

Ten Rules for Life | Second Commandment: You Shall Not Make for Yourself Any Graven Image | Exodus 20:1-4

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(Discussion questions on page 8)

Introduction

Welcome to the official TFCA Pre-Snowpocalypse liturgical party. I'm glad you could all join us tonight. It's really kind of special to gather together on a Saturday night, albeit under snowy circumstances. I will say, however, I was really looking forward to either hiking here tomorrow or perhaps taking a sled down Arlington Blvd. Kids and youth: I know you are praying hard today that school will be cancelled for the whole week. I'm with you. I will join you in those prayers. And our prayers shall rise up like incense before the throne of God. Good luck. Godspeed. Build a snowman and help your parents shovel.

Tonight, we continue our series in *The Ten Commandments* by looking at the second commandment, "you shall not make for yourselves any graven images to bow down to them or serve them."

Straight away, this commandment raises some questions.

- What exactly is being prohibited here?
- Does this commandment mean that all visual expressions of biblical stories, or God, or Jesus are sinful?
 - That might seem unlikely, but at various time and places, some Christians have been radically opposed to the use of any visual art
 - In our own history as the Anglican Church, there was the iconoclastic movement in England during the Reformation
 - As an over-reaction to Medieval excesses and practices the churches and monasteries were stripped of any **statues**, **paintings**, **crucifixes**, and **stained-glass windows**, and most these works of art were destroyed

- Is God furious every time you watch *The Chosen*? The Lord Almighty sitting in his heavenly throne room, just indignant,

‘Why do they insist on watching the film when the book is so *much better!*’

- Should we imagine that God is longing to smite you when you read from *The Big Picture Story Bible* with your Sunday school class, or your kids, or your grandkids,

- Are you breaking the second commandment when you do that?
- Is the Lord grumbling with arms crossed like a grumpy heavenly grandpa,

‘I specifically said no pictures! And what’s this that I see? Cartoons! And you call yourselves Anglicans.’

We’ll approach today’s commandment by asking three questions

- I. What does it mean for us to not make for ourselves graven images?
- II. What does it mean to not bow down and serve them?
- III. What does it mean to be blessed by God rather than cursed by idols?

I. What does it mean for us to make for ourselves a carved image? (Ex. 20:4)

What does it mean for us to create or make an idol? It is not just a matter of us **physically crafting** idols, like when the Israelites made a literal golden calf.

The contemporary application of this commandment goes well beyond the literal craftiness envisioned in its original context. To ‘make’ something an idol is to **assign a created object the place of ultimate value** within the **ecosystem of our affections**, within **the hierarchy of our heart**.

- We may not have physically built the house; but we assign it idolatrous value.
- We didn’t assemble the car; but we assign it pride of place and vanity plates.
- Even if we didn’t *start* the company, we elevate our role so that it becomes an object of ultimate value and worship for us

This is why the passage talks about crafting an image from the “things in the heavens, the earth, and the sea.”

- This is a classic Hebrew way of expressing totality.
- It’s **a way of describing idolatry sourced from all domains of creation.**

This is what it means “**make** for yourself a carved image.” The essence of idolatry is to take something that is *not God* and make it to function *as God*.

Application:

I want to draw one application at this point, namely that this verse offers an opportunity for **course correction about the right use of art in worship** even as it offers a **definite prohibition against worshipping art**.

Notice that the commandment does not prohibit the creation of religious art. Nor does it condemn the use of religious works of art as a tool to worship God, to evoke a sense of wonder, awe, adoration, or inspiration. What it does condemn is the *worship* of works of art made from objects in God's creation.

Think of all the great works of Christian art and the evangelistic impact they have had on humanity:

- Artistic renditions of the Last Supper or the Crucifixion, or the Sistine Chapel, or the Stations of the Cross
- Breathtaking ornate cathedrals leftover from a bygone age in Europe
- Or even the architectural beauty of our own church.

Hear me: these things *honor* God. They do not break the second commandment.

- The prayer book doesn't say, 'Worship the Lord in the plainness of boringness.'
- It says, 'Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.'

And, in fact, in many times and places, when literacy was low, and access to the Bible was impossible to achieve, **it was art that told the story of Jesus**, the masses were evangelized through their medium of the eyes, peaking the imagination and drawing a bridge from **the appreciation of aesthetic beauty to the adoration of Almighty God**.

Transition: This first point, then, is a warning against taking objects of this created world that are **not God** and making them to function **as if they were God**. That is what it means to 'make an idol.' But the second commandment also warns us not to "**bow down**" to idols or to "**serve**" them. What does that mean?

II. What does it mean to bow down and serve idols? (Ex. 20:5a)

On the surface, the commandment “you shall not bow down to them and you shall not serve them” makes sense when you think about the ancient world. Back then, there were visible images of deities everywhere.

- In public, in private houses.
- Endless temples, cults, and religions on visible display.

But in our own culture, these two actions: “bowing down” and “serving” refer to two different aspects of idolatry that easily translate to our contemporary lived experience.

- **‘Bowling down’** refers to our **affections**
- **“Serving”** refers to our **actions**.

Our affections always empower our actions, like a battery and fuel provides energy to an automobile. The heart cultivates affection for the things of this world; and our hands follow the affectionate cues of our heart.

- Bowing down leads to serving.
- **Worship leads to work.**
- Affection leads to action.

Ila. Bowing down

Now, ‘bowing down’ to idols dishonors God. This is no surprise. But it not only dishonors God; it displaces God from the pride of place in our heart.

Human beings do not have infinite space within the confines of our hearts for the accumulation of unlimited objects of affection. **Affection directed at idols pushes God out.**

Idolatry is like giving ungodliness a spiritual green card so that sin can take up permanent residency in our hearts. And when sin moves in; it is *God* who gets evicted. As J.C. Ryle says, “the heart is not made to accommodate a double occupation.”

Ilb. Serving

This misplaced affection leads to misdirected action. And that's what the passage calls "serving."

'Serving' refers to our **iniquitous actions** that stem from **idolatrous worship**. The work that idols require us to do is not work that benefits us.

The idols are not working *for us*; we are working *for them*.

- The word rendered 'serving' is often used to describe the forced labor of bondservants and slaves in the ancient world.

Application

The question for you today is not if you have any idols. The answer to that is "yes." The questions for you to consider are:

- *How many* idols you have crafted?
- How deeply ingrained are they in your heart?"
- How serious are you be about getting rid of them?

Most of us will hear a message like this and sense almost immediately:

- 'Yes, there are idols in my heart.'
- 'Yes, I desperately want to get rid of them.'
- But we might wonder, '**How** do I get rid of them?'

The temptation would be for me to offer 'three easy steps to your new idol-free existence' But the truth is, depending upon the idol and the severity of its hold over your heart,

- there are about as many procedures and spiritual protocols for idol removal as there are idols.
- they are rarely one-size-fits-all
- none of them could be categorized as easy to get rid of.

I cannot offer you a comprehensive approach for ridding yourself of every species of idol known to man. I'm not even sure I could accomplish that in a

year's worth of sermons, or even in a *lifetime's* worth. That's how complicated and serious a problem this really is.

What I *can* do is offer:

- a **diagnostic tool** to help you identify idols in your heart, along with
- an **ongoing commitment**, a commitment that the pastors, leaders, and members of this church will walk alongside you
 - to mutually seek a greater singularity and holiness of heart together
 - to assist one another in ridding ourselves of idols so that we can individually and corporately exalt and honor Christ alone.

The diagnostic

A diagnostic is a test. It's a way of examining your heart. And it always begins with prayer.

One way to prayerfully examine ourselves is to **use this commandment** and other Bible passages **to filter and sift our hearts**. By doing this the idols in our hearts rise to the surface and become identifiable.

Then, once you've entered into a spirit of self-examination, you might ask: what in my life accords with the following sequence?

'I like this. I want this. I deserve this. *I need this. I can't let this go. I can't go on without this.*'

And if the '*this*' of that sentence is anything other than Almighty God, you have identified an idol.

Once you've identified an idol, you ignore it at a terrible and terminal risk.

- At first it an idol will merely **distract** you.
- But then, after time, it will start to **deplete** you.
- Then it will **diminish** you to a fragment of what you once were.
- And then, when all is said and done, it will **destroy** you.

Search your heart. Ask God to reveal the idols that you have created, bowed down to, and served. And then brace yourselves for a long-obedient battle.

Evicting idols from your heart is a hard journey. It is a long journey. And for many idols, it is a *life-long* journey. But remember above all, that for the Christian, a rightly ordered heart never rests not on our own imperfect performance but rather holds fast to the perfect obedience of Jesus Christ credited to us by faith alone.

This does not excuse us from moral effort. But it does free us to follow the Law

- + as a **gracious moral guide**, rather than
- as a **works-based writ of condemnation, failure, and defeat**.

Transition: And this brings us to our last question: what does it mean to be cursed by idols but blessed by God?

III. What does it mean to be cursed by idols but blessed by God? (Ex.20: 5b-6)

Take a look at verse 5. It says that God opposes the making, worshipping and serving of idols **because the Lord is “a jealous God.”**

Now, hang on, we’ve got to start by asking what it means for God to be a jealous God.

- What is that actually saying about God?
- Isn’t this an embarrassing, unflattering thing to say about God?
- Isn’t it true that if human beings are ‘jealous’ we consider that to be a vice *not a virtue*.
- What’s going on here with a jealous God?

Well, the language of jealousy is an example of the Bible using imperfect human words to point to real truths about a perfect God. A God who is himself beyond the limitations of human language.

This description of God as “jealous” is an attempt to express is that the one true and living God will not share his God-ness with things that are, by definition, *not God*. This is not an indictment upon God as arrogant or something. Rather, it is a statement about the absolute uniqueness and holiness of God.

Idolatry is not just the attempt to situate God alongside a host of false gods in the personal pantheon of preferred deities in our hearts. Idolatry is also the attempt to incorporate **something that is *not God* into the very essence and concept of God**. If we were to accept this—if *God* were to accept this—God would cease to be God. His whole being would unwind like a ball of yarn. Instead of being the same, ‘yesterday, today and forever,’ God would be ever-changing, unreliable, unholy, incapable of creating, or upholding, or saving anyone—including *himself*. **By sharing his glory with idols; God wouldn’t expand his divinity; he would erase it.**

Idolatry does not honor a God who says, ‘let us make man in our own image;’ it exalts humans who say, ‘let us make God in ours.’

Verses 5 and 6 take us from the reasons to oppose idolatry to its results. The passage provides two potential outcomes.

- God will visit the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate him (Ex. 20:5b)
- + God will show steadfast love to thousands [of generations] for those who love God and keep his commandments (Ex. 20:6)

What are we to make of this concept of being cursed by idols or blessed by God?

- First, it makes sense that our contemporary actions would impact future generations. Personal sin has corporate, generational, and spiritual impact.
- Second, I want you to notice the massive difference between the extent of the blessing compared to the extent of the curse.
 - the **curse** of disobedience extends to **the third or fourth generations**
 - the **blessing** of obedience extends for **thousands** of generations.

The point here is **not numerical literalism** but **literary impact**. The eternal abundance of grace towers over the temporary obstructions of sin.

Grace delivers its generational blessing at a click of 996 generations to curse's 4. God's grace is portrayed here as infinitely more powerful than human sin. Grace wins a super-abundant victory over curse, not a minor one.

Conclusion (How Jesus lifts the curse for both the obedience and the disobedient)

But just when we're inclined to celebrate God's grace, perhaps you start to notice something disturbing. When you look at this commandment. When you examine yourself:

- Do you find idols occupying the affections of your heart?
- If so, where does that leave *you*.
- Where does it leave your family?

If we look at our children or those who fall under our care, we can observe our best traits in them, but if we're honest, we can just as easily identify our worst. Virtue begets virtue, but sin begets sin. And sin seems to 'stick' much more quickly and easily than virtue.

So, which is it? Is your legacy a four-generation curse or thousand-generation blessing?

The problem is that, according to Scripture, the all-pervasive polluting power of sin on the human soul and psyche **has consigned all of us**—the obedient and the disobedient alike—**to the category of cursed.**

The Psalmist says along with St. Paul says,

“None is righteous, no, not one

no one understands;

no one seeks for God.

All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;

no one does good, not even one.”

The prophet Isaiah says likewise,

We have all become like one who is unclean,

and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment

(Isa. 64:6).

But just when we start to hang our heads in defeat and hang our hats on hook of the four-generation curse, God himself breaks in to bear our curse on his own shoulders. The condemnation of the four-generation curse meets its end in the grace of the thousand-generation blessing through Jesus Christ.

If you feel cursed. If you feel defeated. If you feel like your best obedience is about as good as dirty rags. You are *right*. But in Christ your imperfect obedience is carried along by the perfect obedience of Jesus Christ.

Galatians 2

¹¹ Now it is evident that no one is counted righteous before God by keeping the Law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.”

¹³ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”— ¹⁴ so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the nations, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.

Discussion Questions

1. Given that the second commandment **does not** prohibit the creation of, appreciation of, and use of religious art as a legitimate and holy means of worshipping God but **does** prohibit the worship of created things *as if they were* God, what are some works of Christian art (e.g., film, visual art, musical expressions of art) that have helped evoke a sense of awe, wonder, and inspiration toward the true and living God?

2. 'Making for yourself a graven image' means so much more than physically crafting idols. For contemporary Christians, 'crafting idols' refers to **assigning the pride of place in the hierarchy of our heart's affections to anything except the true and living God**. Often, we feel that our heart can accommodate a double occupancy of idols *alongside* the living God (to paraphrase J.C. Ryle). It's not that we don't want God. We do! But we also want a pantheon of personal supplementary gods to diversify our divinity portfolio. This not only dulls the presence and power of the true and living God in our lives; it pushes God out of our hearts because God will not and cannot dwell with sin, iniquity and idols. God will share his glory with no one and nothing else. He alone is God. Mixing idols with God does not expand God's divinity; it erases it.

2a. What idols do you allow to occupy your affections alongside God?

To help you figure these out ask yourself what in your life follows this sequence: 'I like this. I want this. I deserve this. I *need* this. *I can't let this go*. I can't go on without this.' If the '*this*' of that sentence is anything other than Almighty God, you have identified an idol.

2b. What do those idols tell you about your own needs, sins, or insecurities, that you would need or want them in the first place?

2c. How can these wants or needs being supplied by idols be shifted to the true and living God who can attend to your felt needs not only now but eternally?

3. Reflect on Galatians 2 where "no one is counted righteous before God by keeping the Law" but rather "the righteous shall live by faith." And where "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us" by dying for our sins and rising to life so that we might receive the blessing of God rather than condemnation and curse for our disobedience and sin. How does this change how we think about God's Law? How does this generate a greater need for Christ to be our all in all when it comes to salvation, blessing and life? How does this motivate us away from 'crafting dead idols' to worshipping the living God?

This is a preaching draft.

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