

Deuteronomy 12:17-19

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Moses warns Israel against eating sacrifices within their gates. This act is to be done before the Suzerain God in the sanctuary as a way of thanking Him for His provisions.

Although the Suzerain God with whom Israel had a covenant allowed the Israelites to slaughter and eat non-sacrificial food at home, He warned them against consuming sacrificial food at home. Moses said to Israel, *You are not allowed to eat within your gates the tithe of your grain or new wine or oil, or the firstborn of your herd or flock, or any of your votive offerings which you vow, or your freewill offerings, or the contribution of your hand.* There was to be a strict separation between what was offered unto the LORD, and consumed as a part of worship, and what was consumed in the home for daily sustenance.

Why would this be, since God is the LORD of all? It is likely to impress upon Israel the fundamental difference between the Creator God, who designed them and desires to lead them into the ways of life, goodness, and fulfillment, as opposed to the false gods of paganism. Pagan gods are transactional. They promise people can “get their way” if they will sufficiently appease the gods. The LORD God made it clear that the way to life and goodness was not to find ways to manipulate Him. It was to serve Him by following His ways. God knows what is best for us, so we are to follow Him—not the other way around. It is likely that this prohibition is a very tangible and continual way of teaching Israel this lesson.

This prohibition applied to a number of activities. The *tithe* was a gift in the form of payment of ten percent of any agricultural products (grain, wine, oil). This was to be given in the manner prescribed by God. It was not to be diverted for other uses.

The *firstborn* of the *herd* or *flock* refers to the first-born male oxen, sheep, and goats that the worshiper sacrificed to God ([Exodus 13:2](#); [Numbers 18:15-18](#)). These were to be offered in the prescribed manner. Israel was not allowed to do work-arounds, such as sacrificing the *firstborn* of the *herd* or *flock* at home so they could eat it as a part of their normal menu.

The *votive offerings* refer to any offerings made as payment of a vow. These were promised gifts ([Numbers 30:3, 4](#); [Deuteronomy 12:11](#)). They were only to be paid in the prescribed manner. No home option was allowed.

The *freewill offerings* were gifts that were not legally required, which could be any sacrifices. They were free to offer them, but only in the manner prescribed by God at the place of worship He would direct. *The contribution of your hand* refers to a portion that was set apart from the larger portions and dedicated to the priests ([Leviticus 7:14](#)); the “wave” or “lifted up” offerings. The priests might be local, but they were all to go to the prescribed location before the wave offering could be collected by the Levites.

In each case, it is clear that Israel is to seek God’s ways, rather than seeking to manipulate God’s power to support their ways (as with pagan gods).

The Israelites were commanded to eat all these offerings *before the LORD your God in the place which the LORD your God will choose*. Moses told them that the meal included *you and your son and daughter, and your male and female servants*. In other words, everyone in the household was to eat the offerings together in the LORD’s presence.

The household celebration was to include *the Levite who is within your gates*. This was because the Levites depended upon the tithes, offerings, and dues of the other tribes for their livelihood ([Numbers 18:21-24](#)). In Deuteronomy, Moses reminded the Israelites of their responsibilities to provide for the Levite *since he has no portion or inheritance with them* ([Deuteronomy 12:12](#)). In essence, this is saying, “You got the Levite’s portion of the land, so you need to share with them your produce from the land.”

Therefore, the worshiper and all his households (including the Levite) were to eat at the prescribed place of worship. The worshiper was to eat with joy in order to thank God for His provisions. Moses declared, *You shall rejoice before the LORD your God in all your undertakings*. The phrase *in all your undertakings* here is literally translated as “in every outstretching of one’s hand.” It refers to the fruits of man’s labor ([Deuteronomy 26:11](#)). The Israelites were commanded to eat the products of their labor with gladness *before the LORD*. This emphasizes that the LORD’s purpose in all these provisions was to lead Israel to live in a manner that led to their maximum fulfillment. God wanted them to *rejoice in all their undertakings*. God’s desire was for every single thing they did to prosper and bring them joy. A major part of this opportunity for joy would stem directly from Israel following God’s Law, which led them to live in a self-governing manner, treating one another with care and respect. Not

having to worry about their lives and property being confiscated would be a major contributor to their ability to enjoy the fruits of their labor.

Once again, Moses told the people to *be careful that you do not forsake the Levite as long as you live in your land* (v. 19). This repetition was designed to impress upon the people how important it was to support the Levites who ministered before the LORD.

Biblical Text:

¹⁷ You are not allowed to eat within your gates the tithe of your grain or new wine or oil, or the firstborn of your herd or flock, or any of your votive offerings which you vow, or your freewill offerings, or the contribution of your hand. ¹⁸ But you shall eat them before the Lord your God in the place which the Lord your God will choose, you and your son and daughter, and your male and female servants, and the Levite who is within your gates; and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God in all your undertakings. ¹⁹ Be careful that you do not forsake the Levite as long as you live in your land.