

The Second Commandment

“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).

I. Not How But Whom?

“It’s now how you worship but who you worship.” is a very popular expression these days among evangelicals. This sounds very practical and even has a ring of sincerity to it. But is it inconsistent with the second commandment? 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.”**¹ We read in the Harpers Bible Commentary,

“The prohibition against graven images (Exodus 20:4-6, Deuteronomy 5:8-10) may in the first instance have been aimed at images of Israel’s own God, Yahweh. God will not be localized in an object such as a golden calf (see Exodus 20:4-6; 1 Kings 12:28), because to permit this to happen would make God an object of manipulation.”

Going into greater detail, J. I. Packer writes,

“In its Christian application, this means that we are not to make use of visual or pictorial representations of the Triune God, or of any person of the Trinity, for the purposes of Christian worship. The commandment thus deals, not with the object of our worship, but with the manner of it; what it tells us is that statues and pictures of the one whom we worship are not to be used as

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

an aid to worshipping Him.”²

What Harm in That?

Someone might suggest, “Shouldn’t personal taste dictate? What if looking at a picture of Jesus helps?” A very nice lady called into a radio show I was doing on this subject and warmly expressed how a picture of Jesus helped her in her Christian life. She was so sweet and her testimony was so warm that I almost felt guilty to say she might be wrong.

Richard Foster, in his book *Celebration of Discipline*, recommends using pictures of Jesus for deep meditation³. Have you found that images of God the Father or God the Son help you create a mental picture making it all more real to you? What harm is there in that? Allow me to give you an example of how it might not be as helpful as you think.

A Selective Portrait

We tend to be very selective when we paint a portrait. Suppose my wife hired someone to paint a picture of me. I might be very complimented. But suppose every time she thought of me, it was that picture that came to her mind? Suppose she had the artist paint a picture that revealed or hid qualities about me to her liking. I wonder if I might start resenting the picture. She might say, “But honey, it makes me love you even more!” To which I might respond, “Yeah, especially because it leaves out this trait or that aspect of my looks or personality.” The painting may, in fact, be a hindrance to our relationship rather than a help. The sense of the commandment is thou shalt not make any likeness of any thing for use in worship, public or private.

Just a Decoration?

People might say they have a picture of Jesus, but they don’t use it for worship. It’s just decorative. I ask them if they can run around the building three times without thinking of a fox. Of course they can’t. It would be nearly impossible. So how possible is it to have a picture of Jesus in your living room and begin to worship on Sunday morning without having that picture enter your head?

II. Visiting Iniquity

Sanctions and Blessings

² J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Intervarsity Press, 1973), p. 39.

³ Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (Harper and Row, 1978), p. 21.

The sanctions, or punishments, that comes with this commandment are truly 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. Surely you see qualities in yourself that you saw in your mother or father. Negative qualities can easily be traced to your great, great grandparents.

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). The neglect of this commandment robs God of His glory and gives us a false image of who He truly is. How does this take place?

III. False Images

Images Are Not Truthful

Though God is revealed everywhere we turn (Romans 1; Psalm 19), making an image of God puts limits on our perception of God. Images pervert God's glory and therefore dishonor Him. This effects us in ways we maybe don't realize. John Calvin stated, **“A true image of God is not to be found in all the world; and hence...His glory is defiled.”**⁴

Packer points out that the golden calf built by the Israelites was a bull-image of God and His great strength. That was the characteristic of God they wanted as they sought deliverance from the wilderness, a big strong animal who does your bidding. The bull-calf, however came quite short of portraying the true image of God. It left out, for example, His moral character, His righteousness, goodness and patience. The true glory of God was therefore hidden.⁵

Crucifix

Packer also points out that a crucifix, portraying the crucified Christ on the cross, also obscures the glory of Christ, for it hides His deity, victory and present kingdom. It displays His human weakness, but conceals His divine strength; it depicts the reality of His pain, but keeps out of our sight the reality of

⁴ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Intervarsity Press, 1973), p. 40.

⁵ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Intervarsity Press, 1973), p. 40.

His joy and His power. Images fall short. Images are unworthy because of what they fail to display. Looking at pictures should not be used to move us to worship because they can never show us His glory.⁶ Artists may make an effort at showing His glory by painting a halo around His head, but the effort is truly feeble.

Jealousy

Have you ever been curious as to why it is proper for God to be jealous? The term '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.

It is dishonoring to God and harmful to men for the glory of God to be obscured through false representation. Images are misleading. Isaiah writes, **"To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare to Him" (Isaiah 40:18?)**. The rhetorical question assumes the answer is 'no one' or 'none'.

Perverse Thoughts = Perverse Actions

The inadequacy of images pervert our thoughts about God. 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)⁷. The crucifix promotes an opposing emotion of walking into a church and brooding over the bodily suffering of Christ. An image of Christ on the throne promotes the pondering of His victory, which may cause us to be overly autocratic or domineering. An image of Christ doing a good deed so we could ponder His righteousness may cause us to forget salvation by grace. An image of Christ doing a miracle so we could ponder His deity may have us continually looking for signs.

We could never make enough images to give us an accurate representation of Christ. But even if we could, we could never accurately portray the look on His face or whatever gestures He may have been doing at the time of the event.

Screenplay

We wouldn't think to add 'screenplay' like descriptions to the Bible. How obviously wrong it would be to write a new study Bible that gave how the

⁶ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Intervarsity Press, 1973), p. 41.

⁷ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Intervarsity Press, 1973), p. 41.

author thought Jesus might have stooping when He engaged the children. Or what the look on His face might have been as He healed the leper. What if the author decided that Jesus looked scared? Would we be scared? What if the author decided Jesus looked angry or impatient? Would not that promote impatience in us? After all, He is our Lord. The inadequacy of images pervert our thoughts about God.

An Unavoidable Disposition

Images also promote a disposition in the worshipper. We visualize the image. When we fall to our knees to pray we will, no doubt, visualize the one we are praying to based upon the image used to represent Him. To the extent that that image falls short of the truth about God, we will fail to worship God in truth. This results in God's jealousy because at this point we begin worshipping a caricature of God rather than the true God.

Naming our Children

When naming our children we accept or reject names, often times, based upon a person we knew who had a similar name. There was something about that person we either liked or disliked that is strong enough to influence our decision. When God is associated with certain physical features, we may find ourselves coming up short in our respect of Christ. What if the picture or image of Jesus conveyed to you is startlingly similar to someone who disgusts you, or you know to be very evil?

Who Plays Jesus?

I find myself disappointed, time after time, when I see who Hollywood, or even Christian films, decide to cast as Jesus. Who would you cast as Jesus? What traits would you look for? What kind of voice? Arnold Swarzenegger? Woody Allen? Christopher Walken? Tom Selleck? You might think to yourself, "How silly. They would never cast Arnold Swarzenegger as Jesus." Ah, but you have now revealed your hand. Because the fact is, you don't know that He didn't look like Arnold Swarzenegger. And the fact that you wouldn't allow Him to look that way, indicates that you do have a picture in your mind of just who you will allow Jesus to, or not to, look like. There was a time when they wouldn't show Jesus in the movies. That was probably wise. Images bring out God's jealousy because worshipping through images is stepping away from worshipping the true God.

IV. I Like to Think of God as a...

What we have spoken of so far may help us understand the problem with mental images of God as well. This moves into the spirit of the commandment. You've heard people say, "I like to think of God as an artist, architect or father; not as a judge⁸." The 'I like to think of God as...' comment usually precedes some denial of what the Bible tells us about God. It conflicts with the image of God we have created in our heads. Packer addresses this by stating,

"At best, they can only think of God in the image of a man - as an ideal man, perhaps, or a super-man. But God is not any sort of man. We were made in His image, but we must not think of Him as existing in ours⁹."

The Incomprehensible God

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 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 what He is like and how we should think of Him.

God in a Box

This is where the comment, "You can't put God in a box." may be appropriate. Unfortunately, that phrase is usually used by those who have just learned of an attribute of God that violates their image. Both Isaiah and the Apostle Paul had personal glimpses of the heavenly throne. Yet even they recognized God's incomprehensibility.

"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways," says the LORD. ⁹ "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8).

"Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out" (Romans 11:33).

The wisdom, values, aims and mode of God are so beyond us that we cannot possibly guess our way to them by intuition or any notion of ideal

⁸ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Intervarsity Press, 1973), p. 42.

⁹ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Intervarsity Press, 1973), p. 42.

manhood. He tells us about Himself through apostles, prophets and His own Son. The second commandment requires that we get our thoughts toward God from His word and not from images. We cannot put God in a box, but He has chosen to reveal Himself in a book.

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. Moses teaches that God expressly forbids the use of images. The images made, even by well meaning men, will eventually war with the God of the Scriptures.

More Than a Friend

We will often hear orphans or widows refer to Jesus as their husband or father. After all, God is the Father to the fatherless. We must take care when we worship that we are not imagining God to be the father, husband, wife or friend we never had. We will then seek to endow Him with the traits we wished they had had. He is all that and more, but not merely that. He calls us friends but you never hear any of the apostles referring to themselves in that fashion. They rather refer to themselves as servants, slaves and prisoners of Christ.

Where Does My Searching Lead?

Are we worshipping the one true God in truth? We may not have bull-calves in our churches or even crucifixes on our walls (though we may have pictures of Christ!!?). How do I know if I am worshipping the one true God in truth? I look to the person and work of Jesus Christ, as revealed in the Scriptures, showing me the final truth about the nature and the grace of God?

Do I see all purposes of God centering upon Him? Do I find, as I search the Scriptures, that I am continually having to carve myself and adjust my errant views of God, or do I adjust God to my images of Him? Do my findings lead me to one solution - Calvary? Does the incomprehensibility of God bring me to my knees and make me ever aware of my sin and need for a Savior whom God graciously provides in His Son? How impossible it is to avoid having an image of God that is less than what He is. How clearly we have violated this command in both word and deed. And how obvious it should be that we need to take

refuge in the Son who fully knows His Father. If this brings you to your knees, then you know that you are worshipping the one true God in truth. and enjoying everlasting life according to Christ's own definition. **“And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (John. 17:3).**

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Is the adage, "It's now how you worship, but who you worship." biblical?
2. What harm is there if pictures of Jesus helps in your Christian life?
3. Discuss the sanctions and blessings of disobedience and obedience.
4. In what respect are images not truthful?
5. Why is it proper for God to be jealous?
6. How will perverse thoughts about God result in perverse actions?
7. What is wrong with the , "I like to think of God as a..." comment?
8. How do images violate God's incomprehensibility? Why is this important?
9. Discuss what people mean when they speak of putting God in a box.
10. Why does God call those who disobey this commandment God haters?
11. What danger is there in thinking of God as your husband or best friend?
12. How do you know when you're worshipping the one true God?