

Honor God's Holiness – Exodus 20:4-6 The Second Commandment

I. INTRODUCTION

⁴ “You shall not make for yourself a carved image—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;* ⁵ you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, *am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me,* ⁶ but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments. ^[1]

A. A Picture of God

1. A 3rd grade Sunday school class had some extra time at the end of the lesson one day so the teacher told the children they could just go ahead and color quietly till their parents came and picked them up.
2. They asked her what they could draw and she told them whatever they wanted.
3. So the children grabbed crayons and some construction paper and went to work -
4. All except one young girl named Tiffany who sat there just staring at the ceiling with a troubled look on her face.
5. Then she got a big smile, and set to work.
6. The teacher walked around the room, looking at the various pieces of art.
7. When she arrived at the little girl's seat, she asked, “What are you drawing Tiffany?”
8. Tiffany replied, “I'm drawing a picture of God.”
9. The teacher said, “But honey – no one knows what God looks like.”
10. Tiffany just sighed and said, “They will when I'm done!”

B. Icons

1. One of the biggest controversies in the entire history of the Church has been over the use of images in the worship of God.
2. Known as **icons**, they have been the cause of huge debate.
 - a. an icon is a highly stylized painting of Jesus, Mary, or one of the saints
 - b. they're usually painted on wood but are also found on canvas, paper, & stone.
3. During the Reformation, icons were banned for use in Protestant churches, but they continue to be used in Eastern Orthodox churches to this day.
4. In fact, icons are a **central part** of worship there.
 - a. they're thought to be containers & communicators of special grace.
 - b. they're venerated, people burn incense to them, light candles before them and even bow down to and kiss them as **acts** of worship.
 - c. no one in the Eastern Orthodox church would think of holding a church service without the veneration of the icons.
5. But even long **before** the Reformation, there were those who believed the making and use of icons for worship was a **basic violation** of the **Second Commandment**.
 - a. known as the “**iconoclasts**”, they campaigned long and hard to banish the use of images in worship.
 - b. but time and again they lost out to the “**iconodules**,” the supporters of icons.
6. We possess no icons here today. There will be no veneration of a piece of wood. We'll not bow before a painting.
7. Does that mean we've kept the Second Commandment – or might there be some far more subtle and important way God's word speaks to us today? Let's see.

II. TEXT

A. V. 4-5a

4 “You shall not make for yourself a carved image—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; 5 you shall not bow down to them nor serve them.

1. This is the Second of the Ten Commandments.
2. The First is found in v. 3
“You shall have no other gods before Me.”
3. The First commandment was a prohibition of worshiping *false gods*.
The Second commandment was a prohibition of worshiping the *true God* in a *false way*.
4. God says, “Make no image, no likeness of *anything* in creation as an object to worship.”
 - a. God was not prohibiting art for simple art’s sake here.
 - b. a bit later He commanded the fashioning of cherubim for the mercy seat, and after that told Moses to make a bronze serpent.
 - c. God is not banning art or the fashioning of figures for the sake of creative artistry.
 - d. what He’s prohibiting is the making of an image *to be used as an aid to worship*.
 - e. He bans the use of *images* as representations *of Him!*
5. God gave this command because it was the universal practice for the religions of the ancient world to make idols, representative of their gods.
 - a. the Egyptians among whom they had just lived for 430 years had many gods, each with it’s own idol.
 - b. the Canaanites they were about to take the land from also worshiped idols.
 - c. and God did not want His people to confuse the worship of these pagans with His worship – He was *nothing like* the petty deities of the heathen.
6. But there was an even *more important reason* why God gave this commandment.
7. You see, it wasn’t just to correct the faulty view of the *other religions* of that time.
8. Rather, God knows it’s the tendency of human nature *at all times* to fashion and worship idols, even in our own day, this enlightened, scientific age.
9. For an idol is nothing but a false *image* of God.
 - a. and where does an image *begin*? In the *imagination*.
 - b. the imagination is the *mental factory* where ideas take *shape*.
 - c. and long before we ever fashion an idol with our hands, we make one in our thoughts.
10. There’s nothing wrong or inherently sinful with the imagination; it’s part of our God given *creativity* which comes from our being created in the *image* of God, who is *The Creator*.
 - a. but the imagination, as a mental factory, can only manufacture ideas out of the *ingredients* we put *in* it!
 - 1) put raw plastic into a factory, and you get plastic thingies out of it.
 - 2) put metal ore into a factory and it will make metal dealy-bobs
 - b. in the same way that a factory only shapes what’s put into it into another form,
 - c. so our imagination as the factory of our soul, can only fashion ideas out of what’s put into it.
11. God said – “When you think about Me, don’t reduce Me to the level of creation. Don’t fashion ideas about Me drawn from the skies, the earth or the oceans.”
 - a. “I am Creator – don’t make Me *into* the creation!”
 - b. if we use created things to represent God, then it won’t be long before we’ve confused God *with* the that created thing.
 - c. if we make an image, even a *lofty* image to stand for Him, it’s inevitable that we’ll soon start thinking of the symbol *as* Him.
12. This is what the ancient religions did with their idols.
 - a. they all began by believing in spiritual entities which stood *above* the physical world.
 - b. in seeking to make an image to these spiritual entities they scrounged around for things on earth that corresponded to their beliefs about their gods.
 - c. the Egyptians believed that Hathor was a powerful and gracious goddess who bestowed blessing on them like a mother on her children.

- 1) so they looked around for a suitable symbol for her and found it in the Cow.
 - 2) they made an image of Hathor in the shape of a heifer – and it wasn't long before cattle were being worshiped by the Egyptians!
 - d. native Americans believed in the great Spirit in the sky – and found a worthy symbol in the eagle – and so placed it at the top of their totems. Whenever an eagle would fly overhead they would do homage to it.
 - e. I could go on with *each* of the idols worshiped in the past and today.
13. But the great danger you and I face as we read the Second Commandment is to think, “No sweat! Christians don't worship idols!”
 - a. that's true if by *idol* we simply mean some graven image of wood or stone.
 - b. but what if the image is *mental* instead of *material*?
 - c. what if we've cooked up some mental image of God - manufactured, not out of His revelation, but out of our own desires, wishes, & whims?
 14. Have you ever heard someone say, “I like to think of God as (fill in the blank.)”
 - a. I have! I've heard lots of Christians say it.
 - b. the danger of idols is not outside us but inside us, in our imaginations.
 - c. it's possible to mold and shape a likeness of God, not based in His word, His reality,
 - d. but out of our own desires; what we *want* Him to be --
 - e. or what others have told us, or out of the ideas of the world.
 15. If you were to go out to the mall and walk up to a dozen people and ask them, “Tell me what God is like” you would get a dozen different answers.
 16. Are there any less *idols* than Hathor or a totem? Not at all!
 17. Idols are plentiful today, enshrined in the hearts and minds of the imagination of millions.
 18. God says, “Make no image, no likeness of Me of anything *in* creation.”
 - a. “I am God! I am holy, above creation!”
 - b. “Don't confuse Me with it.”
 19. Over against the material of creation & ideas of the world which would vie to be the stuff of our ideas about God we have God's Word & Spirit to put into the factory of our minds to know Him.
 20. And realizing the constant threat of idolatry, we must ever *stay* in God's Word and yielded to the work of the Holy Spirit to *challenge* our ideas about God.
 21. You see, as long as we live in this fallen world, in these unredeemed bodies, we will face a constant battle over the Knowledge of God.
 22. Our flesh will exert a downward pull that will manifest itself in 4 main ways.
 - 1) The Desire for Ease & Convenience will seek to fashion an idol of God as *Comfy, Furry Fuzzball*.

Many people don't want a Heavenly Father so much as a Heavenly *Grandfather*.
They don't want a Divine Parent Who's concerned with growing them up into holy maturity so much as an accepting presence who wants to spoil them with goodies, who winks at their failure and gives lots of hugs and kisses.
The Fuzzball God makes no demands on them and requires nothing from them.
If they make it to church once every few months, He's tickled pink!
 - 2) The Desire for the Proudful Exaltation of Self fashions an idol of God as *Rule-Maker*.

This is the Fuzzball's opposite – for if the Fuzzball is *all-accepting*, the Rule-Maker is narrow and restrictive.
This is the God of the *legalist*; a deity who says the only way to Him is by following a strict set of rules that govern every moral choice.
This idol is worshiped by the length of one's hair, the music you listen to, the programs you watch, the clothes you wear, the car you drive; on and on the list goes and ever grows.
But at the end of the day, the goal of the legalist is to be able to say, “Look what I did for God!”
 - 3) The Desire for Wealth makes an idol of God in the shape of a *Cosmic Bellhop*.

Paul says that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil, identifying greed as one of the chief desires that drive human nature.

And truly, many seemingly deeply religious people in fact are only *using* God as the means to their own ends, the lust for riches.

Faith becomes a spiritual force, and words are the containers of that force.

Since God operates in the realm of faith, by speaking the right words, you can get God to do what you want, creating your own reality marked by physical health and financial wealth.

As one of the faith teachers said some years ago, “As good as heaven is going to be, brother, by faith I can have that NOW!”^[2]

4) The Desire for Power makes an idol of God in the shape of a *Divine Faucet*.

Federick Nietzsche identified the lust for power as one of the primary desires of the human soul and truly it is!

It's the lingering echo from the Fall when the devil told Eve that she could be as God. Though his offer has long been proven empty, the deceit lives on in our lust for power.

While the world angles for power in the political, economic, and social spheres, the people of God are often seduced into a lust for power in a *spiritual* vein.

Whenever you find people being *super*-spiritual, and seeking experiences with God that are extra-biblical, then you see this.

Movements that reject the Bible, setting it aside in favor of an esoteric and special touch from God that's only for those who are properly enlightened have turned God into something other than what His Word reveals Him to be.

He is the heavenly faucet Who exists to satisfy their *thirst* for power.

23. Make no mistake, the danger and threat of idolatry, of violating the Second Commandment is very real for you and I today.

24. To prove this, let's consider what happened to Israel.

- a. after the entire nation of some 3 million heard the words of the 10 Commandments,
- b. the people asked Aaron to fashion an idol for them so they could worship!
- c. think of it! While the words of God were still echoing in their souls, and the cloud of God's presence was resting on the mount above their heads! They had the audacity to request he make an image so they could worship.
- d. Aaron caved in to their request and made a golden calf. Exodus 32:4-6

⁴ And he received the gold from their hand, and he fashioned it with an engraving tool, and made a molded calf. Then they said, “This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!”

- e. they meant the calf was a *representation* of Yahweh.

⁵ So when Aaron saw it,

- f. meaning when he saw how the people were intent on worshipping the idol -

he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, “Tomorrow is a feast to the LORD.” ⁶ Then they rose early on the next day, offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings;

- g. look at all the religious devotion and forms of ritual that rise up around the idol.
- h. this is the way it always is with the images we make of God
- i. but listen to the how the people reacted in the end -

and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play.

- j. this turned into a drunken orgy!
- k. but that's to be expected when the image you pick for God is a golden calf.
1) you see, to them, the calf represented fertility, and fertility is linked to sex.

- 2) gold spoke of prosperity, and being an agricultural economy, that too spoke of the productivity of their vines - and so the wine flowed in abundance.
25. Consider the progression we see here – they asked for an image and gave the material to make it to Aaron, who fashioned a golden calf, which led to an altar, and ritual, and in the end a drunken orgy!
Their idol was an animal – and soon they were acting like animals!
26. The point is this – we inevitably become like the god we worship.
27. And this is why God absolutely prohibits the use of images in the worship of Him -
28. Because any image we *might* use, would in the end, not *enhance* our knowledge and understanding of God, but rather, would *obscure* Him.
29. The glory of God and the well-being of His people are tied to one another.
- the glory of God is unbound, unlimited.
 - an image, by its very nature has boundaries, so it *must* fall short of the glory of God.
 - this is why we must resist making images of God, even mental images –
 - because in the end, they hinder us from becoming fully human; they keep us from becoming all God created us to be.
30. But human nature resists the unknown.
- we want to tie a neat bow around everything – to bring all things under our comprehension.
 - human reason struggles to rise to the highest ground from which it can look down on the rest.
 - we're uneasy in the face of mystery, of that which is bigger and higher than we are
 - so we lay hold of it with the intent of pulling it down to a more accommodating, neater, & more comfortable place.
 - we put God in a box and label it “Theology” or “Church”.
 - AW Tozer wrote –
Left to ourselves we tend immediately to reduce God to manageable terms. We want to get Him where we can use Him or at least know where He is when we need Him. We want a God we can in some measure control. ^[3]
31. Such a God is not worthy of our attention, let alone our worship and devotion.

B. Vs. 5b-6

For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, ⁶ but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments. [4]

- The word *jealous* has a negative connotation today; it sounds *selfish*, but that is not at all the way God means it here!
- God is not jealous in some *insecure* way, as if our love and devotion to Him made him feel better. He is no Tinkerbell God whose glory gets brighter when we clap our hands!
- God is jealous in the sense that He is zealous *toward* us & *for* us.
 - He loves us so much that He wants the best for us --
 - and He knows our best is wrapped up in our thoughts *about* Him!
 - Listen again to Tozer
What comes to mind when we think of God is the most important thing about us. The most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like. We tend by some secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God. ^[5]
- Our thoughts about God are the rudder for our lives, the steering wheel of our decisions.
 - these decisions become the curriculum for the training of our children.
 - in parenting our kids, far more is *caught* by our example than is *taught* by our words.
- And this is why God speaks of generational sin here.
- I'm frequently asked about generational *curses*; it's a subject popular in some Pentecostal and

- charismatic circles where there's unbalanced teaching on spiritual warfare.
- a. the proof text that's used is this passage.
 - b. so I want to ask you to note the *context* & connection –
 - c. what God says here is tied to the Second commandment, which is a prohibition of what? Idolatry!
 - d. and what does God say here in v. 5 – is the word “curse” even used here? No!
 - e. He says that He visits the *iniquity*, the *sin*, of the fathers upon the children to the 3rd & 4th generation.
 - f. keeping the context in mind, WHAT SIN is He referring to? IDOLATRY!
7. God is saying that if a man fails to come to Him through His revelation and instead sets up an idol, he will fail to experience the fullness of life that God jealously and zealously longs for us to experience.
- a. on top of that, because of the way that man's life will go, he'll wear a rut that his own children will find the wheels of their lives caught in.
 - b. but it doesn't end there, for the reality of repentance and forgiveness is held out to *every* generation.
 - c. God says in v. 6, that whenever a man turns from idolatry, his own, or that of his ancestors, and embraces the true and living God, then God breaks the history of sin and ruin that has marked his life & family and sets them on a new course.
8. There's a fascinating story from history that illustrates what we find in vs. 5 & 6.
- a. it's a comparison of two men and their descendants: Jonathan Edwards and Max Jukes. Both men lived in the 18th Century in New York
 - b. Max Jukes did not believe in Christ or in Christian training for his children.
 - 1) He refused to take them to church, even when they asked to go.
 - 2) He's had 1,026 descendants;
 - 3) 300 were sent to prison for an average term of thirteen years;
 - 4) 190 were prostitutes;
 - 5) 680 were admitted alcoholics.
 - 6) His family, thus far, has cost the State in excess of half a million dollars.
 - 7) They made no contribution to society.
 - c. Jonathan Edwards lived at the same time as Jukes.
 - 1) He loved the Lord and saw that his children were in church every Sunday, as he served the Lord to the best of his ability.
 - 2) He has had 929 descendants, and of these 430 were ministers;
 - 3) 86 became university professors; 4) 13 became university presidents;
 - 5) 75 authored good books; 6) 7 were elected to the United States Congress.
 - 7) One was vice president of the nation.
 - 8) His family never cost the state one cent but has contributed *immeasurably* to the life of plenty in this land today.

III. CONCLUSION

A. Whose Image?

1. This command, like the first, is set as a *prohibition* – a negative – “Thou shall not!”
2. And like the first it *implies* a positive.
3. While we aren't to make an image of God – we are to worship and serve God as He's revealed Himself to us in His Word and by His Spirit!
4. The way God has *most perfectly* revealed Himself is in Jesus Christ Who is, as it says in Heb. 1:3, the *express image* of His person.
5. Rather than fashioning images of God, God wants to fashion us into the image of His Son.
6. This is what Paul says in Romans 8:29 – God is conforming us into the image of Christ.

7. Image! – IMAGE! – In our media-pervaded, consumer-driven age, image is everything.
 - a. maybe for us today, the real danger of violating the Second commandment is not so much that we would make an image of God,
 - b. but that we might make our image, our god!
 - c. that we would define our lives and devote ourselves to fashioning an image for ourselves that consumes us.
8. Does the label on our shirt, pants, dress, or shoes determine our sense of self?
 - a. does it *identify* us?
 - b. am I a *better person* because of the label I wear?
9. Take your teenager son to the store and set before him two T-shirts; one with no label and the other OP or Billabong – the no label is \$5 but the identical shirt with Billabong logo is \$18 – which does he have to have?
10. Take your 12 year old daughter to the store and put two skirts in front of her; one Sears and the other Roxy. The difference between their price tags is \$23, but you know she has to have the Roxy skirt! She couldn't be caught dead in a Sear's skirt – how embarrassing!
12. Oakley, Tommy Hilfiger, Nautica, Nike, Hugo Boss, Versace, Armani, Coach = IMAGE!
13. When we were in the Philippines a couple years ago we visited a massive outdoor mall.
 - a. one of the merchants sold clothing; shirts, pants, jackets.
 - b. and on the wall was a board with all of the various brand labels they would embroider on whatever garment you bought!
14. There's nothing wrong with owning a pair of Nike shoes and some OP T-shirts; that's not what I'm saying.
15. What I **AM** saying is that we need to be careful about whose image we're trying to fit in to – Barry's message last week was about this very thing.
16. We were originally created in the image of God, and though that image has been marred by sin, God jealously desires to restore it.
17. So, we have a choice – do we want the image of the world; the passing, nearly daily changing image of worldliness – or the glorious eternal image of Jesus Christ?
18. Rather than setting up our own images of God, let's bow humbly before Him, yielding to **HIS** work of making **US** into the image of His Son.

[1] *The New King James Version*. 1996, c1982. Thomas Nelson: Nashville

[2] Kenneth Copeland – *Believer's Voice of Victory* broadcast

[3] Tozer, A.W. *Knowledge of the Holy* (New York:Harper & Row, 1961), p. 16

[4] *The New King James Version*. 1996, c1982. Thomas Nelson: Nashville

[5] Peel, Bill & Kathy *Where Is Moses When We Need Him?* P. 60