

# Loving His Commandments

Part Five

The First Commandment-B

*Exodus 20:4-6; Acts 17:29*

*With Study Questions*

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## Part Five

### The Second Commandment-A

*Exodus 20:4-6; Acts 17:29*

**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 nor 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 fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments (Exodus 20:4-6).**

**Being then the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man (Acts 17:29).**

## Review

Last time we discussed how the phrase, “It’s now how you worship but who you worship” sounds good but may not be the healthiest way to approach worship or loving God. The Scriptures reveal not merely who is to be worshiped but how He is to be worshiped.

The first four commandments are God’s lessons on how we are to love God. The second commandment which speaks of images *pesel* or likenesses *tmunah* of God. The great systematic theologian, Charles Hodge, regarding the second commandment, stated,

**Idolatry consists not only in the worship of false gods, but also in the worship of the true God by images.<sup>1</sup>**

Many people, including myself at one time, read the first two commandments like this: **“You shall have no other gods before me...if you choose to disregard this, at least don’t worship the false god with man-made idols.”** I don’t think it should be read that way. It should be

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology, Vol III*, (Eerdmans, reprint 1989), p. 291.

read, **“You shall no others gods before me and you shall not worship me utilizing man-made images.”** The sense of the commandment is thou shalt not make any likeness of any thing for use in worship, public or private. The Westminster Larger Catechism teaches (in part),

**The sins forbidden in the second commandment are, all devising, (Numb. 15:39) counselling, (Deut. 13:6-8) commanding, (Hosea 5:11, Micah 6:16) using, (1 Kings 11:33, 1 Kings 12:33) and any wise approving, any religious worship not instituted by God himself; (Deut. 12:30-32) the making any representation of God, of all or of any of the three persons, either inwardly in our mind, or outwardly in any kind of image or likeness of any creature whatsoever; (Deut. 4:15-19, Acts 17:29, Rom. 1:21-23,25).**

The reason for this is because images simply aren't truthful. They will always give us a skewed perception of God.

John Calvin stated,

**A true image of God is not to be found in all the world; and hence...His glory is defiled.<sup>2</sup>**

**Being then the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man (Acts 17:29).**

Images promote falsehood because of what they fail to display and the wrongs things they do portray. The inadequacies of images pervert our thoughts about God which leads to other perversions in life. The bull-calf of Aaron led the Israelites to think of God as a Being who could be worshipped acceptably by frenzied debauchery (Exodus 32:5)<sup>3</sup>.

The second commandment warns us against any worship or religious practice that leads us to dishonor God and falsify His truth. The second commandment should cause us to humble ourselves before God's

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<sup>2</sup> J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Intervarsity Press, 1973), p. 40.

<sup>3</sup> J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Intervarsity Press, 1973), p. 41.

incomprehensibility. It summons to us to recognize that God the Creator is transcendent, mysterious, and inscrutable. God is beyond the range of any imaging or philosophical guesswork of which we are capable. We should then humble ourselves, listen and learn of Him and let Him teach us through the Scriptures what He is like and how, what we should think of Him and how we are to love and worship Him.

We continue.

## Jealousy

This brings us to the notion of God being “**jealous**” *qana*. Have you ever been curious as to why it is proper for God to be jealous? It has been widely reported that Oprah Winfrey (perhaps the most influential woman in America) declared that her impatience with "rules, belief systems and doctrines" began when she, in her late 20s, heard a Baptist pastor say that God was jealous. How can it be right for God to be jealous or how can we say God is righteous if He has this character flaw?

It might be helpful to point out the difference between jealousy and envy. Envy is the feeling one has when they desire that which belongs to someone else. Jealousy is the experience of recognizing that that which belongs to you is somehow being taken by another. To desire another person's spouse is envy or covetous. The sorrow experienced what your spouse shows undue affection for another is jealousy. To be sure, a person can respond to their own jealous feelings in an inappropriate way. They can rant and become violent. But the feeling of jealousy is not itself wrong.

It shouldn't be too difficult for us to recognize that envy is impossible for God, for God owns the earth and all it contains. Since there is nothing that does not belong to God, the idea that He desires that which belongs to someone becomes a bit of an empty set. It cannot happen

Why is the term jealousy used in the Second Commandment? Jealousy is used in conjunction with this commandment because of the fallacious representation that images portray of God. God's jealousy is His zeal to maintain His glory and protect His children. If we recognize that it is most glorious to God, and in our own best interests, to worship the true God, we should recognize His jealousy as a good thing. For when our view of God is distorted by an image, we are straying from the true God and from what is most glorious to Him and best for us.

If I see my children captivated by a man who is not their father, but is seeking to have a father's place in their lives, I am to be jealous. For whoever that man is, he does not love my children the way I do.

## **The God-Haters**

God refers to those who neglect His word in this respect, not as image-worshippers, but as haters of God. Those who disregard His commandments as a whole are considered to be those who hate Him. The context of the statement, 'God-hater' is within the framework of image-users who prefer the image of God over the true God. They made the image, naturally they prefer it.

Image users inevitably get their theology from the God they imagine rather than the revealed will of God in the Scriptures. Most of Deuteronomy 4 reveals the contrast of the God who reveals Himself by speaking versus the temptation to make images.

**Take careful heed to yourselves, for you saw no form when the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, 16 lest you act corruptly and make for yourselves a carved image in the form of any figure: the likeness of male or female, 17 the likeness of any animal that is on the earth or the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, 18 the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground or the likeness of any fish that is in the water beneath the earth. 19 And take heed, lest you lift your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun, the moon, and the stars, all the host of heaven, you feel driven to worship them and serve them, which the LORD your God has given to all the peoples under the whole heaven as a heritage... 23 Take heed to yourselves, lest you forget the covenant of the LORD your God which He made with you, and make for yourselves a carved image in the form of anything which the LORD your God has forbidden you. 24 For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God (Deuteronomy 4:15-19; 23, 24).**

Moses teaches that God expressly forbids the use of images. The

images made, even by those who are well meaning, will eventually war with the God of the Scriptures. You can't serve two masters Jesus taught. And the language Jesus uses in this instruction pits the two vying for that role in strong opposition.

**No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other (Matthew 6:24).**

This is remarkable language! We might find it difficult for this to resonate with our experience. What I mean by this is that we don't generally find that when something or someone is vying to be a priority in our lives and gets second-place so to speak, that we hate it or despise it. If I choose tacos over hamburgers, it doesn't follow that I hate hamburgers. If I choose to place a higher priority on my health than on my academics, it doesn't follow that I hate academics. Even if I choose to make a certain person my best friend over someone else I genuinely like, it doesn't follow that I hate and despise the other person.

But a passage like this is not merely talking about preferences. It's really talking about the absolute controlling influence in our lives. It is that aspect of our personhood which governs all other decisions. It is our very heart and soul.

When we begin to construct God via images, likenesses (whether on canvas, stone or in our own minds) that image commandeers our hearts and souls. And it will not tolerate a competitor. It is not a matter of merely preferring one thing, or even person, over another. It is the recognition that something or someone is looking at you and saying, "**This is mine**". And when someone or something else utters the same phrase, the fight is to the death. This may sound overly dramatic, but does not Paul use this kind of language?

**...knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin (Romans 6:6).**

In light of this it is little wonder that the greatest foes of Christ were religious. And this hits so very close to home when we realize their

religion was not so much a false religion but a perversion of the true religion. And the same danger lurks throughout history. The caricatures of the truth remain and, from time to time, prevail. Ross Douthat, in his book *Bad Religion, How We Became a Nation of Heretics*, makes a strong argument that we currently live in that theological climate.

Is due entirely to the breaking of the Second Commandment? Not likely. But is due to our propensity to chip away at a Biblically based presentation of the Triune God and all of His attributes. The ease at which we construct images and likenesses of God is both disease and symptom. It is a symptom in that it is the consequence of a low view of God and the Scriptures by which He reveals Himself. It is a disease in its contribution to a god that is not the true God at all, but a (perhaps) superior version of ourselves; a truth expressed by the Psalmist when writing about man-made images:

**Those who make them are like them; So is everyone who trusts in them (Psalm 135:18).**

## **Sanctions and Blessings**

The sanctions, or punishments, that comes with this commandment are severe. The Lord states, **“For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me,”** These sanctions are frightening.

This commandment is no small thing and shouldn't be taken lightly. It affects us and will affect our children. It shouldn't be startling to us that we are the most powerful influence in our children's lives. The improper view of God we have will be passed on to our descendants for three and four generations. I see qualities in myself, both good and bad, that I saw in my mother or father. A skewed understanding of God may be the worst thing we can leave our children.

We are also told of the positive side of keeping the commandment. **“...but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.”** The adherence to this commandment promotes the glory of God and the spiritual well being of man. We see the mercy of God in how long obedience yields blessings (thousands of generations) versus how quickly the evil can be purged (three and four generations).

## Conclusion

By now we may be drawing the conclusion that it is virtually impossible for the creature to have a truly accurate view of God. Not only is God far beyond our comprehension in terms of His eternal, infinite nature, even that which we can apprehend, the things we do understand, inevitably fall short of perfection. This is not to say we have no grasp or understanding whatsoever. It should also be a lifelong quest to understand Him more fully. As Paul prayed,

**...that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him (Ephesians 1:17).**

But we should never draw the conclusion that our understanding is pure enough to warrant God's approval. To put it in simple terms, we live in a constant state of disobedience to this commandment.

But praise be to God that our peace with Him is not a ladder we climb or a leap we make. The ascending of man only takes place by the descending of Christ. We don't reach Him but He has reached us. And He turns our face toward Him and we bask in His glorious light (Psalm 118:27; 1 Peter 2:9).

No, we have not kept this commandment. Our knowledge of God is skewed in innumerable ways. But not so with Christ. He fully knows the Father. He always kept this and all commandments. And His great obedience belongs to those who have called upon His Name. We see this in His wonderful prayer for us:

**O righteous Father! The world has not known You, but I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me. 26 And I have declared to them Your name, and will declare it, that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them (John 17:25, 26).**

## Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Discuss the adage, “It’s now how you worship, but who you worship” (pages 2, 3).
2. What do the first four commandments principally teach (pages 2, 3)?
3. What are some of the sins forbidden in the Second Commandment (page 3)?
4. How do images of God promote falsehood (pages 3, 4)?
5. How is it possible for jealousy to be a good thing (pages 4, 5)?
6. Discuss how a violation of the Second Commandment is a form of hating God (pages 5, 6)?
7. What are the blessings and sanctions attached to the Second Commandment (page 7)?
8. How does this commandment reveal to us our need for Christ (pages 7, 8)?