

No Worship, But His

Exodus 20:1-2 and Exodus 20:4-6

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Good morning. It's good to be with you this morning. If you have your Bibles with you or a device that you might want to tap on, please turn to the book of Exodus. We're looking at chapter 20 in this sermon series. Today, we'll be looking at verses 4 through 6 with verses 1 and 2 for context.

As we began this sermon series last week, we started looking at the Ten Commandments as we look at Renewal in the Wilderness and how the story of redemption of God's people with His purposes and His plans brings forth life and renewal. Last week, Pastor Randy began and introduced the sermon series looking at who it is that we are to worship. This week, we are going to be looking at how we must worship.

Follow along as I read from Exodus 20.

And God spoke all these words, saying,

"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. 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. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments." [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let us pray.

Father, would you add to the reading of your word. These are your words. I am but a man. I err. I make mistakes. I am in sin, and I need your gracious redemption. Feed us by your word and renew us by your Spirit. We pray these things in Jesus's name. Amen.

In 2005, just a few years before his death, the famous writer David Foster Wallace gave what has become a well-known famous speech. At one point in the speech, he said these words. "In the day to day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship."

Another famous author Kurt Vonnegut called himself a "Christ-loving atheist." But in a letter to his daughter in 1979 regarding his upcoming wedding for his second marriage, he wrote these words about the wedding. "It will be as secular as I can make it since I am not a Christian of any kind. But it will take place in a church because churches are so beautiful and holy."

What do you make of that? Here are two authors who explore the human condition, who write and weave beautiful stories that are both the splendors of humanity and also the depths of humanity. Perhaps if you claim to be religious or even spiritual of any kind, you may agree with some of those words in part. But if you don't see yourself as such, then you may likely disagree that all of life is worship. But, friends, this has been the story of the world for as long as we have evidence, and it is fair to speculate the story goes back longer than that.

Now, if you're older than I am, you may have remembered if you've been a part of any of the various protestant denominations back in the '80's and '90's, what was sometimes called the worship wars. These worship wars were primarily about music styles, contemporary music versus traditional worship. But as our text today highlights, divisions in worship go back further in time and highlights something more serious than mere musical preferences. You see, being created in the image of God,

being formed in His likeness, God Himself intends for us to worship Him, to worship the one whose image we reflect. Our very essence, the way we are built, the way we are made has a strong magnetic pull to worship, but our human condition likewise has this loose deviating drift toward counterfeits.

As we look at the Ten Commandments in this series, God Himself is telling us who He is. And in the context of His redemption by delivering them out of Egypt, He's calling this people His people and bringing them into a covenant that will shape their understanding of who their God is and who they are themselves. Worship is the means by which God communicates Himself, and it's the means by which we experience renewal in Him.

So if the first commandment is directing the attention of God's people of who they are to worship, then this second commandment today teaches us how we must worship because we worship Him according to His ways, not of our own devices. There is no worship but His worship. The question that we have to ask from this text is how are we to worship? We see that the Lord is instructing His people on what is true worship to Him and what is false worship to idols. Today, we'll look at these verses at how our worship must represent God accurately, how our worship must avoid serving God falsely, and how our worship must acknowledge God completely.

Let's look at verse 4 where we see how worship must represent God accurately. There in verse 4, it says, "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above," being the sky, the planets, the music of the spheres, "or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth." This totality of the cosmos from the highest to the lowest, these things are not to be images. This image making is the intentional crafting of an object to represent the Lord.

Now, this was very common throughout the ancient world. The Israelites would have seen it up close in Egypt where pictures and statues would have had these deities represented the form of animals, in the form of men and women, sometimes mixed together as half man and half animal. And these carved idols were made from materials like wood, or stone, or metals. In the ancient world, it was often the assumption that making, shaping, and forming such an object would become the location by which the deity would dwell. It would become the conduit by which the deity would communicate its powers. The worshiper would interact with the object as if he were interacting with the deity, seeking its favor and blessing.

If you're familiar with this part of the history of Israel, it's quite amazing how quickly they forgot and how quickly they failed to keep this commandment. Here they are at the base of Mount Sinai, and the text tells us they were afraid by what they witnessed and that they wished for Moses to be their mediator between the Lord and themselves. They witnessed the Lord through Moses speaking the Lord's message to Pharaoh. They experienced the events of their deliverance from Egypt. They saw with their own eyes, and they heard with their own ears the Lord's activity on the mountain.

But very soon, we're told the people grew anxious because Moses delayed coming down from the mountain. The people asked Moses's brother Aaron to make for them gods that represented them. Aaron from their earrings and their bracelets and their gold fashioned a golden calf, and he said these words in Exodus 34, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt." And Aaron declared that they would have a feast to the Lord. It is not that they started worshipping another god. No. They sought to worship the true God in the wrong way, and this happened again and again in the history of God's people.

By making for themselves a carved image in the likeness of something created, they misrepresent God. They sought to fashion something they could easily and tangibly see, something they could interact with in their feasting and in their singing and their dancing, all of their rejoicing, all of these activities of worship needing something tangible. But by doing so, what they do is they reduce God's presence to an idol and so distort the true God.

As we look at the commandment, we have to recognize we are not Israel of course, but being in the story of God's redemption. We are in the story. Now, we are in the story much longer down the road, but we are being brought into the story through Jesus Christ. We have to take God's word as it stands and be thoughtful and mindful of how we make idols. We must not represent God in any form for our worship of Him.

Now, this commandment doesn't prohibit art. It doesn't prohibit craftsmanship. It doesn't prohibit beauty. But it teaches us not to capture God's essence, God's being in our own imaginations or our own devices in order to worship Him.

For you, Christian, why? Because in our feeble attempts at representing God, what we do is we elevate a part or parts of God to a particular form, but what that does is it reduces and distorts His wholeness. If we picture something in the sky above, we conflate God with the heavens instead of Him being the heaven's sustainer. If we picture God in the form of an animal or a person, we elevate the created over the creator. We end up worshiping a god of our own making, and it does not represent God accurately.

As we move on to verse 5, we see that the second part of this commandment shows that our worship must avoid serving God falsely. The text says, "You shall not bow down to them or serve them." Some biblical scholars take these two actions as saying one thing. Serving and bowing down, these are actions of worship. Other scholars understand them to be saying similar but distinct things. They get this from looking at the two verbs. The verb of not bowing down is actively lowering yourself, prostrating yourself to the ground as an act of humiliation, of humbling yourself before that which is above you, perhaps a ruler or a monarch or deity for instance. It is an act of worship showing allegiance and honor. The word to serve them is much more passive as if you are being enticed to serve these idols.

Depending on how you look at that, it doesn't change the meaning really, but it is an interesting thing to look at. It certainly has in mind worshiping God with the means of the carved images that are mentioned earlier in verse 4. But taken in this sense, the use of such images becomes false worship. By implication, we see how God's people must not give their worship or be cajoled to serve other idols besides the Lord. That is also false worship. This is what the Bible calls idolatry.

Because we are to pursue right worship of the Lord, of the true and living God, then we must really understand idolatry. Just briefly, what are some common features of idolatry? In the ancient world, it was a comprehensive system of organizing all of life and society and relationships. It shaped religious life around the temple, the sacrifices, whatever may be in that system of idol worship. It impacted all of economic life in the making and the selling of those idols. It impacted the marketplace of food, especially meats, the pleasures of wine and sex, and all of these things taken together were in this sense of the location of the deity being found in the idol. You see personal interaction and community being shaped by these interactions of beliefs and practices that really come down to seeing that they are controlling the gods for personal favor, for blessings upon their family, successes of the crops and livestock, and seeking prosperity and wealth.

It was quite normal in the ancient world for people to organize their lives in these ways but, even more complex, seeing it in categories of three types of idols: the personal god, the family god, and the national god. In the life of Israel, we learn of how easy it was to juggle these layers in their practices and their beliefs. For example, in the book of Judges, we see a downward spiral of the corruption of what's happening in Israel. You might see a person personally calling upon Dagon as a personal god, maybe Baal as a family god, and yet maintaining their worship of Yahweh, the Lord presented to Moses and then at Sinai, as Israel's national God.

No ancient Israelite would ever say that they do not believe in the Lord God, the true God who has revealed Himself to Moses for He was their national God that brought them out of Egypt. He was their national God that would be brought out with the Ark of the Covenant who would win the battle and win

the day against their enemies. But day to day loyalties might be directed to those personal gods or those family gods.

We see how this is further working out through the centuries. In 2 Kings 17, we read how the northern kingdom is conquered by the Assyrians. The ruler of Assyria is resettling the cities in Samaria with people from the surrounding Assyrian empire. In this part of what was formerly the northern kingdom of Israel, the text tells us how they practiced idolatry saying they do not fear the Lord, and they do not follow the statutes or the rules or the law of the commandment that the Lord commanded the children of Jacob whom He named Israel. Verse 41 brings this very stark summary conclusion. "So these nations feared the Lord, and also served their carved images. Their children did likewise, and their children's children as their fathers did. So they do to this day."

If you take a scan of your life, if you look in your calendar, perhaps you don't make carved images. Maybe you don't fit it in your rotation to bow down before stone statues and ask for their blessings. Let's look at idolatry from another perspective. And this perspective I draw heavily from Tim Keller's book that's called *Counterfeit Gods*. I highly recommend it. It is jam-packed and very helpful on this subject. He writes this, that "An idol is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you only what God can give." This suggests that we can serve God falsely with idols that we've made internally in our hearts without ever being done externally and literally.

The Bible speaks of this as well. The Bible speaks of idolatry as worshiping actual idols, of course, such as things of wood, stone, or metal that we've been discussing. But the Bible also speaks of idolatry as ways such as adultery in the book of Hosea, as self-salvation in 1 Samuel 15, as spiritual treason in Samuel 8. But the Bible also recognizes the weaving of our hearts at a much deeper level and how our idolatry is our enslaved desires, looking at Galatians 5:16-21, Colossians 3:5, 1 Peter 5:3.

In the same speech that I referenced from David Foster Wallace, he went on to say this about us choosing who we worship, that there's nothing not that we worship but what we choose. And he says this.

"And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual type of thing to worship is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough. You will never feel that you have enough. Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure, and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you."

I think what he says in this speech taps into something very profound. These idols are of our own making, and they mirror the deepest motivations of our hearts. They shape what we desire, what we think, how we feel. They are the making of something that reflects the derived good. That was mentioned last week as well. It reflects the derived good of God's intentions, and what it does is it makes them the ultimate thing as the source of what is good. And when we give ourselves to something or someone in a way that confuses or replaces true worship of the true God, we seek a derived good separately from the one who is the source Himself, and it becomes our false worship. In the end, we find ourselves unsatisfied. We either feel shame for being so foolish, or we're angry and bitter that we placed our trust in something that failed us. But God is the source of all good, and He is the one that remains faithful.

Again, I've reference idolatry. The story of Israel is throughout all of the pages. There's probably not a page that you can flip through where you're not seeing these dynamics in play. They're the dynamics that are in my heart, and I would suggest that they are the dynamics that are in your heart. But there is something beautiful here of what God is saying when He says, "I am the Lord your God who

brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." Having true worship in the one who has saved you and who has delivered you is where you find that true satisfaction.

We see another beautiful story of the outcome of what I mentioned in 2 Kings 17, the story of a conquered people, the story of the humiliation of being moved about and resettled and the mixing and anger and resentment that is even found within the nation of Israel, and we find a woman in Samaria. In John 4, we see a picture of a conversation about worship. What is right worship? Where is it to be held? Is it to be held in the mountains of our forefathers in the hills of Samaria, or should it be in Jerusalem? In this interaction, Jesus comes to her. He speaks to her. He interacts with her. The text says this in John 4 starting at verse 7.

A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock." Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water." [ESV]

And they carry on their conversation. And as it moves to worship, Jesus says this. "But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth." The woman said to Him,

"I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things." Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he."

Just then his disciples came back. They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you seek?" or, "Why are you talking with her?" So the woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" [ESV]

And in that interaction, there is a visitation. There is a visitation of the Lord.

Moving into the last section of today, we see our worship must recognize God completely. I'll come back to what we just read in John in a second. But as we go back to Exodus 20 looking at verses 5 and 6, we must rightly understand what God is saying and what He is not saying. He says,

"For I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments." [ESV]

Is this text saying that the Lord judges you for the sins of your fathers? Or does the Lord punish your sins upon your child or grandchild? The answer is what this verse says, and it draws us to the very character of God. In this moment, God in His wisdom declares something about being jealous, and it teaches us that indeed the Lord holds the guilty accountable.

But this verse can easily be distorted. We see its ripples in John 9:2 where Jesus is asked about a very common assumption regarding a man who is blind. Jesus was asked if this man's blindness was due to his sin or his parent's sin. What Jesus responds is particular to that situation, but He rightfully is understanding what's happening truthfully here in Exodus, but we also see in God's word from Ezekiel 18:20 how this really works in tension that we might be feeling from verse 5. Ezekiel the prophet says, "The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself."

In highlighting this commandment to not make carved images, to not worship anything other than the Lord Himself in the ways and the means that He discloses, He's highlighting His character. We know from the preamble in verses 1 and 2 it's in the context of His redemption. We see here His character of His jealousy. We see two things held together in His perfect righteousness that in the expanding corrosion of idolatry, the sins of the fathers will teach, they will inform, and they will entice their children and their children's children to embrace their sins, to embrace their idolatries. And upon their guilt, the Lord visits. It's not because of the father's sin. It is because they share in their guilt. But God being rich in mercy, He ever extends His grace not to the third, to the fourth generation, but to thousands.

In this contrast, we don't see a capricious God who's saying worship me. I'm jealous. You can't worship anybody else. No. He is in the context of His loving and gracious redemption. As far as we know, there is no evidence of any ancient culture that recognizes their deity redeeming their whole people. We see this in the story of the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob bringing the sons of Joshua and the other sons of Jacob out of Egypt and making them a people recognizing this Lord, this one true and living God, as their God.

I leave you with this very important question to reflect on as we come to an end soon. As you discern your motivations of your heart before the Lord, what or who do you seek as that ultimate thing, that derived good that you put in place of an ultimate thing which you then draw from as your source of longing? In reflecting upon that, an important follow-up question is what would make you the most anxious, what would make you the most fearful, what would make you the most angry if that thing were taken away? When the things we love most are lost or taken away, it threatens our sense of self. It threatens our sense of meaning and purpose. What the second commandment gives us hope and good news for is we are called by name to love and to serve the Lord God who redeems, who shows mercy, who shows that fast love. His visit upon those who hate Him does not last forever, but to those He loves He continues to pour out His love.

This commandment is relevant for worship. It's relevant for your personal worship, everything from visual depictions of God to how you might compartmentalize your worship of the one true God by what you add to that, the beliefs, the practices, any sort of sentiments or values that you put on those things but you separate from the worship of God to what you really hold as first importance. It also could imply that you're elevating good ideas, elevating good desires to the standard of the ultimate that become your governing ideas and the things that shape your desires.

The first part of this commandment makes clear that the people of God are not to divert their worship to anyone other than the Lord God. This covenant relationship between the Lord and His people marks out the boundaries of covenant loyalty. But this is initiated and sustained by the Lord's steadfast love.

Perhaps you have heard people discussing the show *The Crown*. It is a story that depicts the life of Queen Elizabeth. In the second season, there is an episode called "A Company of Men." Queen Elizabeth writes a little note to her husband Prince Philip. He's about to go on a five-month tour. Their relationship is pretty tense in those moments. I don't know how accurate it is, but it makes for good drama. But there is this beautiful note that she writes to him, and it says, "Always remember you have a family."

Now, if you read that and you are experiencing tension in your marriage, if you're uncertain of your relationship, then such a note can be chilling. It can be calculating. It can be manipulative. It can push your spouse in a way to better act right. "Always remember you have a family." But that would be true. That would be right. To a certain degree, a spouse's jealousy can be right because both spouses made promises to each other. But it is also a law that looks like a carrot but bruises like a stick. However, when you read through the lens of a thriving love, such words are warm remembrances of a relationship that's secure. In that context, the promises made in the relationship are beautiful, and they're compelling reminders to remain faithful out of joy for one another.

Approaching the commandment here in Exodus 20, without knowing the security of God's deliverance, it can be a cold rigid performance of worship. But in the love of God and within His freedom, then all of life is worship. All of life that is worship comes with joy, although there might be circumstances of sorrow. It comes with trust to the one who is worthy to be praised. It is the difference between performing the law to prove that you are worthy and following the law because the one who is worthy has shown His great love. One may move you for a season, but the other breathes life in you eternally.

The response of faith that we can get from even this verse today for our whole worship of God is to worship God in the means that He has provided for Himself. We seek to represent Him accurately. We long to serve Him truthfully. We need to recognize Him completely, not the pieces that we prefer over others but to stand in awe of His glory because no worship exists but to Him alone. Let us pray.

Father God, we do thank you for your word this morning. We do ask that you would encourage us and strengthen our faith. Renew us to find satisfaction in you. Breathe life into us with your warmth, with your kindness, with your steadfast love, that these things are culminated in your deliverance and your salvation that we see the perfect embodiment of who you are in your son Jesus Christ, as Paul writes, "The very image of the invisible God." Help us to rightfully worship you. Help us to worship you in all of our lives. We pray these things in Jesus's name. Amen.