

THE SECOND COMMANDMENT

By Andy Manning

Exodus 20:4-6

The title of this sermon is “The Second Commandment.” This is week 4 of our sermon series through the Ten Commandments.

There are two temptations that every human being faces in their relationship with God.

First, it is tempting to reject the authority of the Bible and create your own concept of God that better serves your needs.

And **second**, it is tempting to use visible images and physical items to help you feel closer to a God who is both invisible and spiritual.

Phil Ryken said, “The tendency of the Israelites toward idolatry was in part the expression of the universal human longing for a god one can see and know through the physical senses.”

Both of these temptations have been around since the beginning of human history, and both of them are very real today.

And these two temptations are addressed by the second commandment. Let’s read it. Our text today is in **Exodus 20:4-6 (CSB).**

4 Do not make an idol for yourself, whether in the shape of anything in the heavens above or on the earth below or in the waters under the earth.

5 Do not bow in worship to them, and do not serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the fathers’ iniquity, to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me,

6 but showing faithful love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commands.

WHAT IS FORBIDDEN IN THIS COMMANDMENT?

This commandment forbids **two things**.

First, do not make an idol for yourself.

Second, do not worship idols made by other people. Whether you make it or someone else makes it, do not worship an idol.

Notice the **detail** in this commandment (this is one of the longest commandments).

It says don't make an idol of anything in the sky, in the water, and on the earth.

That includes everything. Don't worship an idol of anything.

What is an idol? An idol can be an idea, an image, or an item, such as a statue, that you venerate, trust in, pray to, or give offerings to, in the place of God.

For example, in my house by the front door I have a picture of Jesus. Now it's not wrong to have a picture of Jesus. But it would be wrong if I prayed to that picture, if I venerated that picture, if I took that picture with me for blessing, or if I gave offerings to that picture. That's when that picture becomes an idol.

People tend to make **three mistakes** when then read this commandment.

First, they think this command only forbids idols of false gods, like Baal or Molech, but it is okay to have images of God, Jesus, Mary, and the saints.

But that's not true.

God forbids the use of any kind of image – in the heavens, on earth, or in the water.

An example of this is in Exodus 32. When Moses was up on Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments for forty days and nights, the people became impatient, and so they asked Aaron to make an idol in the shape of

a golden calf. But what did the calf represent? The calf did not represent a false god; the calf was made to represent Yahweh.

After he made the idol **Aaron** said, “There will be a festival to the Lord tomorrow (Ex 32:5).”

But this did not make it okay to have an idol.

Notice God’s response in Exodus 32:9-10. “9 The Lord also said to Moses: “I have seen this people, and they are indeed a stiff-necked people. 10 Now leave me alone, so that my anger can burn against them and I can destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation.”

For making an idol, even an idol that represented God, the Lord was angered and wanted to destroy the people.

Many years later King Jeroboam did something similar in 1 Kings 12. After King Solomon died, the kingdom of Israel was split in two. Rehoboam was the king of Judah in the south. And Jeroboam was the king of Israel in the north. The temple was in the south, and so Jeroboam was afraid that eventually as his people went to Jerusalem to make their regular sacrifices they would eventually turn away from him and give their allegiance to Rehoboam. So Jeroboam came up with a plan. He built two golden calves – one in the city of Dan, and one in the city of Bethel. What did the calves represent? Not a false God, but the true God who led them out of Egypt.

And **1 Kings 12:34** says, “This was the sin that caused the house of Jeroboam to be cut off and obliterated from the face of the earth.”

So it doesn’t matter if the statue represents a false god or the true God, or Jesus, or a saint, it is forbidden.

Second, people think this command doesn’t apply to them because they are not actually worshipping the idol, but what the idol represents.

This is in fact what Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians say.

But the Bible is very clear not to worship through images and icons and items.

This is exactly what the pagans did during the time of ancient Israel. The pagans didn't actually believe that the idol was supernatural, but that the idol represented a god, and that the god would someone inhabit the idol.

Roman Catholics will say that they are not worshipping their images and icons, but only venerating them.

But veneration is worship.

This is what God doesn't want. God wants all of your religious veneration for Himself.

As well, Roman Catholics tend to do more than venerate these statues and images.

They come to believe that they can get closer to God if they are near a statue or image.

They tend to put faith in religious objects, like bracelets and necklaces; they believe that if they have them close they will be more blessed.

This is idol worship.

Kevin DeYoung wrote, "What is wrong is to infuse objects or ornamentations with spiritual efficacy as if these artifacts brought us closer to God, represented God, or established our communion with God."

Third, some people think this command only forbids physical images and items.

But deep down, what this command forbids is false concepts of God; false ideas of God.

Every physical idol or item or image begins as a concept in someone's mind; an inaccurate concept; and then it becomes something physical and visual.

But the real harm is that the concept is false, and then the false concept of God is worshipped rather than the true God.

This is why it is so important that ideas about God be accurate, as revealed to us in Scripture.

The New City Catechism video on this commandment says, "Idolatry is worshiping God according to your own conception of Him. Instead, you are to worship God according to who He is and not according to who you want him to be. Idolatry is to worship God falsely."

Similarly, **Jl Packer** wrote, "This forbids not worshiping many gods, but imagining the true God as like yourself or something lower. God's real attack is on mental images, of which metal images are more truly the consequence than the cause.... No statement starting, 'This is how I like to think of God' should ever be trusted. An imagined God will always be quite imaginary and unreal."

Alistair Begg wrote, "The essence of idolatry is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of God."

Sometimes people will say, "I like to think of God as this or that; I like to think that God is like this or like that. I don't believe God would send anyone to hell. I don't believe God condemns homosexuality. I don't think God minds if I have sex with my girlfriend." This is idolatry.

So the **bottom line** is that God forbids us from using religious objects in worship – pictures, jewelry, statues, etc. You can't bow down to them. You can't serve them. You cannot venerate them. You cannot pray to them. You cannot put faith in them.

Praying to or through a statue of Jesus doesn't make your prayers more effective. It makes you a lawbreaker and incurs the wrath of God.

One **author** wrote, “God is to be adored in the heart, not painted to the eye.”

Again, religious images are not wrong; it is only wrong when they are used in worship.

For example, in Numbers 21 God sent poisonous snakes to punish the people for complaining against Moses. And so the people repented, and Moses prayed for them. And God told Moses to make a bronze snake, and if anyone who is bitten will look at the bronze snake, they would live. So there was an image that God commanded them to make.

But the image was kept. And years later, the people started worshipping the snake. So in 2 Kings 18, King Hezekiah pleased God when he took the bronze snake and broke it into pieces.

So something like a cross is fine for a decoration, but it must not be used for worship. We must not pray to it, or venerate it, or give offerings to it.

HOW ARE THE FIRST TWO COMMANDMENTS DIFFERENT?

Now this commandment is different than the first commandment.

Have no other gods is different than do not make an idol.

The first commandment says to worship the right God.

The second commandment says to worship God the right way.

Or to put it negatively, the first commandment forbids us from worshipping false gods;

the second commandment forbids us from worshipping the right God falsely.

The first commandment deals with the object of worship;

the second commandment deals with the manner of worship.

The first commandment is about exclusivity. Worship no one but God.

The second commandment is about truth. Worship God as He truly is, and that means worship without any symbols.

It's possible to be successful at keeping the first commandment but not the second.

In 2 Kings 10, King Jehu did the right thing by destroying the Baals, and the temple to Baal, and he killed the worshipers of Baal. He even turned the temple into a public toilet. He kept the first commandment by only worshiping God. But he failed to get rid of the golden calves that were set up by Jeroboam at Bethel and Dan.

And so the second commandment is to worship God in the right way – without symbols, statues, pictures, etc.

Let me quote from the Heidelberg Catechism, a Protestant Catechism from the sixteenth century.

Heidelberg Catechism

Q & A 95

Q. What is idolatry?

A. Idolatry is having or inventing something in which one trusts in place of or alongside of the only true God, who has revealed himself in the Word.

Q & A 96

Q. What is God's will for us in the second commandment?

A. That we in no way make any image of God nor worship him in any other way than has been commanded in God's Word.

Q & A 97

Q. May we then not make any image at all?

A. God can not and may not be visibly portrayed in any way. Although creatures may be portrayed, yet God forbids making or having such images if one's intention is to worship them or to serve God through them.

WHY IS IDOLATRY FORBIDDEN?

Why is idolatry forbidden? What so wrong with idolatry, especially if you are simply using symbols to worship the true God?

1. It damages God's reputation.

God's reputation is what people think of Him.

And idolatry is evil because it causes people to have wrong thoughts about God.

Idolatry distorts God. It inevitably changes God.

No idol or symbol or picture can accurately represent God; and therefore every idol misrepresents God.

Idols make God to be something that He is not.

Alistair Begg wrote, "Idols confuse people as to the nature of God."

How does idolatry distort God?

First, idols are finite.

They are limited.

This is most obvious in that they are limited in space. If an idol is here, then it is not somewhere else at the same time. They are limited.

They are also limited in that they are imperfect. No idol is a perfect representation of God; and no idol is even a perfect work of art. Every idol has flaws.

But God is infinite. God is omni – omnipresent; omnipotent; omniscient; omni-benevolent.

God is perfect – perfectly in love, in holiness, in justice, in beauty.

Second, idols are created.

An idol has to be made by something greater than itself.

But God is self-existent.

That's the very meaning of God's name, Yahweh. God is self-existent. Eternal. He is. He always was. He always will be.

This means that everything in existence comes from His hand, and is less than Him.

Third, idols can be controlled.

We can pick them up, move them, hide them, design them how we want, decorate them how we want. You can destroy it, cover it, turn it around, change it.

In the pagan world, idols could be controlled and manipulated. As long as you fed your idol, it blessed you.

But God is uncontrollable. He cannot be manipulated, or tricked, or forced.

He controls us. He is in charge of everything and everyone.

This is called God's sovereignty.

Fourth, idols are needy.

They need to be dusted, kept out of the elements, guarded from theft, carried from place to place, picked up when they fall over.

God doesn't need anything.

Acts 17:24-25 says, "24 The God who made the world and everything in it—he is Lord of heaven and earth—does not live in shrines made by hands. 25 Neither is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives everyone life and breath and all things."

Fifth, idols are physical.

They have shape and form. They have location.

But God is formless.

John 4:24 says that God is spirit.

Deuteronomy 4:11-12 says, "11 You came near and stood at the base of the mountain, a mountain blazing with fire into the heavens and enveloped in a totally black cloud. 12 Then the Lord spoke to you from the fire. You kept hearing the sound of the words, but didn't see a form; there was only a voice."

Sixth, idols are visible.

You can see an idol. This is why they are so appealing.

But God is invisible.

This is why it is impossible to make a true image of God.

Colossians 1:15 calls God "the invisible God."

John 1:18 says “no one has ever seen God.”

1 Timothy 1:17 says, “Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.”

Jerry Vines says, “When you make a graven image of God, you fix God. An image is limited. God is unlimited. An image is local. God is universal. An image is temporal. God is eternal. An image is material. God is spiritual. When you make a graven image, it distorts God.”

This, by the way, is highly insulting to God.

Thomas Watson said, “To set up an image to represent God, is debasing him. If any one should make images of snakes or spiders, saying he did it to represent his prince, would not the prince take it in disdain? What greater disparagement to the infinite God than to represent him by that which is finite; the living God, by that which is without life; and the Maker of all by a thing which is made?”

The builder is greater than the building. So if you build an idol, you are greater than the idol.

So not only have you made God to look less glorious than He is, but you have made God to look less glorious than you.

2. It leads to false worship.

The second reason that idolatry is evil is that it leads to false worship.

The idol is not God. God is a spirit.

As well, idols don’t accurately represent God.

Therefore to worship an idol or through an idol is false worship.

Rather than worshiping God, you are worshiping the idol.

This means that breaking the second commandment also leads to breaking the first commandment.

When you worship an idol, even if it is an idol of the true God, you are worshiping a false god, because the idol is not actually God, nor is it an accurate representation of Him.

Idolatry is giving your worship away to something other than God.

It is worshiping the creation rather than the creator.

You are not having a relationship with God, but with a lifeless object.

Al Mohler said, "To worship the right God in the wrong way is to worship the wrong God."

Idolatry leads to false allegiance.

You are giving your respect to the idol rather than God.

You are praying to the idol rather than God.

Often times it means giving offerings and gifts to the idol rather than God.

It means trusting in and hoping in the power of the idol rather than God.

And the practical problem with false worship is that idols cannot help you.

Idols cannot save you. They cannot answer your prayers. They cannot deliver you. They cannot heal you.

Psalms 115:4-8 says, "4 Their idols are silver and gold, made by human hands. 5 They have mouths but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see. 6 They have ears but cannot hear, noses, but cannot smell. 7 They have hands but cannot feel, feet, but cannot walk. They cannot make a sound with their throats. 8 Those who make them are just like them, as are all who trust in them."

Those who worship idols are just like them – powerless. Helpless.

When you worship an idol you are worshipping something other than God.

3. It makes God jealous.

Go back to Exodus 20:5. “Do not bow in worship to them, and do not serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the fathers’ iniquity, to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me.”

What does it mean that God is a jealous God?

We tend to think of jealousy as an evil, mean, ugly attitude. An egocentric, prideful, selfish attitude.

And that’s the way most human jealousy is.

Phil Johnson said, “Jealousy is the fear of being supplanted. It’s a negative passion stirred in us when we believe we are about to lose a loved one’s affections. It is usually accompanied by envy, resentment, suspicion, and insecurity. It is normally self-centered and hateful.”

But there is such a thing as a godly jealousy, as when a husband wants his wife all to himself, and a wife doesn’t want to share her husband with anyone else.

That’s how it is with God. God wants our exclusive worship. He wants us all to Himself. He wants all of our trust, all of our veneration, all of our adoration, all of us for Himself.

Phil Johnson said, “God’s jealousy is a holy vigilance against anything that would alienate our affections for him, or anything that would compromise our love for Him. It is rooted in his love for us. Because God loves us He must hate everything that would diminish our love for him. God is jealous when our iniquity compromises our love for Him.”

God's jealousy is not like human jealousy. It is fixed. It is unchanging. It doesn't flare up and get out of control. It is not a fluctuating emotion. It is deliberate and unchanging.

Phil Johnson said, "God's jealousy is a deliberate and unchanging contempt/loathing for everything that challenges his rightful place as sovereign God. Of anything that would rival him."

It's important that you see that God's jealousy is an expression of His love.

Phillip Ryken said that God's jealousy is "His zeal – the burning passion of his love. A holy jealousy is one that guards someone's rightful possession. No husband who truly loves his wife could possibly endure seeing her in the arms of another man."

And how is God's jealousy expressed? With wrath.

Go back to **Exodus 20:5**. "Do not bow in worship to them, and do not serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the fathers' iniquity, to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me."

Not only does God punish you, but He punishes your children and grandchildren. This is meant to scare us away from idolatry.

What does it mean that God will punish the children for the father's iniquity? This is meant to be a warning for parents. It means **three things**.

First, it means that your kids and grandkids will suffer the consequences for your sins.

That's just common sense. If you are addicted to alcohol, or commit adultery, or get a divorce, or commit a crime and go to prison, or throw away your money on gambling, your kids will be negatively affected.

Sin never affects just you, and that's true especially if you are a parent.

Second, it means that your kids will likely follow your example.

Again, this is just common sense.

Your chances of getting a divorce go way up if your parents are divorced.

Your chances of going to prison go way up if your father or mother was incarcerated.

If you commit the sin of idolatry, your kids probably will, too.

This doesn't mean that you are destined to follow your parent's example; but it means that you will be prone to.

Third, it means that your kids, if they do not repent, will be punished not only for their sins, but for yours, too.

Again, this is meant to motivate parents to be faithful to God.

Thomas Watson said, "Idolatrous persons are enemies not to their own souls only, but to their children."

Here's what this command doesn't mean.

It doesn't mean that you will be punished for some unknown sin that your parents committed.

It doesn't mean that you will be punished for your parent's sin.

If you will look back at Exodus 20:5, you'll see that it says that God will punish the children for the father's iniquity if they, too, hate the Lord.

In other words, if you practice idolatry, and your kids don't follow your example, then they won't be punished.

But if they practice idolatry, too, which God considers hatred, then God will punish them for your sin and theirs.

But God will not punish faithful Christians who love God for the sins of their parents.

Some people think that God inevitably punishes kids for their parent's sin.

Ezekiel 18:20-21 says, “20 The person who sins is the one who will die. A son won't suffer punishment for the father's iniquity, and a father won't suffer punishment for the son's iniquity. The righteousness of the righteous person will be on him, and the wickedness of the wicked person will be on him. 21 “But if the wicked person turns from all the sins he has committed, keeps all my statutes, and does what is just and right, he will certainly live; he will not die.”

In other words, you can break the curse of your family's sin.

If you repent and love God, then God will not punish you. Instead, He will bless you.

Look at **Exodus 20:6**. “But showing faithful love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commands.”

If you repent of your parent's sin, and love God and keep His commandments, then He will not only bless you, but he will give extra blessings to your descendants, as long as they continue to love Him, too.

The thing to note here is that God hates idolatry.

Verse five says that idolatry is the same as God-hating.

Idol-lovers are God-haters.

You might not mean to hate God, but that's how it feels to God.

It's like a husband who cheats on his wife and tells her, "I didn't mean to hurt you."

Idolatry hurts God. Offends Him. Insults Him. Angers Him.

Thomas Watson wrote, "Image worship makes God abhor a people.... One special sin for which God visits, is idolatry and image worship. For Israel's idolatry he suffered their army to be routed, their priests slain, the ark taken captive."

It was the sin of idolatry that ultimately caused God to send the Assyrian army to destroy the nation of Israel, and it was idolatry that caused God to send the Babylonians to destroy the nation of Judah.

CONCLUSION

So what is the application of the second commandment?

Remember that every commandment is both positive negative.

On the negative side, it means don't make or worship idols.

On the positive side it means this. Jesus said in **John 4:24**, "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in Spirit and in truth."

What does it mean to worship God in spirit? It means don't worship Him through idols or images or items. Worship Him by faith, not by sight.

What does it mean to worship Him in truth?

It means to worship God as He truly is; as He has revealed Himself in Scripture.

This means you need to know your Bible.

You cannot worship a God you don't know.

And if you worship God as you think He is rather than as He really is, then you are an idolater.

Every Christian should be a student of theology.

But to worship God in truth means one more thing. It means to truly and sincerely worship Him.

When you come to church, do you actually think about what you are singing?

Are you actually listening to the sermon?

When we pray together are you actually praying?

When you sing, do you mean what you say?

Do you truly mean it when we sing, "Have thine own way?"

To keep the second commandment is to worship God in Spirit and in truth.

And that of course means to worship the Lord Jesus Christ, God's unique Son.

Jesus said in **John 14:6**, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

In **John 14:9** Jesus said, "The one who has seen me has seen the Father."

Colossians 1:15 says, "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation."