

Sermon File # 668

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Sermon Title: *Commandment Two: Why We Like Idols*

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Commandment Two: Why We Like Idols

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to our text, as we continue our summertime series from the Ten Commandments, today looking at the 2nd. As we noted last Sunday, these commandments were not given to God's people as the steps toward earning salvation. The Israelites had already been saved by grace through God's deliverance from their bondage in Egypt. Rather, the Decalogue was given to God's people as his commandments for a life that pleases him, one that is lived in accordance with his perfect will for a blessed and joyful life.

God's people would fail to obey these laws and to be faithful to the covenant that the Lord had established with them, thus they were to forfeit the blessings the Lord would have given them. The only one to fulfill these commandments, not just in the minimal, negative sense but in the absolute way that he interpreted them in his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), was the Lord Jesus, the eternal Son of God. Jesus teaches us the full meaning of these commandments and it is only in our faith relationship with him, empowered by the Holy Spirit, that we can obey these commandments. The Decalogue is summarized by the Great Commandment to love God with our entire being and love one's neighbor as oneself (Mark 12:28-31;

Matthew 22:34-40). The first four commandments have to do with our loving God and the others have to do with loving our neighbor. So we will continue to look at these commandments from Jesus' perspective and seek his power to obey them.

We noted last Sunday that the command to have no other gods except the Lord God requires that we surrender to and follow Jesus Christ, God's Son, as our only Lord and Master. We worship the one Triune God through his Son Jesus by the power of the Spirit. He demands our exclusive worship, to the exclusion of all other gods, meaning anyone and anything that would detract from his Lordship and deter us from following him wholeheartedly.

The second commandment is closely related. The first one tells us whom to worship and serve, and the second focuses on how we are to worship him. The first commands us to worship the right God and the second tells us to worship him in the right way, (Ryken, 568). When we worship the Lord God in the way that pleases him, we worship him in spirit and in truth, without idols.

Follow as I read, **Exodus 20:1-6**, focusing on verses **4-6**.

As the prophets of Israel made abundantly clear, nothing is more ridiculous than worshiping an idol (e.g. Isaiah 44:9-20; 46:1f, 7; Jeremiah 10:3-5). Yet the paradox is that "nothing is easier to understand than the process by which an idol comes to be regarded as divine" (Barclay, 18f). Symbols, such as the bronze serpent that saved the Israelites from the plague of venomous snakes (Numbers 21:6-9), were turned into idols. The bronze serpent, which had been used to inspire trust in the Lord, became an object of veneration and superstitious worship, finally eradicated by King Hezekiah (2 Kings 18:4).

Our worship of the one true God is easily corrupted into undue veneration of an image, experience or obsession, which began innocently enough but became a corruption and distortion of true, spiritual worship. What was once true devotion becomes an idolatrous obsession, superstitious focus or distorted image of the one true God. We no longer worship the Lord in spirit and in truth (John 4:24), but instead compromise our worship and devotion to Christ and substitute a blessing from God for God himself. We easily make an idol out of a gift.

The fact that this second commandment is given three verses indicates its importance within the ten. And it's interesting that the Apostle John, who wrote his first letter on the theme of Christian assurance based on love and right belief in Christ and behavior in the church, concludes his letter with this final verse:

"Dear children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21).

Just as the Israelites needed this second commandment given emphatically, with a promised curse for disobedience and blessing for obedience, so we today need to be warned about the tendency to idolatry and its consequences in our lives and in the community of faith. The great reformed theologian John Calvin noted that the

human heart is “a perpetual factory of idols” (quoted in Ryken, 574). When we hear the word “idols” we think of those wooden and gold sculptures in the Scriptures or those we might find in a museum or in a Hindu temple. But just as we noted last Sunday that there are many lesser gods besides the ones worship by other world religions, so there are many idols besides those we find in museums and pagan temples. We may discover and uncover some idols in our Christian homes and churches. The truth is, our sinful hearts are too easily drawn to idols and we too quickly begin to form them. In fact, we like them and we like them because, first of all...

Idols are tangible

We are God’s mortal creatures and we live in this world of time and space, and as a result of our fallen sinful nature, we often find it difficult to understand and appreciate the unseen yet equally real spiritual world. We are called to be God’s people of faith and “faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see....” and “By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was made out of what was visible” (Hebrews 11:1f).

Sometimes we find it difficult to live by faith in the unseen reality of God and his kingdom and the promises of his Word, but...

We can see and experience idols

In his conversation with the Samaritan woman, Jesus gently confronted her idolatry of worship on a certain mountain by saying that God demands that we worship him in spirit and in truth (John 4:19-24). As fallen mortal creatures we are too tied to this material world and blinded to the reality of the God of the living, the Lord of the resurrection (Matthew 22:23-33). The disciples had difficulty accepting the reality of the kingdom, and Thomas was the spokesman for that skepticism. He wanted tangible evidence, which the risen Jesus offered him. But then Jesus noted that those who aren’t given physical evidence, but who exercise faith in the unseen, are more blessed (John 20:24-29).

The great faith chapter, Hebrews 11, recounts the heroes of faith who obeyed and trusted without visible evidence. As examples, Noah was “warned about things not seen” (7), and Abraham “obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going” (8). And, as we’ll see when the Israelites coaxed Aaron to make them the idol of the golden calf, their craving was for tangible evidence. They complained about Moses’ long absence and when the idol was forged from the people’s gold, Aaron said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt” (Exodus 32:4).

It’s one thing for unbelievers to insist on tangible evidence, for “proof for the existence of God,” but for God’s people, who have been saved by grace through

faith in Christ and in response only to his word, this craving is evidence of our lingering, fallen sinful nature. We live in a culture that has emerged from one that is word-centered to one that is image-centered, according to Neil Postman, in his influential book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (quoted by Ryken, 574f):

“The God of the Jews was to exist in the Word and through the Word, an unprecedented conception requiring the highest order of abstract thinking. Iconography thus became blasphemy....People like ourselves who are in the process of converting their culture from word-centered to image-centered might profit by reflecting on this Mosaic injunction” (i.e. the second commandment).

If you don't believe this cultural shift is taking place, just consider the fact that young children are no longer content with a bedtime story, but often insist on watching an action-packed DVD of their favorite super hero. School teachers can attest to the fact that the attention span of children has been altered by the inundation of their students with all sorts of visual stimulation. And this insistence on the visual and use of images has influenced preaching, which is often accompanied by videos and images flashed on a big screen to hold the congregation's interest in what has to be an “arresting sermon” that no longer depends on the power of the spoken word and the Holy Spirit-inspired imagination.

A best-selling book among evangelicals is Todd Burpo's account of his son's “glimpse into heaven” titled *Heaven Is for Real*. Young Colton Burpo relates to his father the details of his experience of visiting heaven during an emergency appendectomy. I don't doubt that the Lord gave comfort to this little boy with a special revelation nor do I think this account is necessarily inconsistent with biblical revelation, with perhaps the necessity of wings for everyone except Jesus (Burpo, 72).

We need to be careful that we don't minimize the power and the sufficiency of the Word to give us our revelation for faith. If we begin to rely on human testimony we open ourselves to other testimonies that can undermine faith as well as those that “augment” faith. I think of the testimonies of those amassed by thanatologists like Elizabeth Kubler-Ross (1926-2004) and Raymond Moody (b. 1944), who describe the experiences of those who were resuscitated from “clinical death.” These people, including unbelievers and atheists, indicated a similar experience of seeing a beautiful light and hearing glorious music, only to be brought back to a relatively mundane earthly, mortal life. “There's nothing to fear about death,” is their uniform testimony.

But biblical faith teaches the truth that we are saved by grace through faith in Christ alone, and to believe in and follow Jesus is to receive the free gift of eternal life and the only hope for heaven; to reject Christ means the unrepentant must await a fearful judgment and eternal punishment. So, what about these “life after death” testimonies of unbelievers? Paul gives the answer, saying that “Satan himself

masquerades as an angel of light” (2 Corinthians 11:14). And perhaps all will gain a glimpse of the glory of Christ and the New Heaven and Earth as we all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. For those who belong to Christ, there will be “a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:11). But for unbelievers, who have this glimpse of glory, there will be the fearful words of Christ, “Depart from me, you who are cursed” (Matthew 25:41), and entrance into eternal separation from Christ and everlasting regret.

“We live by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7), and must be careful we don’t make an idol of our “sightings,” our experiences, as real to us and as comforting as they might be. In this visual image culture we need to remember that...

God’s reality is invisible

As Jesus told the Samaritan woman, God’s worshipers “must worship him in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24). Kingdom reality is not visible to our physical eyes in this fallen world, but is known to us in our spirit and conveyed to us through the truth of the Word. God has spoken to us through his written word and has made himself known to us perfectly through his Son, the Living Word (John 1:1-18). Christ Jesus, the sinless Son and crucified, risen Savior, “is the image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15), and through the incarnation of Jesus God “has spoken to us by his Son” (Hebrews 1:2). Jesus is the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6) and as he told Philip, whoever has seen him has seen the Father (14:9).

We see the truth of God in Christ, and we see by faith, through the aid of God’s Holy Spirit, what is invisible to the human eye. Even though we “do not see him now,” as Peter writes, we nevertheless love him, and even though we do not see him now, we believe in him “and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy,” for we are receiving the goal of our faith, the salvation of our souls (1 Peter 1:8f). As much as we like what we can see with our physical eyes and experience immediately and emotionally, we must worship the Lord who reveals himself to our hearts and minds by faith through reading and hearing his word. As Paul says, “faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17).

We like idols because they are tangible, can be seen immediately and felt with our hands and emotions, but we are commanded to reject these God and faith substitutes. But as fallen sinners we like idols because...

Idols are malleable

The more literal translation of this commandment is “You shall not make for yourself a carved image” (ESV). This was a prohibition against cutting or shaping an image in the likeness of a deity for the purpose of worship (Durham, 285). Just as Aaron and the Israelites fashioned the golden calf (Exodus 32), we too fashion our image of

God, which is bound to conform him to what we want him to be. We like idols because they are malleable.

Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary defines "malleable" as "capable of being extended or shaped by beating with a hammer or by the pressure of rollers" and "capable of being altered or controlled by outside forces or influences."

We like idols because they are malleable, meaning...

Idols conform to our image

Some of our non-biblical images of God, which become idols that corrupt our worship of the living God of our Lord Jesus Christ, have their genesis from our childhood days. J B Phillips portrays some of the destructive gods we create, images of inadequate gods that are "too small" to demand our reverence and obedience. He describes the "resident policeman, parental hangover, grand old man, meek-and-mild, God-in-a-box and projected image," just to name a few (15ff).

Even those of us who have a Christian heritage, have professed faith in Christ and maintain a church connection, often try to shape God into our image, to shape him into a "god" with whom we can live comfortably without changing our self-centered ways and personal agendas. We try to give God the image of one who always smiles on our behavior and easily dismisses our character and dismisses any guilt, saying that's "just the way we are." We shape God into one whose business is to save us from sin, death and hell upon our saying the "magic words" of the sinner's prayer. We chisel off of God any sharp edges that make him in the least bit uncomfortable and paint him with the perpetual smile of an indulgent Santa Clause or doting, permissive grandparent.

The god we shape is one who's in complete agreement with our lifestyle, our self-centered ambition and selfish materialism. This god of our making and shaping can be depended on to forgive us and help us along life's way and then get us into heaven with a free pass that's cost us nothing except a few words of agreement to accept the free offer of salvation.

After describing these inadequate, misleading and destructive gods of our own making, Phillips says that eventually "we are driven to reconsider whether after all there is reality beyond the physical, measurable reality" (67). We are forced to consider the claims and demands of the only true God, who is invisible. But also...

God is unchangeable

There's a fine yet very important distinction between an image of God that's given from God and an image we shape. There are biblical images and word pictures of the true and unchangeable God, such as the psalmists and prophets give us of God as our rock, fortress, shield, warrior, vineyard owner, king, potter, etc. (See D & S Larsen). And we noted two weeks ago, from the Lord's speech to his people, the

image of an eagle bearing his eaglets on his wings (Exodus 19:4). And there is also the depiction of God's glory through artistic images and architecture, which can aid us in our worship. In the history of the church, images had their genesis as aids to prayer and worship, and degenerated through the abandonment of Scripture and the weakening of the ministry of the Word, into idolatry, the worship of these images. Even the great Reformer, Martin Luther, had no intention of purging the churches and cathedrals of images and paintings which he saw as aids to worship. He deplored the iconoclast destructiveness of the radical reformers.

The second command is to not make any fabricated image that detracts from the worship of the God of Scripture and that becomes a substitute for spiritual, faithful worship of the one true God revealed in Jesus Christ.

"I the Lord do not change" (Malachi 3:6), says the Lord God, and our inclination to idolatry is fueled by the desire to shape him to our expectations and preferences.

The second commandment charges us to let God be God. He does not change nor will he change from being the holy, sovereign, loving God of our Lord Jesus Christ, who loves us supremely and so intensely that he will not countenance any alteration of who he is before us as we worship, serve and obey him. We belong to the Lord Jesus Christ who "is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8).

We like idols because they are tangible, malleable, and also...

Idols are available

One of the lessons God was teaching the Israelites during the exodus, Sinai and wilderness experience was his faithful presence with his people. His presence was awesome and holy yet also loving and faithful, providing their needs for sustenance, leadership and protection. The Lord gave the conditions of his covenant promises and blessings that were based upon their trust in and obedience to him as their sovereign Lord and God. But the hearts of the people would be drawn toward disobeying this commandment because idols are a lot more manageable and controllable than the Lord God, who is over us and demands control of us, and our total love and obedience. But we like idols because...

Idols serve us

The Israelites, just like their pagan neighbors, could take their idols with them, store them away when not needed and get them out, dust them off and invoke their blessings in times of emergency and other needs.

One of J B Phillips' lesser gods is his "God-in-a-Box" who can be captured and trained to our own liking (37ff). This is the God who fits into our comfortable expectations, rules, regulations and prejudices. But to build on this imagined idol,

we want a god whom we can conveniently take with us but also leave behind when we don't want to be bothered by his demands on us or interference in our lives.

As Old Testament scholar Roy Honeycutt says, the possession of ancient idols “gave ability to control or manipulate...the god himself.” The making of idols “arose out of a desire to insure the blessing and protection of the deity who was represented in the wood, clay or stone” (31). But the second commandment speaks of the sovereignty of God, who comes to us through his word and who has the absolute and exclusive right to be the only sovereign in our lives. We make an idol in the place of God when we reduce God to a convenient and willing helper rather than our sovereign Lord.

We can, even as church people, leaders and pastors, make an idol of our church organization and Bible interpretation and expect God to bless it and go along with us and even lend the authority of his name to us (More about that next week, when we look at the third commandment).

Henry Nouwen tells of his experience when serving as chaplain on board a ship. This huge Dutch ocean liner “was trying to find its way through a thick fog into the port of Rotterdam. The fog was so thick, in fact,” says Nouwen, “that the steersman could not even see the bow of the ship. The captain, carefully listening to a radar station operator who was explaining his position between other ships, walked nervously up and down the bridge and shouted his orders to the steersman. When suddenly he stumbled over me, he blurted out: ‘___ ___ __, (my deletion) Father, get out of my way.’ But when I was ready to run away, filled with feelings of incompetence and guilt, “ says Nouwen, the captain “came back and said: ‘Why don't you just stay around. This might be the only time I really need you’” (Nouwen, 86). The captain wanted a priest on board just in case of a dire emergency, but until then he was apt to just be in the way.

Similarly, we want God to be quietly available to give us a boost and a word of encouragement as we relentlessly pursue our goals of work, success in our career, or pursuit of pleasure, but unless and until we need him, we'd prefer he just keep out of our way.

Idols serve us but...

God demands we worship and serve him

Worshiping an idol that we have constructed for our own convenience results in God's jealousy and judgment, which we see in verse 5. God will not be pushed aside as a scorned spouse while we commit spiritual adultery. God is jealous and zealous, two English translations of this same Hebrew word, and words similar in meaning. God's jealousy is not petty or selfish, but rather is “part of the essence of true love” (Motyer, 223). God's is zealous for our singular love and devotion and his

jealousy is like that of a loving husband who sees his wife in the arms of another man (Ryken, 569).

The Lord God demands our exclusive worship, which means that we worship the God of our Lord Jesus Christ in spirit and in truth. We worship the Lord God, the great I Am, who made himself known to Moses and the Israelites and who made himself known perfectly and completely in his Son, the living and eternal Word of God. He alone is the image of the invisible God and demands our exclusive allegiance and uncompromised love and worship. We see all we need to see in the face of Christ, whom we see by faith and through the Spirit's enlightening (2 Corinthians 4:6).

Christ is the image of God. We were created in his image, but since Adam and Eve's fall, the image of God in us has been marred by sin. But Christ died for us to forgive our sin and remove our guilt before God, and he was raised by the power of God to give us new life and to begin in us the work of restoration, restoring the image of God in us, until the day we see Jesus face to face and will be completely restored to the perfect image of God in us (1 John 3:2).

Conclusion:

When Paul visited the ancient city of Athens he was "greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols" (Acts 17:16). It was said that in Athens it was easier to find a god than a person (Stott, 277). In his discussion with the Greek Epicureans and Stoics, Paul noted that the pervasiveness of idols throughout the city was evidence they were "very religious." He referred to his observation of an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown God" (23). These Athenians were "covering their bases," as we say in baseball terminology. They wanted to make sure they were worshiping enough gods to guarantee their wellbeing. But then Paul gave witness to the one true God they had not yet found and then called them to faith and repentance in preparation for divine judgment (30f).

In the same way we need to realize the idols in our lives and repent to prepare for God's judgment. God warned the Israelites about the punishment awaiting idolaters, a judgment that would follow to succeeding generations (5). This doesn't contradict what we read about in the Scriptures regarding punishment only for one's sins and not for the sins of one's parents (Deuteronomy 24:16; Ezekiel 18:4). But idolatry has far-reaching consequences in our lives and the lives of our children, offspring and others under the influence of idolaters (Enns, 416).

Idols are insidious and their entry into our lives and worship is dangerously subtle. For example, an enjoyable hobby, which should be considered a blessing from God can become a curse if it leads us away from the priority of worshiping and following Jesus as Lord. Easily one can try to worship God on the golf course, but if it replaces or interferes with our faithfully worshiping with and encouraging God's

people in the congregation it has become a distracting idol. It will also be a deterrent to our children and other offspring's worship and following Jesus as Lord.

Those who worship the distorted image of God as one who's there only for our convenience, or who can be shaped according to our likeness will pass along this lesser god to their offspring and others within their sphere of influence. An image of a legalistic god who's difficult to love and trust or a permissive god, who's not to be feared, are terrible legacies to pass along to our children, who likely will have a similar image and idol substitute for the real God.

But also God's blessings for obedience are more far reaching than his judgment for disobedience (6). When we worship the real God of our Lord Jesus in spirit and in truth we will be a blessing to our children and to others around us and succeeding generations because they too will come to know and believe in the one true God and will follow Jesus Christ and worship him as the true image of the invisible God.

The sinful heart likes idols, but the heart that loves God is one that yearns to worship him in spirit and in truth. We are commanded to let God be God and worship him in a way that pleases and honors him and brings countless blessings to others around us and to those who follow behind us.

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. John Calvin said that the human heart is a perpetual factory of idols. What are some present day idols commonly worshiped in our culture?
2. How is it possible that we Christians can corrupt our worship, making it idolatrous?
3. How can we shape and manipulate the image of God into our liking? What kind of god might we tend to make in the place of the biblical God?
4. What are some biblical images of God that help us to worship him in spirit and in truth?
5. What are some distorted images of God, and how do these originate?
6. What is the perfect image of God and how are we to worship him?
7. What should we expect as a result of worshiping God in spirit and in truth?

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