

The Second Commandment: No Idols

Exodus 20:4-6

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If you have your Bibles I'd invite you to turn with me to Exodus chapter 20. For the last few weeks we have been studying in Exodus 19 and 20, giving background to the ten commandments. Last week we finally came to the first word, the first command, the first directive. We said a number of things about. We said that it's a command for the New Testament church. This isn't just something for the misty past of the Old Testament, this isn't just an interesting Bible study that we are doing in Old Testament times without reliance to us, the Lord Jesus obeyed this first commandment. He stressed to His disciples a need for them to obey this first commandment. He called it the first and greatest commandment Himself in His teaching. Paul, John, and Peter all refer to this commandment and enjoin it in the New Testament.

This is a perennially relevant issue that's before us today. This isn't just an interesting history lesson. It's a timely issue because idolatry, idolatry is the challenge of true religion in every age, not atheism. Atheism is a passing fad. Atheists have always made a up a tiny minority and there aren't really atheists anyway, that's another story for another day? The real challenge, you see, is idolatry. So this is a perennially important command. The main thrust of the first commandment is that since the Lord is who He is, and since the Lord has done what He has done, He will not share His worship, He will not share His praise, He will not share His service, He will not share His glory with another. He's exclusive. He alone deserves that glory and honor and exaltation. He's calling us to utter loyalty to Him, to worship Him in all of life with utter devotion. That's what we studied the last time we were together.

Now we're going to turn our attention to the second commandment. The second commandment also pertains to worship. Both the first two commandments in the decalog pertain to the worship of God. The first commandment deals with *whom* we worship. It deals with the object of worship. The second commandment deals with *how* we worship, the right way of worshiping the one true God. Both of them address the subject of worship. So, let's hear God's holy word from Exodus chapter 20 beginning in verse 4.

"You shall not make for yourself an idol or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments."

Amen, thus ends this reading of God's holy and inspired and inerrant word, may He write its eternal truth on our hearts. Let's pray.

Our Father, we pray that by the Spirit You would give us eyes to see Your truth, Your word, Your instruction for our lives. The grace to live it. This we ask in Jesus name. Amen.

This commandment, this second commandment teaches us three things. It teaches us how we are to think about God, it teaches us how we are to worship God and it teaches us that how we think about God and how we worship God is very important to Him. It teaches us how we are to think about God, it teaches us how we are to worship God, and thirdly it teaches us that how we think about God and how we worship God, these things are very important to God. It's just those three things that I'd like to talk with you about today.

I. God's self-disclosure and self-revelation is to dominate our conception of Him.

Turn your attention first to verse 4, where Moses records God's own word to His people which says, "You shall not make for yourself an idol or any likeness of what is in Heaven above or on earth beneath or in the water under the earth." It's fairly straightforward. God is saying His people are not to make images of Him. They are not to make images of false gods, but they are not to make images of Him either.

You need to pause and reflect about a few things about this passage. First of all, the way it's phrased, it might sound like that God is telling Israel that no Israelite can engage in artwork of any kind. It says you shall not make yourself an idol or any likeness of what is in Heaven or Earth, or in the water under the Earth. That might sound like you can't draw anything. You can't paint anything. You can't do woodcuts. You can't do any sort of media. You can't engage in art. That's clearly not what this command means though. First of all, remember in this very book, God will command Israelites to do certain pieces of artwork in the tabernacle for His worship. They are going to do pomegranates, they are going to do all sorts of other designs. In fact, on the mercy seat that symbolizes His covenant presence with His people, there are going to be winged cherubim. So, this is not a command that you can not do artwork. What it is, however, is a command that God is not to be pictured. He is not to be visually represented. It's clear, of

course, from the context and it's clear from other passages, for instance in Deuteronomy chapter 4, in a parallel passage we read this, "So watch yourselves carefully," Deuteronomy 4:15 says, "Since you did not see any form on the day the Lord spoke to you at Horeb from the midst of the fire so that you do not act corruptly and make a graven image for yourself in the form of any figure."

You see the point. You didn't see God at Mt. Sinai, Mt. Horeb, therefore you don't make an image of Him. This command, this second command is a command for us not only to abstain from making pictures of false gods or visual representations of false gods, it is a command that we not visually represent the true God. Now, that too, that point is made very clearly in Exodus chapter 32. You are familiar with the story of the golden calf, but if you're like me, the first three or four or five times you read it you thought that the golden calf was the image of a foreign god that was being introduced into the worship of Israel, but if you look at Exodus 32 verse 4, you will see that when Aaron made that golden calf, he made that golden calf as an image of the God of Israel who had brought Israel out of Egypt. In other words, he wasn't saying, "Children of Israel, the God of Israel has gotten you this far, we're abandoning now. Moses on the mountain, we don't know where he is, we're switching to another brand. We are going to another god now." Now, the golden calf was an image of the God who brought them out of Egypt. Aaron was not attempting to highjack the religion and take them into another form of religion. Although, that is what he really ended up doing. He was attempting to visually represent God. They wanted a god like the nations around them had, they wanted a god they could see, and touch and be sovereign over. The God of Israel said, "No, you will not make an image of Me." So, this prohibition clearly extends both to images of other gods as well as images of the one true God.

Why? Because God's self disclosure in the Bible, God's self-revelation, His revealing of Himself in the Bible, His revealing of Himself through Moses, the words of the prophets, that is to dominate our conception of Him, not our experiences, not our innovations, not our imaginations, not our opinions, not our representation. In other words, God's word, the Bible, is to be the source of our idea of God. Now, this is vital my friends, because, if you can think about God anyway that you want to think, if you can picture God, as it were, in accordance with your own imagination instead of thinking God's thoughts after Him, then you are sovereign over God. If the God of Heaven and Earth is only as sturdy and unchangeable as your opinion, He's in big trouble. And we have a whole generation that is encouraging us to idolatry in precisely that area. It says, "Well we can think about God however we want to think about God." It says about things in the Bible, "Well I don't really like to think about God that way. I like to think about God another way." We talked about that last week. God is saying, "No you can't picture me any way you want to picture Me. You have to think about Me the way I have told you I am in My words."

Think of it. By God demanding that He not be pictured, that He not be visually

represented, it requires you only and solely to conceive of Him as He is described in the word. Now friends, that's obviously, hugely important for those of us who live in an image-dominated culture. We live in a video, visual-dominated culture and God is saying, "When you think about Me, you have to think about Me in accordance with the word. Images distort Me, representations distort Me. Your imaginations distort Me. So, if you want to know Me, you have to know Me by My word." This is huge. This is God saying, "Look don't come to Me with your preconceived notions or if you do, lay them down at the door because I'm going to tell you what I'm like."

This is so important my friends. It's important for the liberals who want to go in with scissors and cut and paste and take out things that they don't like in the word about God because they think they are primitive. We've moved past that now. There are idolaters. It's also important because some of you will come with bad experiences in childhood. Maybe you had a bad father, and let's face it, our fathers are the first ones to teach us what God is like in many ways. They are our first picture of real authority and a bad father can make a really, really messed up person spiritually.

Paul Vits has done a study called 'The Psychology of Atheism' and he's basically studied about one hundred of the most important atheists and agnostics and radical skeptical believers over the last hundred and twenty five years, and you know what the results are? His conclusion is that atheists are made by bad fathers. You see, I have a hard time conceiving of God as Father because I had a bad father. Here is what the heavenly Father is saying: "Don't come here imposing what I can and can't be or what you think I might or might not be like, you come here ready to hear what My word says I'm like." That's liberating my friends. If you've had a bad picture of God given to you by your earthly father, you know what? You've got a great negative example. You can go to God's word and find out what He's really like.

There is one thing I still admire about Stonewall Jackson. You ever read anything about Stonewall Jackson's upbringing? He had horrendous examples of men in his life. About the age of ten, he looked around at these men who were real, real, gutter material and he said, "I don't want to be like this. I want to be different." Where did he get that from? He got it from the word, he got it from God's word. God is saying here, "Don't think about Me in your preconceived categories, don't come here trying to represent Me in accordance with your imagination, I define Myself by My word." That's the first thing that He's saying in this commandment. He's saying that the Bible is to be the source of our idea about God.

By the way my friends, that's one reason why protestant houses of worship are plain. They are not filled with religious symbolism, statues of Saints, pictures of God, because we want to take seriously this second commandment. They are radically word-centered. That's why the Reformers labored to take out the image worship that was present in the church of Rome at the time of the Reformation. It

wasn't because they were mean and hated artwork, it was because it was their desire to be faithful to the second commandment. I know every tour you have ever been on of any wonderful cathedral, you've heard the story of these horrible protestants who came along and wrecked this wonderful artwork. Friends, there was a reason they did that. It was the second commandment.

II. God's nature and revelation is to control our worship of Him.

Second thing we see here, look at verse 5. You shall not worship them or serve them. Again, very straightforward, God's people are not to worship images of other gods; they are not to worship images of Him. This phrase further specifies that not only must we think of Him in accordance with His word, we must worship Him in accordance with His word. God's nature, God's revelation, is to control our worship of Him. It's not just that false gods are not to be worshiped through images, it's that the true God is not to be worshiped through images. Go back to Deuteronomy 4:15 through 18 again. "Remember, you did not see any form on the day the Lord spoke to you. Be careful not to act corruptly and make an image of Him." You see the point is not, 'you didn't see God so don't make false gods.' It's, 'you didn't see God, don't try and make a visual image of Me and then worship Me by it.' Or in Exodus 32 and the golden calf. Now, here is the God who brought you out of Israel, bow to the golden calf. First Kings, chapter 12 verse 28, where Jeroboam has the audacity, not simply to make one golden calf, but two golden calves and say, this is your god who brought you out of Egypt. God is saying, "I am not to be worshiped by images."

Now, you look around us and in this room, "Well, I haven't worshiped an idol this week. I haven't worshiped an image this week, I've kinda got this one down, we can move on to the next point." Friends, our great challenge in the area of the worship of God today is mental and volitional. There are still visual challenges, there are still real idols out there. There are churches full of them, but our great challenge today is making mental images of God that do not accord with His word and imposing them on the one true God. There is a tendency today to seek to serve the God we want, not the God who is. When we worship and serve the God we want rather than the God who is, we are not worshiping the true God. The Lord of Heaven and Earth is saying, "You worship Me in accordance with My word." The Bible is to determine how we worship.

You see there are two ways to commit idolatry. You can worship something other than the one true God, that's way one. There is another way as well. You can worship the one true God by some other means than those that He has appointed. You see, this commandment is addressing precisely that situation. It's forbidding three things. It's forbidding us making images of either false gods or the true God. It's forbidding us human initiated images in worship. Thirdly, by extension it is forbidding us to use any other means or media than that which God has appointed us to use in worship.

The second commandment is the source of what our reformed forebears called the 'Regulative Principle of Worship.' That is, that we do in worship is only what God has commanded in His word. That's why one of our mottos at First Presbyterian Church is 'sing the Bible, pray the Bible, read the Bible, preach the Bible.' Why? Because the Bible is to provide the substance and the form of our worship in order that we might worship in Spirit and in truth, Not in accordance with the imaginations and vain understandings of men, but in accordance with God's own word. That's why God says no image making. That's why God says you can't worship Me in a way that I have not commanded. If you can think about God anyway you want to think about God, you can be sovereign over Him. If you can worship Him anyway that you want to worship Him, you may end up worshiping something other than Him. In fact you inevitably will. Therefore He says, because worship creates a culture, because worship creates My people and how you worship determines what you become, you must only worship Me the way I have told you to worship in My word.

III. God's nature, God's warning, God's promise.

Lastly, in verses 5 and 6 we learn a third thing. That God's people are to refrain from thinking about Him in terms of these visual representation and worshiping Him via images because of who he is and because of what he warns and because of what he promises. The importance of the manner of our worship, the importance of the purity of our worship in other words is scene in three things in verses 5 and 6. God's nature, God's warning, and God's promise, and it's in that order by the way.

We are first told in verse 5 that He is a jealous God. Now, that opens a whole bag of problems there. First of all it's an ascription to God of what we normally think of as sinful human emotion. I mean, we're not suppose to be jealous, are we? It starts you running down that rabbit trail and then you start thinking, "Well, does that means that God actually has an emotion in Him that corresponds to our jealousy?" and we start running down that trail. Hold on, focus, keep your eye on the ball. What's the point? God is saying, I am like a husband married to his wife and his wife has gone after another man, when you worship me in accordance with your own desires and not according to My word. That is exactly what God is saying. He's saying, I am like a husband who has been wronged by his wife, when you worship Me the way you want to worship Me. Let Me tell you what I'm like. I'm like a husband whose wife has committed adultery. That conveys, my friends, precisely what God is saying.

You don't believe He's serious about that? You read what He did to Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus chapter 10, verses 1 through 3, when they came and offered a sacrifice that He had not asked for. He killed them on the spot. You go look and read 1 Samuel 6 verses 1 through 10, when the children of Israel had put the ark

of the covenant on a cart and they were caring it back to Jerusalem. Surely God was pleased with this. The oxen stumbled, Uzzah reached out to steady the ark, to keep it from falling, and he was struck down dead. David pouted about that for months. God, how could You do this to me. I was bringing the ark back to Jerusalem. Well, you go back and read 1 Samuel 6 and 7 sometime. You know what you'll find out? Oh yes, I remember the ark was not supposed to be carried on a cart. It was suppose to be carried on poles. Oh, God takes His worship seriously even down to the details. God is saying, when he says, "I am a jealous God," He's reminding us of the marriage bond and He's saying that when you choose to do what You want to do instead of what I've said to do in My word, it's just like you've gone off and committed adultery and I'm the wronged husband. That's what He's saying.

He goes on to give a very stiff warning. Look at His words, "I visit the iniquities of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me." Again, your mind starts wondering and you think, that doesn't sound fair. Generation one sins, He punishes generation four, what's going on? Well, again keep your eye on the ball. The point of this particular passage is this, we are being told here that God is strict in His justice. He is indefatigable in His pursuit of justice in those who hate Him. Notice that *hate* here is simply a synonym for *disobeying* this command. He describes those who disobey this command as those who hate Him. You say, "Now come, on that's going a little too far isn't it." God says, "No, you don't keep this command, you hate Me. I'll pursue it to the third and fourth generation." This is a sign of God's strict justice.

Notice what He goes on to say, He gives a word of promise and a word of compassion and mercy and blessing. He goes on to say, "but showing loving kindness to thousands who love Me and keep My commands." By the way, there you see the parallel, you see the parallelism. 'Love Me' is a synonym there for 'keep My command.' Heard that somewhere else before? Hum...think Jesus said that on the night in which He was betrayed. "If you love Me, keep My commands." You see, to love God is to keep His commands. He's saying, let me tell you this, you keep this commandment and I'll show you mercy for a thousand generations. You see, even that comparison of His word of justice and His word of mercy shows us that God delights in showing mercy and compassion more than He delights in condemnation to sinners, even as He told Ezekiel, "I delight when sinners repeat and turn to Me rather than in the destruction of the wicked."

What's the Lord saying? He's saying that the way we worship is a reflection of our knowledge of God and it's a reflection of how seriously we take Him. If we know His nature, if we know His warning, if we know His promises, we will be careful to worship Him in accordance with His word.

Now, there is one last thing that I need to say. Because this commandment is emphasizing that God, the true God, can not be worshiped rightly unless we worship in the way He has appointed, we cannot fail to mention that the most

important thing to know about that is this. You can not worship the true God unless you come to Him through Jesus Christ His Son. That's the whole point of the book of Hebrews. You can't worship God, you can't fellowship with God unless you come to Him through His son. The first thing we need to do in order to obey the second commandment is bow the knee to Jesus Christ. To accept Him as Lord and Savior and never again dare to come into the presence of the Heavenly Father without clinging to His sacrifice and person. Without coming before Him consciously dependent upon His death, His live, His sacrifice on our behalf. May God bless you as you trust in Him and take your first step in truly worshiping God. Let us pray.

Our Lord and our God, we ask the You would grant us a heart of trust in Jesus Christ and a realization that no man comes to the Father but by Him. And so worship You in spirit and truth. In Jesus name. Amen.

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