

IMMENSE BUT KNOWABLE

(Sermon Summary)

Reading: Exodus 20:4-6; Exodus 32:1-35

This is a longer commandment than the First. It protects the First Commandment and what that requires of us. Idols are ruled out as these are false gods usurping the place of the One God whom we alone should worship. The list of idols is not exhaustive but it encourages us to be exhaustive in how we think about what idols are. It shows us how many temptations there are to make and have idols. It shows us the cost of having idols and the benefits of getting rid of them.

1. Sinful man – an idolater by nature.

Commandments would not exist, nor would they have to provide the details they do, unless there were real dangers that we might commit those sins. It is an indication of a sinful nature which bristles against the prohibitions in the Commandments. We are in a world full of idols. The people of God fell into idolatry shortly after the Commandments were given. They modeled in Exodus 32 their golden bull idol on idols they had seen in Egypt. Then there were the Baals and the Ashtoreths they worshipped. Babylon had its idols (Isaiah 46:1-2). Rachel had her gods (Genesis 31:19, 30 and 34). Micah had his own gods (Judges 17: 3-6).

God is too immense and glorious to be meaningfully or properly represented by an object, however skillfully and beautifully made. But man is an idolater and is tempted to make such objects. The visible things then are made objects of worship (Romans 1: 20-23). These are a sign of the ignorance of the heart of sinful man. So we end up with the idols of Hinduism or the statues of Mary in Roman Catholicism. Other expressions of Christianity have icons that are venerated. Man is a sinful idolater who longs for something visible and tangible, and this then becomes the object of worship.

2. An invisible but knowable God.

God is Spirit and so belongs to an order of Being that is immense and beyond our powers of conception. He is Omnipresent as well as being just and holy and good. To try to picture Him would be an insult to Him, it would dishonour Him and make Him out to be smaller than He is. It would be misleading and deceiving. Likewise to try to picture the Lord Jesus would be wrong as He is divine. Neither could a picture of Him adequately convey His perfect humanity.

The wonder for us is that this God, far beyond us, desires to have fellowship with us. We can respond to Him with worship in spirit and truth that conforms to who He is and how He is to be approached (John 4: 21-24). We do not need pictures, or places, or mountains. We do not need a beautiful Tabernacle or Temple, for seeing Christ by faith gives us all the beauty that we need to behold.

The Bible uses words to open our minds to the immensity and glory of God, and gives expression to the inexpressible through words like 'glory' and 'awesome'. These expressions preserve boundaries for us while at the same time opening up our minds to the reality of who God truly is. Such words convey more clearly than any picture could how we are to think of God and approach Him. They also reveal to us most clearly who we are and what we are like. The words are not the relationship itself but give clarity, set boundaries and give shape to that relationship. The light of that revelation should give us the illumination we need to recognise and dispose of the idols that we do have. In that way the instruction of the First Commandment is met and we are enabled to approach the right Person (God) in the right way, to respond to Him rightly, love and obey Him rightly. Boundaries are set for our imaginations and the way is opened to us to develop in the clarity and depth we bring to worship in spirit and in truth.

3. We are not to make idols of ourselves.

We can make the object of our absorption and fascination ourselves, our feelings and inner states. We can believe that we need to achieve some particular feeling or ecstasy, or inner serenity, in order to properly worship God. Here our feelings have become an idol and the measure of our spiritual accomplishments and progress. This is aided and abetted by churches which aim to create such experiences through their music. They aim to make people feel happy and uplifted, brighter, energized or more peaceful. These things are mistaken for the power and presence of God.

In this system, talented musicians become themselves idols to people because they deliver the experiences that are held up to be true worship. Or 'anointed men and women' who lay hands on people who then feel great power or something unusual. These people become revered and their every word becomes law. Preachers can become idols who have answers to everything, reckon to be able to discern the times or who give people a lift and make them feel bright. These are all breaches of the Second Commandment since they make something the object of worship, not God Himself. The result, as we can see in Romans 1:24-25, is that we end up serving man not God. The attitudes make people more worldly, more accommodating to ideas that the world approves of, like Gay Marriage. It leads to women being in the wrong roles in ministry and 'diversity quotas' being more important than biblical qualifications for ministry posts. The church can finish up being an arm of Government policy rather than a city on a hill that cannot be hidden.

The Second Commandment warns us that mistakes that are made have consequences for the next generation. They leave a legacy of damage for our children and our children's children. But we can also see there is a legacy of blessing for aiming to understand and apply this Commandment with greater clarity.