

## **You Shall Not Make for Yourself an Idol**

Exodus 20:1-2; 4-6

September 27, 2020

Phil Moran

**I'm going to focus today on two truths in the second commandment.** It teaches us how we are to think about God; and second, it teaches us something vitally important about how God thinks about us

**First, this commandment tells us that God's self-disclosure, His Word is to dominate our conception of Him.** Vs. 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."* That's fairly straightforward, isn't it? God's people are not to make images of Him.

**This is not saying God's people cannot create art.** It's not saying we can't draw or paint or do any kind of artistic media. Later in the Bible, God would command His people Israel to create artwork for the Tabernacle, and then later for the Temple in Jerusalem. The human ability to create art actually reflects God's image in us. God is creative and so are we! What is clear in the commandment is that God is not to be visually represented. A parallel passage in Deuteronomy 4:15-16 says, *"Therefore watch yourselves very carefully. Since you saw no form on the day that the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, beware lest you act corruptly by making a carved image for yourselves in the form of any figure."*

**You see the point. You didn't see God at Mt. Sinai, Mt. Horeb, therefore don't make an image of Him.** It's vital to see this doesn't only mean we don't make images of false gods. It says we are not to visually represent the true God. Exodus 32 tells the story of the golden calf. Now, if you're like me, the first time you read or heard that story you thought the golden calf was an image of a foreign god that was being introduced into the worship of Israel. But if you read Exodus 32 carefully, you'll see that when Aaron made that golden calf he made it as an image of the God of Israel who brought them out of Egypt. In other words, he wasn't saying, "People of Israel, the God of Israel brought you this far, but now that Moses is taking so long on the mountain we're switching brands. We're going to worship another god now." No! Aaron presented the golden calf as an image of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Aaron wasn't attempting to introduce a new religion. He was attempting to visually represent the one true God. But God said, "No, you will not make an image of me."

**Why? Because God's self-disclosure, God's self-revelation in His Word, and only that is to dominate our conception of Him.** We are not to look to what other people worship, not to our experiences, not to our innovations, not our imaginations, not our opinions. In other words, God's Word, the Bible is to be the source of our conception of God. This is vital, because if you can think about God any way you want, if you can picture God according to your own imagination instead of relying on what God Himself has revealed in His Word, then you are sovereign over God. If the God of Heaven and Earth is only as sturdy and unchangeable as your opinion, then He's in big trouble and so are you! And the modern world encourages us to idolatry in precisely this area. The modern world says, "We can think about God any way we want, whatever seems good to us." And the modern world says of the Bible, "Well, I don't like

to think about God that way. The Bible is so narrow and full of inconvenient commandments, but now we know better.” **God has commanded that He not be pictured or imaged in any way,** and by so doing, God requires us solely and exclusively to conceive of Him as He is described in His Word.

**This is hugely important for people like us that live in an image-dominated culture.** Our hearts and minds are flooded every day by video images on television and computer screens, Youtube and Facebook. Visual images have great power over our hearts and minds. So, why does God command that make no image of Him? Because images distort Him, representations distort Him, our imaginations distort Him. So, if you want to know God, look to His Word and only to His Word.

**God is saying, “Don’t come to me with your preconceived notions. Leave those at the door because I’m going to tell you what I’m like.”** Many people today, even many Christians, have been led astray by liberal churches and liberal theology that goes into the Bible with scissors and paste to remove the things they don’t like because they think the Bible’s conception of God is outdated. They have in their minds an image of a god they think is superior to the God of the Bible. My friends, that is idolatry.

**Dear friends, the second commandment is liberating. Dr. Paul Vitz is a Christian and also a psychologist.** He wrote a book, “The Psychology of Atheism.” He studied dozens of well-known atheists and agnostics over the last hundred years. He came to the conclusion that atheists are made by bad fathers. Almost every atheist he studied had an abusive, distant, or absent father. They rejected God because they took their bad experience of fatherhood and said, “If that’s who God is, then I want no part of him!” Maybe you had a bad or absent father, and you’ve struggled to believe in a Heavenly Father who really loves you and cares for you. Do you see how liberating the second commandment is? Take that false image that’s based on your experience and throw it out. That’s not God. It’s an idol. Shoot it between the eyes and nothing but sawdust comes out. Want to know what your Heavenly Father is like? Go to His Word and find out who He really is.

**This is why, traditionally, Protestant houses of worship are plain.** Reformed houses of worship are (usually) not filled with religious symbols other than the cross. There are no statues of saints or the Virgin Mary, no figure of Jesus on the cross, no pictures of God like the Sistine Chapel. Why? Because we want to take the second commandment seriously. We are radically Word centered. That’s why the Reformers removed the statues and images from churches. It wasn’t because they hated art, but because they wanted to obey the second commandment and conceive of God only according to His Word. God commands that He is not to be worshiped by the use of images.

**You may say, “Phil, I haven’t worshiped an idol all this week.** I’ve pretty much got this one down, we can move on to commandment three.” But my friends, our challenge doesn’t involve statues and paintings. God’s prohibition of images also applies to mental images. We are all prone to create mental images of God that are not based on His Word. The modern world and even some churches have encouraged us to seek and serve the God we want rather than the God who is. When we cook up in our own minds the God we want, we are worshiping and serving an idol, not the true God. Many people have a mental image of God that is based more

on George Burns and Morgan Freeman than the God of the Bible. If your god affirms all the things you already believe, if your god never challenges your values or your impulses or your politics, then chances are you are worshiping and serving an idol of your own making. But the Lord of Heaven and Earth says, "You shall not make an image." We are to know God and serve Him according to His Word.

**This leads us to a SECOND truth in the second commandment.** Vs. 5 says, "*You shall not bow down to them (idols) or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God.*" We normally think of *jealousy* as a sinful human emotion. We're not supposed to be jealous, are we? So, what does God mean that He is a *jealous God*? God is saying that He is like a loving and committed husband whose wife has gone after another man. When we worship false gods that we've made for ourselves we are committing spiritual adultery. When we try to worship and serve a god we've cooked up to satisfy our own desires, we are cheating on the God who made us and saved us through the gift of His Son. And the consequences are severe. God is a jealous God (v. 5), "*visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me.*" Did you catch that? Worshiping a god of our own making is *hatred* toward the God who is.

**But notice He goes on to give a word of promise and compassion and mercy.** Vs. 6 says, "*But showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.*" To love God is to keep His commandments. Have you heard that somewhere else in the Bible? On the night He was betrayed, Jesus said, "*If you love me, you will keep my commandments* (John 14:15). To love God is to keep His commandments.

**There is one last thing I need to say.** There is one and only one visual and tangible image of God that is authorized in the Bible. God has given us an authorized image to look to so that we can know without a doubt who God really is. Colossians 1:15 says, "*[Jesus Christ] is the image of the invisible God.*" John 1:14 says, "*The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.*" Do you want to know the true God? Look only to His Word, and most of all to His Word made flesh, Jesus Christ. Martin Luther said if you want to know God, put out of your mind any vision of a great king on a mighty throne, and look only to a cradle in Bethlehem and a cross on Calvary, and behold your God.

**You cannot know and worship the true God unless you come to Him through Jesus Christ His Son.** The first thing to do in order to obey the second commandment is to bow the knee to Jesus Christ. To know and worship the true God, you must accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and trust only in His sacrifice on the cross in your place. And know that Jesus is the image of God, the Word made flesh. Look to Him and trust in Him. When you do that, you take your first step in truly worshiping and serving the living God.