

You Shall not Make or Possess Any Idols

Exodus 20:4–6, Part One

If God is God, he has the authority and the right to say how he will be worshiped, where he will be worshiped, when he will be worshiped, by whom he will be worshiped, and to demand exclusivity in worship — he alone will be worshiped. These opening commandments define worship of God.

God is eternal, immutable, independent and self-sufficient, infinite, omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent. He is altogether lovely, altogether worthy. He is righteous, good, and just. God is love. God is holy, holy, holy. He is faithful, wise, and sovereign, full of mercy and grace.

Does this painted wall accurately capture any of those attributes?

How about this attempt by an untrained woman to restore the original painted. She wanted people to see Jesus restored. God does not need to be restored. Nor can he be reduced to paint on mortar.

We have been trying to tame God and bring him down to a level we can manage since the garden. That defiance doesn't just show up in fashioning physical idols made in the likeness of created things, but in foolish thinking that imagines God to be other than he is. God is spirit, not a limited corporeal being. In **Psalms 50:21** God warns, “you thought that I was one like yourself. But now I rebuke you...” let's read, and pray for help to know, and worship God, as he reveals himself, and not as we imagine him to be. **Exodus 20:1–6** — And God spoke all these words, saying, ²“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. ³“You shall have no other gods before me. ⁴“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. ⁵You 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 fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

PRAY

The 2nd Command: You shall not make a carved image.

The first commandment determines who will be worshiped — God alone. The second commandment defines **how** he will be worshiped. We do not approach him on our terms. We do not decide how he reveals himself. We are not free to make a god out of created things. Portraits, images of God,

pictures, three dimensional carvings — all of these are forbidden. We may not reduce the eternal God to a bite-sized concept that our limited IQs and experience imagine to be clever or manageable. Self-willed worship is eliminated altogether.

You shall not make one or possess one *for yourself*. Corporate idolatry is easier to spot, as the violation when Aaron made the golden calf. Most of us have no problem understanding or obeying this corporate command. If we were to attend church on vacation and once the service began, some statue was brought out to bow before it, we would all knock people over to get out of that place. But there can be a personal aspect to idolatry. Household gods were common. Statuettes, talismans, charm bracelets or medals to ward off evil or gain some favor or blessing, lucky rabbit's feet — all prohibited. God is the strength of my heart and my portion. God is my refuge and strength. He is the present help in time of trouble. He is my hiding place. We are to ask him and trust him for deliverance from evil. Everything else is a substitute for God — a false god. As Thomas Watson said, God is to be adored in the heart, not painted for the eye.

It is worth noting that God is not prohibiting artistic expressions of beauty from worship. The careful instructions for both the tabernacle and the temple command beauty and assigns those who are gifted artists to accomplish the work. The prohibition is that no picture of God may be made. And nothing that is created, painted, or crafted is to be bowed to, worshiped, or served. Exodus 28 and 39 describe priestly garments that are to be made beautiful with a pattern of blue pomegranates and gold bells on the hem.

The Futility of Idols

Earthen idols cannot represent God who made the earth. To attempt to fashion an image of God is unbridled hubris and arrogance. Exchanging the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things puts us in Romans 1 judgment where idolatry is so extreme that actual people and their bodies become objects that are worship through sexual deviancy. We dare not exchange the truth about God for lies about who he is.

Fashioning an image of the free and limitless God into something small enough for a man to imagine is to brazenly act out of blinding pride.

1. How can the human search out the divine?
2. How can the finite grasp the infinite?

3

3. How can one whose span of life is less than 100 years comprehend he who inhabits eternity?
4. How can one created and formed out of dust fully grasp the uncreated Creator who is Spirit?
5. How can someone bound in their body clearly comprehend the One who fills heaven and earth?
6. How can those conceived in sin accurately depict the One who knows no sin, who is holy, holy, holy?
7. How can those born in the domain of darkness lay hold of him who dwells in unapproachable light?
8. How can one dependent on air in his lungs truly render a painting of the One who has the power of being in himself?
9. How can one who continually learns and changes represent the Lord who does not change, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever?
10. How can those who can only see the outside of a man craft an image of God who sees and knows the heart?
11. How can those who grow weary in a day craft a form that magnificently represents God, who holds all things together by the power of his word?
12. How can sinners render an image of God who is a consuming fire?
13. How can a tree fallen by gravity be carved into a figure of the resurrected Lord seated on a throne surrounded by a rainbow of emerald?

As he wrote what he saw in the throne room, the apostle John can't even find language — much less paint an image — to fully describe the things of God, much less God himself. That's why he uses the word "like" 45 times in the Revelation. A voice like a trumpet. One like a son of man.

The wicked worship of created things is a common sin for God's people. How many times do we see in the old testament accounts of different kings that one of the things that godly kings did was to go around the country and tear down idolatrous statues? As soon as the godly king tore them down, they would be rebuilt under the reign of his successor. But it is not something existing in history only. The Eastern Orthodox church, the Russian Orthodox church, the Roman Catholic church all bow, genuflect, light candles to, and pray to images that prohibited by God because they are neither God, nor are they accurate representations of God, as we have just seen. Those in Rome, or orthodox traditions, build icons into their worship. They would take offense to the Baptist pastor says they are violating the second commandment. A linguistic dodge is offered as justification for bowing before these idols. They would say they don't worship them, but venerate them. But the plain reading of this command that we are not to bow down to creative things, that is a distinction without a difference.

Idols Cannot Fulfill the Covenant of God

Last week we saw that God made us to worship. Worship is inescapable. But what we worship and pursue by sinful nature is not God, but things with which we seek to satisfy ourselves apart from God. In Matthew 6 Jesus tells us that the world seeks what they will eat, what they will drink, and what they will wear. They seek created things to meet their perceived needs and desires. Jesus makes it clear that what we really need is God, and he commands us to seek him and his kingdom first. Then he provides everything else. He satisfies all other needs. That is a picture of what God's covenant relationship with his people looks like. At the root level of his covenant, God undertakes to save and satisfy those who are his. Therefore idolatry is a violation of the covenant relationship, since only God saves and satisfies. No created thing can do that. Only God can do that.

Let's wrap up today by taking a pause on what is false, and looking at what is true. We are only partially done with the 2nd Commandment, and we will explore the second half of God's character in both his jealousy for his people next Sunday, Lord willing.

True Worship

The commands God gives us here for worship does not usher in the era of true worship. Don't misunderstand me. I am not suggesting the text is inaccurate, or that God is misleading us in some way. No, the Law is exposing our idolatrous hearts and our recalcitrance at continually running after idols that cannot save, help, or sustain us. But we keep rebelliously trying. The Commandments show us who our God is — he is holy, he is other, and he is unchanging. We are sinful, common rebels given to the whims of our fleshly appetites. How can such people truly draw near to worship God? We will have to be saved. We will have to be changed. Jesus ushers in the age of true worship. We are living in the age of true worship, as he says in John 4 — worship in spirit and truth.

We worship in spirit, as God is spirit. He gives his Holy Spirit to live in his people and set up the temple there. No more separation.

We worship in truth — the full revealed truth of our rescuing, redeeming King Jesus, and the truth of who we are — sinners in need of a Savior, and as we come to him in faith and repentance, ***saved by grace.***

5

- Rather than carved images, Jesus comes and makes the father plain. He is the image of the invisible God, and the exact representation of his nature.
- Rather than commands written on stone tablets that exposed our sinful incapacity, Jesus gives a new heart and writes his law there, giving us a desire to love God by keeping it.
- Rather than in the physical geography of Jerusalem, the temple of worship is the human heart.
- Rather than through sacrifice that reminds of sin, a Jesus make the final sacrifice that pays for sin.
- Rather than restricted access to the mercy seat behind the curtain once a year, Jesus has opened a new and living way through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, his body.
- Rather than being kept at arm's length from holy God because of sin, Jesus, our great priest, is now over the house of God so that we can draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

This is our God! Only he can do this! Forsake any idol that has gained a foothold in your heart and life and turn to the one true God, Jesus, who fulfills his covenant and saves and satisfies the soul.