley, famous former editor of the *New York Tribune*, clearly knew a lot of words, but said, "The word *rest* is not in my vocabulary." He was a workaholic who seldom spent time with his wife and ended his life in insanity. I hope rest is in your vocabulary. Enjoying rest in Christ is foundational to our Christian lives. Only when we know that rest will we enjoy the blessing of spending time and, indeed, our whole lives in the presence of God.

Our centre of worship is Jesus. So we refuse to worship God in the way others do who do not center their lives around the Lord Jesus Christ. We do **not** "worship" to raise money, attract crowds, heal human hurts, recruit workers, improve church morale, help talented musicians fulfil their calling, teach our children the way of righteousness, help marriages stay together, evangelise the lost, motivate people for service projects, or to give people a family feeling. We come together to center our attention on Jesus, to delight in him individually and corporately. When Christ is the centre of our individual and corporate lives, then we have the right context to address other needs such as fund raising and strategizing for evangelism and church growth, and seeking to meet human need and improve our church morale and teach our children how to live and strengthen our marriages and families and so on.