

—Westminster Shorter Catechism—

Lesson 69—What does the Second Commandment Forbid? Qs.51-52

The sins forbidden

- I. The second commandment forbids the worshipping of God by images, or any other way not appointed in His Word, Dt 4.15-19; Rom 1.22-23; Lev 10.1-3; Ex 20.22-26.
 - A. All worship by images is forbidden by God. God showed the people no form when He spoke to them directly, and therefore condemns the making of images to represent Him.
 1. He's the God who's *heard and not seen*. This shows us that His Word is the primary means of His self-revelation. His Word trumps all, WSC 2-3. When the Lord has spoken, all debate ends. Whatever He says is truth and law.
 - a) Even when the eternal God becomes incarnate in the NT in the person of Jesus Christ, who is the preeminent and consummate self-revelation of God to man (Heb 1.1-3), it is the *Word* who became flesh and dwelt among us, Jn 1.14.
 - b) One problem with physical images of God is that they prevent us from hearing God's voice in the ministry of His Word. Therefore, when Christ ascended and ordered His NT church, He appointed the apostles to establish the authority of Scripture and the centrality of preaching in His church, so that the worship of God might be Word-based, Word-centered, and Word-bound, WCF 20.2.
 - c) God does not want us to *look* with our eyes in worship so much as He wants us to *listen* with our ears. He doesn't appear among us to be *seen* but to be *heard*. He didn't institute ordinances that dazzle the *eyes*, but ordinances that speak to the heart and conscience by the *ears*, Lk 8.18; 10.24; Acts 10.33; Phil 4.9; 1Th 2.13; 2Tim 2.2; 1Jn 2.24; Rev 2.7.
 2. To make an image of God and to worship Him by images is not simply to debase Him, it's to *lie* about who and what He is. It denies His eternal deity and glorious majesty.
 - a) To worship God by images is to say He's finite, created, needy, and physical, but He is infinite (Isa 40.18-19), uncreated (Isa 40.25-26), sovereign and in need of nothing (Isa 40.28-31; Acts 17.24-25), and spirit (Jn 4.24; Dt 4.11-12).
 - b) God is infinite and invisible, omnipresent and omnipotent. Worshipping Him by images denies all of these and attempts to squeeze the eternal God into a man-made image. Idolatry makes God out to be the exact opposite of what He is and betrays the absurdity of human beings trying to make that God in their image who Himself made them in His.
 - c) An idol is a lie. It's a god who cannot see, know, act, save, or love, and is therefore no God, Acts 19.26. And those who worship them become like them, Ps 115.2-9; Isa 44.9-22.
 - B. The principle underlying this prohibition is that our worship of God is not to be in any way according to our own imagination or inclination, but only according to His appointment and directive.
 1. Worship according to our own imagination or inclination is *will-worship*, worship driven by a love of self, a love for what we want over what God commands.
 2. We live in an image-centered culture, a visual age, and a strong temptation of the church today is to present and package God by images, to employ forms of media that make God and His worship visual or attractive to the eyes. But when we do that, we neither improve on worship nor make His gospel more accessible or understandable. Instead, we hinder and distract the ears of men from hearing the Word of God. We make it harder to hear the voice of God, not easier. The crucifix, the icon, the drama, the dance, the light show—these things are not helps to worship; these make true worship all but impossible. Our age may be visual, but God remains spirit and seeks worshippers who will worship Him in spirit and truth.
 3. Moreover, in this commandment, God forbids us to attempt to establish another path or means of worship than the one He ultimately established through His only Son, Jn 14.6; 1Tim 2.5. We're

not to worship God by images, because God can only be worshipped by His Spirit and through the mediation of His Son, Eph 2.12-13, 18.

- II. The second commandment forbids the *neglect* of God's ordinances, public worship, and sacraments, Heb 10.24-25; Acts 2.42; Mt 26.26-27; Jn 6.53.

The reasons annexed

- I. Because God is jealous, or passionately in love with us.
- A. No husband who truly loves his wife could possibly endure seeing her in the arms of another man. No more, then, can God endure to see the people He loves and redeemed, falling into the arms of another god, which is no God at all.
 - B. Idolatry is spiritual adultery, whoredom against God Himself, 2Chr 21.11-13; Jer 3.2; Hos 4.11-12; 5.4; Js 4.4-10.
 - C. God's commitment to us is total. His love is exclusive, passionate, and intense. He's given Himself, in His own Son, to us and held nothing in reserve. He gave His all to save us. He is jealous for our love in return and will defend and protect our love as a man protects his home and marriage-bed.
- II. Because God is sovereign over us. He is our God. No other is or could be. Therefore He insists on our love and worship.
- III. Because He has the right to determine how He's to be worshipped. It's presumptuous and flagrant pride for us to assume that we, as sinful creatures, know how to approach the holy God aright. We know by nature that He is to be worshipped, but the manner of doing it we cannot know unless He reveals it to us—which He has.
- IV. Because He is zealous for His own worship, that it be done aright and not given to another.
- A. A curse to the third and fourth generation of idolaters.
 - 1. The point here is that God holds families responsible for their conduct as families. When a father leads his family in sin, he needs to understand that he's not only passing on a bad example, he's passing on guilt as well, Ps 109.6-15 (cf. the death Ahab's sons, 2Kgs 10.1-17).
 - 2. This doesn't deny individual responsibility, Ezk 18.20. God never condemns the innocent, but only the guilty. But unless grace intervenes (Gen 12.1-4; Ezk 18.21-22), the children of idolaters who continue in idolatry will be punished for their own sin of idolatry and for their willing embrace of their father's sin of idolatry. (The commandment says, *of those who hate me* (Ex 20.5, showing that the children of such fathers are not innocent, but haters of God as much as their fathers were).
 - B. A blessing of unending duration to true worshippers.
 - 1. The blessing is more powerful than the threat, reaching not merely to a few generations, but all generations, Gen 17.7; Gal 3.29.
 - 2. If we come from unbelieving parents, but have come to know God, let's not miss the fact that the intervention of grace into our lives has brought this promise of blessing into the family line.

Applications

- I. We're all natural-born idolaters, and we need to acknowledge that upfront.
- II. There's no easy path from idolatry to worship. There has to be repentance and then reform.
- III. Let fathers see that the worst legacy they can leave for their children and their children's children is a legacy of *ungodliness*. No earthly inheritance can make up for the eternal woes they pass on. But the greatest blessing fathers can leave, and the greatest hope they can have for the salvation of their descendants, is a legacy of godliness. Therefore bless your family line and live a God-fearing life!
- IV. Lest we become extremists, we must understand that God doesn't mean for us to shut our eyes in worship.
- A. Israel was given many beautiful things in worship for the eyes to take in, and the NT church is given the two sacraments, a minister of the gospel, and the assembly itself.
 - B. So worship isn't *simply* a matter of hearing. The eye is just as important as the ear in worship. The point, however, is that seeing and hearing must go together and must both submit to what God says in His Word.
 - C. So that just as Israel was to interpret all they saw in worship by what they heard from God, so the NT church is to interpret all she sees by what God says, until that Day when we shall see Christ with our eyes and worship Him, body and soul, with all our senses, in heaven, forever and ever.
 - 1. Let us long for heaven, when the God who is heard but not seen will be both seen and heard, and when our worship of God will be as visually stunning as it will be audibly awesome.