

The 2nd Commandment: Worshipping the Right God the Right Way

Exodus 20:4-6

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Steve DeWitt

Today we are looking at the 2nd commandment which happens to be the longest one.

Remember the first commandment: *You shall have no other gods before me.* A god is anything we look to for ultimate meaning, purpose, joy, comfort, help, meaning, significance, or salvation. The command is a command to NOT place anything or anyone ahead of the one true God in our value set. It is a command to live for God, love him ultimately, and live a life to his glory—to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

Listen to the 2nd commandment God gave Israel:

"You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments." (Exodus 20:4-6 ESV)

We can summarize the first commandment as a commandment to worship the right God. The second commands us to worship the right God rightly or to worship the right God in the right way.

The first command was about the internal—the heart. Is God first? The second command is an application of the first. If the one true God is my ultimate, then I want to worship him, not anything other than him, and not anything lesser than him. You can worship the wrong God and you can worship the right God wrongly. We want to worship the right God in the right way.

A God I Can Make

Some of you may know the KJV language here: *"Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image."* (Exodus 20:4 KJV) The Hebrew means "something hacked" or "chiseled." This is not God doing the chiseling; this is man doing the chiseling. A man-made representation of a false god is clearly wrong because of the first commandment. But the command goes further; you shall not make, chisel, paint, sculpt, or construct an image of the one true God. Notice the all-inclusive language; don't make him to look like anything in heaven, earth, or beneath the earth.

We see the context in verse 5, *"You shall not bow down to them."* (Exodus 20:5 ESV) The primary concern here is worship and man's desire to represent an infinite God in a finite way.

Romans 1 describes it well, *"Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles....They exchanged the truth about God for a lie,*

and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.” (Romans 1:22-23, 25 NIV)

Verse 25 is a summary of the 2nd commandment. Man in his fallenness will replace the Creator as the object of his worship and will substitute him with something created. This created thing can be made by God—man may worship the moon or the sun or whatever—or made by man—an object that we venerate and give God-like honor to. An idol is anything we love more than God. A graven image is anything we make and treat like God.

Lest you think this an unnecessary command, remember that just a few chapters from now in Exodus 32, while Moses is on the mountain meeting with God, the people will demand that Aaron make them gods that they can follow. Aaron complies and makes a golden calf. This calf was familiar to them as the Egyptians worshiped idols of calves and bulls. Aaron then makes an altar in front of the calf and declares, *“These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!”* (Exodus 32:4 ESV). The people held a feast and then they indulged in revelry and it would seem had a mass orgy.

This was merely weeks after crossing the Red Sea and covenanting to obey the commands of God. We see how fickle and easily deceived and idolatrous the human heart is. Left to ourselves and apart from the Spirit of God, we would do the same.

This command condemns the making of any god-like representations for the purpose of worshiping them or using them to worship God.

What is wrong with man-made representations of God?

The whole world can't contain the true glory and greatness of God, much less an icon

The real issue here is irreverence and blasphemy. To think that I can contain all that God is in something that I make, this is human arrogance.

In Exodus 20:5, God explains why this is so important to him. *“For I the LORD your God am a jealous God.”* *Jealous* might better be translated *zealous*. He is zealous and jealous for his glory. He will not share his glory; that's the 1st commandment. He will not allow it to be diminished; that's the 2nd commandment. All the idols and icons people venerate and worship blaspheme his glory and he will not tolerate it. He promises to visit punishment up to the 3rd and 4th generation of those who “hate him,” those who worship lesser things than him. This is a debated verse particularly because in Deuteronomy 24:16 he says he will not make children guilty for the sins of their parents. Let me make a quick attempt to explain that. Does God hold children responsible for the sins of their parents? No, at least not in an eternal sense. Each is judged for their own actions. However, what is plainly true? Parents greatly influence their children. Their priorities often shape the child. We can see how a life lived directionally away from God will drag their children in that same direction. Now the godlessness of the parents influences the life and worship of their children and then their children, each personally responsible, but greatly influenced by idolatrous parents.

But God declares himself in physical terms! God has condescended to explain who he is in categories that we can understand. Theologians call this anthropomorphism. When God says he has eyes, he doesn't have actual eyes, but he does see everything. When it describes him with arms, it is so we can sense his love and embrace. God is spirit. He is not physical or material. He is spiritual and infinite and far greater than we even begin to understand.

It's the opposite of the wizard of Oz. The wizard of Oz portrayed himself as bigger and greater than he actually was. Dorothy and her friends pull back the veil and, lo and behold, the mighty Oz is much smaller than they expected. He oversold himself. He was all hype.

Hype is when reality is less than advertised, like the Super Bowl. There is no hype with God. When death unveils his true majesty and glory and we see him, he will be greater and more glorious beyond our wildest imagination.

Think of the greatest contemplation or thought you have ever had about God and he is far, far greater. Think of a child in our nursery drawing something like squiggly lines. Only faintly can you discern even a human shape. The teacher asks, "Who is this a picture of?"

"It is my Daddy."

"You mean it's a picture of your Daddy."

"No. This is actually my Daddy."

"Sweetie, you are very confused. Your Daddy is much, much greater than that piece of paper."

God

Spirit/invisible

Eternal

Present everywhere

Alive

Personal

Relational

Idol/Icon of worship

Physical/visible

Created

Reduced to one singular location

Non-living matter

Impersonal

No communication, love, or relationship

Icons distract from the one representation of God we are to worship—the incarnate Son of God

There is only one true physical expression of the glory of God: Jesus.

- *"He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature."* (Hebrews 1:3)
- *"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation."* (Colossians 1:15)
- *"For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell."* (Colossians 1:19)

We live in a physical world and a spiritual God can seem so surreal or unrelatable. We live on earth and a transcendent God can seem so "out there." I think much of the idolatry stems from our desire to worship something we can see and touch. Jesus is the touchable, seeable, relatable expression of all that God is. He is the glory of God in true humanity.

The apostles were eyewitnesses along with many others. John would put his head on Jesus' shoulder. Mary Magdalene clung to him after his resurrection. Jesus ascended to heaven and we are in this period of redemptive history that we see with eyes of faith who he is.

"Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls." (1 Peter 1:8-9)

That's us today. We worship the incarnate Jesus who we can't see or touch, yet we love him; only him. Don't let any physical thing, other than Jesus, be the object of your worship and affection.

Is there a difference between art and icon?

By icon I mean art that is religiously venerated and treated as God or a means to God. Over the years, I have traveled to see our missionaries in various parts of the world. In each part of the world I have seen a local religious culture's violation of the 2nd commandment. It seems normal because much of this type of worship is generational. Much of it is ancient so it feels reverent and holy. India's religion of 300 million gods is worshiping the wrong gods wrongly. But many violations are at least Christian in name. There are huge cathedrals and worship expressions that are centuries old.

The ancient churches of Christianity battled over the proper use of icons in worship: Western Church versus Eastern Church. This was a big deal. This was a big deal in the Reformation which reacted against the worship of icons by stripping their churches of all art; no images at all. So is it wrong to have a picture in your house of Jesus praying or of Jesus at the Last Supper?

What is the difference between art and icon? A good example is the story of Moses and the bronze serpent. If you remember, some Israelites were grumbling to Moses about bringing them into the desert and giving them the "worthless food" of the manna. So the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, they were bitten, and many died. And the people came to Moses in repentance and asked the Lord to take the serpents away. So God told Moses to make a brass serpent that would provide healing for all those who looked upon it. Eventually, that serpent became a stumbling block for Israel because they actually started worshipping it. The art and gift from God became an icon and a stumbling block.

And often that's what happens. The artist may not have meant it to be an object of worship (it was simply an expression of his faith), but over time people have a picture of Jesus or Mary and they get religiously superstitious, and artistic expression can become icon as people venerate, and in a sense, deify it. Or they look to it as a means to God. Only Jesus himself is a means to God. He is the way, the truth and the life; not his picture.

This is what is so prevalent all around the world. Churches and houses of worship have art that has become icon. People light candles and pray to the icon. In their homes they have little images that are prayed to or put in a place of near worshipful prominence. Art is not the way to God. Pictures of Jesus are not the way to God. The disciples' remains or graves are not the way to God. Mary is not the way to God. Pictures, paintings, sculptures big and small are not the way to God. Jesus is the way to God and these other things are distraction in the least and idolatry at worst.

I remember being on a church tour where we were in a famous ancient church filled with people bowing down and praying to statues and pictures. There were hundreds, maybe thousands of people. In our group was a young woman who was raised praying to icons. She had recently become a Christian. She looked around at all the art and statuary. I asked her what she was feeling. She said with tears in her eyes, "These are all the things that got in the way." Got in the way of what? Seeing Jesus as the way to God.

Is it wrong to have pictures of Jesus in your house or even church? Is it wrong to use pictures of Jesus to teach our children? Does a film like the *Passion of the Christ* or Michelangelo's *Piata* violate it? No, not technically. However, we must be careful that art doesn't become icon to us. Religion in the world shows how slippery this can be. If your art can stay art and you don't limit God to the object, I think it is as appropriate as God's command for Israel to fill the temple with art. It's not the art; it's the heart. Don't worship it. Don't pray to it. Don't talk to it. Don't bow down to it. Don't light candles to it. Don't

worship it. Art can draw our hearts in worship to the one true God, but be careful that it doesn't become God to you or superstitiously a means to God.

Finally, see the promise here. "*But showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.*" (Exodus 20:6) The ESV has the footnote and alternate reading you may be familiar with: *a thousand generations*. I'm not sure which it is but the point is the same. For those who love him, God shows a steadfast love to them, and through them, to many others. A life lived to the glory of the one true God not only is blessed by God, but also blesses by example and inspires many others including their family. Here's the point: why worship a thing when we can worship the one true God who promises steadfast love to all who worship him and worship him rightly?

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