

Introduction

What comes to mind when we think of an idol? Is it the small shrine to the Seahawks in my office? I think we want to think so, but that's probably not really the essence of the second commandment.

When we think about idolatry, what does it look like in the 21st century? Broadly speaking, we might imagine the many gods of Hinduism and the like when we consider idolatry. In some ways, it may bring to mind images (no pun intended) of pantheism and Eastern Religions. The three most prominent religions in America are Christianity, Judaism and Islam which are all monotheistic and have express prohibitions against idolatry. As such, most of us have never really brushed elbows with what we may regard as traditional idols. In the West, we often have to create ideas of idolatry like our phones or our favorite sports teams or something tactile like that to try to help ourselves get the idea. Idolatry in the Old Testament is a whole other thing.

Last week we looked at the first commandment; "*You shall have no other gods before me.*" (Exodus 20:3) It seems to me that we often conflate the first and second commands by imagining that we are not guilty of the first if we have not transgressed the second. The Ten Commandments don't flow in that direction, however. Let's read the text...

Exodus 20:4-6

Last week we considered the fact that worship is an unavoidable expression of the human heart that belongs only to the One, True God. However, what we seek to fulfill us is what we worship. This week, we pick up from that point.

Idolatry Seeks To Transfer God's Glory

Arguably, the most central doctrine of the Christian faith is the doctrine of creation, but since that's not the sermon I'm preaching today, I do think that we can comfortably say that the very core of all of our theology of God's sovereignty is the doctrine of creation. God's response to Job about all that transpired in Job's life centered around His sovereign rule demonstrated in the created order. Paul picked up this theme in Romans 1 wherein he opens Romans discussing the sinfulness of man and mankind's need for a Redeemer. We've read it multiple weeks now so I won't camp there too long, but remember Paul's description of the condition of mankind, "*For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.*" (Romans 1:21-23)

The essence of idolatry is found in the attempt to transfer the incomprehensible glory of God onto a component of God's creation. In other words, seeking to make finite He who is infinite. John Piper opens his book, *The Pleasures of God* with this paragraph:

There never has been an era when too many people thought too deeply about God or knew him too well. It is impossible to know God too well. He is the most important person who exists. And this is because he made all others, and any importance they have is owing to him. Any strength or intelligence or skill or beauty they have comes from him.

On every scale of excellence, he is infinitely greater than the best person you have ever known or ever heard of. (Piper, John; *The Pleasures of God*, pg. xi)

This extreme excellence, however, has a two-fold effect. For the believer, it is inviting. Piper describes God as “*infinitely interesting*” while inviting other believers to bask in the glory and wonder of God and to desire Him with a hedonistic passion. Jesus said it in another way, “*My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.*” (John 10:27) For the unbeliever, though, this is repellant. The magnitude of God's glory is described by Moses in Exodus 19 involving thunder and lightning and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast and this caused the people in the camp to tremble. (Exodus 19:16) This glory is deemed unapproachable in such a manner that the carnal mind and heart seeks not to come on God's terms, but, instead, chooses to transfer that glory to comprehensible mediums best pictured among the created order.

Consider Isaiah's words:

To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him? An idol! A craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and casts for it silver chains. He who is too impoverished for an offering chooses wood that will not rot; he seeks out a skillful craftsman to set up an idol that will not move. Do you not know? Do you not hear? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in; who brings princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness. (Isaiah 40:18–23)

The tendency to create such images comes from an earthly desire to reduce God's glory to something we find accessible or tangible.

Idolatry Seeks to Make God Accessible

This is the natural aim of reducing God's glory. Have you ever noticed the common objection by many people when they are faced with something about God that they don't understand or, frankly, don't like? I just don't think that God would do something like that OR I just don't think that God would say that OR I just don't think God...[fill in the blank]. The condition of the sinful human heart is such that we seek to meet God, not on His terms, but on our own.

Consider the famous event that we often simply call The Golden Calf (Exodus 32). It really is an astounding display of ignorance and pride all at the same time. Remember, Moses is up on Mount Sinai, where they ASKED him to go intercede for them. After being gone for what they deemed was too long, they compelled Aaron to make them gods that would go before them as they invaded the Promised Land. Aaron, as you know, doesn't even seem to balk at this and readily collects their gold jewelry to fashion said god: a calf. Once complete, Aaron presents this calf to the people, declaring, “*These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!*” Don't miss that! In the presentation of Aaron, this isn't a new god; it is the physical manifestation of the God of Israel to whom Aaron credits for their deliverance. Let me say it

again, Moses is literally receiving word from God on Sinai as this rebellion and accompanying debauchery is taking place. Then God informs Moses of what's going on, recounting for him the very words spoken by Aaron. God determines to let his wrath burn against them and restart with Moses. Moses, as intermediary between God and Israel, implores God to relent by calling upon His character before the Egyptians and God relents. The story goes on from there with Moses smashing the tablets from God to bits and the eventual death of thousands for their sin of idolatry. Here's the point, though. Israel decided to create a god that they could understand because the God of Moses was incomprehensible and scary.

We see this same pattern repeated in the divided kingdom of Israel when Jeroboam of Nebat looked into the annals of Israel's past and, instead of learning from their folly and destruction, modeled his system of worship after Aaron's golden calf. He, fearing the Israelites would turn their loyalties to Judah if they had to go to Jerusalem to worship at the Temple, instead fashioned two golden calves and placed them in Bethel and Dan in the northern kingdom of Israel and placed priests there. Listen to how this system of worship is described in 1 Kings 12:33. *"He went up to the altar that he had made in Bethel on the fifteenth day in the eighth month, in the month that he had devised from his own heart. And he instituted a feast for the people of Israel and went up to the altar to make offerings."*

Idolatry Rejects God's Love

God is jealous for His followers, not because He's toxic or dangerous, but because He loves them with steadfast love. His ways are for our good. His prohibition of idolatry is so that His followers will know the fullness of His glory, NOT the stifled, one-dimensional faux glory of false idols. The idols of our own making cannot hold the truth of God and, therefore, cannot deliver us from our sin and slavery.

With this in mind, we have to recognize that idolatry is a rejection of God and His love. The folly of this is plumbed in Isaiah 44:9-20. Let's read it. Verse like *"They know not, nor do they discern, for he has shut their eyes, so that they cannot see, and their hearts, so that they cannot understand."* (Isaiah 44:18) and words like *"deluded"* in reference to the idolatrous heart remind us that salvation is not in our own hands and to give glory to anything else is not merely a misstep in our worship practices, but a denial of God and His love as revealed on His own terms. The Psalmist said, "I hate those who pay regard to worthless idols, but I trust in the LORD. (Psalm 31:6)

How is God made truly accessible to us, though? Through the incarnation of Christ. Colossians 1:15 uses interesting language to describe Jesus. Paul says, *"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation."* This is why the incarnation is so important. God revealed the image of Himself in the manner in which it was always intended: a man. Mankind was the only created being made in the image of God. In our sin, that image is marred and only by the redemption of Christ is that image made right. Colossians 3:10 goes on to describe those of us redeemed in Christ as, *"...being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator."*

Conclusion

In closing, we need to grab onto this understanding of idolatry. While in America and the West, we may not build or carve images to which we give God's glory, we do build up in our hearts and minds that which robs God of His glory and steals His worship. This is the idolatrous heart in action. American Christians are guilty of all manner of worship forms and teachings that seek to transfer God's glory and make God more accessible in ways that ultimately have the unintended, though real, consequence of rejecting God's steadfast love.

I think in our time, idolatry looks less like statues and carved images of creeping things and more like religious teachings that downplay the glory of God, prosperity gospels that wrongly co-opt God's OT promises in ways that line the pockets of liars and deceivers, books that blunt the hard teachings of the Bible or adapt difficult truths to the cultural moment to be more inclusive or "welcoming"...the list goes on, but the outcome is the same. People are left with an image of God that is incomplete and, therefore, inept to save them. That's the message of Isaiah 44:9-20.