

The Second Word

Deuteronomy 5:8-10

As we look at the Second Commandment this morning, let me remind you of the context. It is simple, but crucial in order to rightly apply these commandments. God has redeemed his people. He has saved them. He has rescued them from bondage, and forgiven them their sin. He has claimed them to be his people, and declared himself to be their God.

v.6

Therefore, God declares to the objects of his saving love, “You shall have no other gods before me.” That’s the first word. Today, the second word. The first commandment addresses the question of whom you shall worship, namely the one true and living God. The second commandment addresses the question of how you ought to worship him.

Looking ahead, the third commandment addresses the matter of your attitude and motive, and the fourth commandment addresses the issue of when. So the commands regarding the duty of our love for God are commands regarding the particulars of who, how, why and when we are to worship the Lord our God.

This morning, how. How we are to worship the one true and living God. The manner of our worship.

Interestingly, Roman Catholics do not distinguish the first and the second commandments, treating them both as the first, only to divide the tenth commandment regarding coveting into two commandments in order to have a total of ten. With that neglect of the matter of how to worship God, it is not surprising that among those churches outwardly professing the Christian faith, they are the most prone to all sorts of abuses with regard to idolatry. Yet

the flagrant violations of this command among are by no means restricted to the Roman church alone, and thus it is well worth our time considering this command carefully and thoroughly.

How does God want us to worship him? Or more broadly, as we read in Deuteronomy,

I.WHAT IS REQUIRED BY THE SECOND COMMANDMENT. v.8-9a

Let me begin with these positive requirements. Although the commandments are typically put in the negative form of “thou shalt not,” that prohibition implies and requires the opposite requirement of our positive duty. So this commandment means much more than simply avoiding carving some idols out of wood and bowing down before them in worship.

Within the the broad context of worship, let me say two things positively about our duty. First of all, the prohibition against graven images teaches you that,

A. You must worship God in spirit and in truth.

God is spirit, isn’t he? He does not have a body like men. He is not a creature, but the eternal creator. He has no beginning. Rather we read in the first words of our Bibles, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” And so we must worship him as spirit! Not according to what we see or touch, but according to the convictions and beliefs of our faith. We believe in a God whom we have not seen, and we must learn to worship him without resorting to the use of physical images or any external representations of him. After all, he is not part of a physical creation, but exists as the one and only eternal creator of all things. He is spirit.

Calvin comments, “The sum is, that the worship of God must

be spiritual, in order that it may correspond with his nature...The words simply express that it is wrong for men to seek the presence of God in any visible image, because He cannot be represented to our eyes.”

You must worship God in spirit and in truth. Those words, you no doubt recall, are actually Jesus’ words, found in John 4. Remember that context--the woman from Samaria meeting with Jesus at the well, and he asks her for a drink, violating all the social customs of the day. A fascinating evangelistic conversation follows. Referring to the well,

John 4:13 Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 14but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty forever. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” 15 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.”

Jesus then sought to confront her with her sin that she might repent.

John 4:16 Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come here.” 17 The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; 18 for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true.” 19 The woman said to him, “Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. [Now it’s time to change the subject.] 20 Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.” 21 Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. 22 You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23 But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will

worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. 24 God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” 25 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.” 26 Jesus said to her, “I who speak to you am he.”

So the woman put her focus upon the outward trappings of worship, which mountain was the appropriate place to gather. And Jesus’ answer transcended all that she could have possibly imagined, giving such a great exposition of this second commandment. He didn’t choose between one mountain or the other. He declared what worship ought to be in its essence-- worship according to faith. Worship according to that which is believed by faith, worship according to the truth of God as he is revealed not to the sight of our eyes, but to our hearts. God requires us to worship him as spirit, not as a visible or created being.

According to the Apostle Paul in,

Acts. 17:24 “The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, 25 nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.”

God is not worshipped in a physical and external manner. He is worshipped in spirit. And related to that, one more thing. One more very important thing about what we actually do outwardly when we worship in spirit and in truth.

B. You must worship God in the manner he prescribes.
v.9a

By specifying the most obvious and offensive violation of this command, God has included all the lesser duties and obligations,

and this statement summarizes them all. That which we do when we worship God must be limited and restricted to that which God has commanded us to do.

It is good to speak of Christian liberty or Christian freedom when referring to all the rest of life, which means that in life you are free to do whatever you wish as long as God has not prohibited it. God gives you certain restraints, but within those restraints you are free to do what you please. And Jesus has harsh words for the Pharisees who add their own human traditions to the laws of God.

In worship, however, there is a higher standard embodied in this particular commandment. That standard is stated clearly in Deuteronomy 12. The context is in the Old Covenant, but the principle applies in much broader settings than merely with Israel's relationship with nations she conquers.

Deut. 12:29 "When the Lord your God cuts off before you the nations whom you go in to dispossess, and you dispossess them and dwell in their land, 30 take care that you be not ensnared to follow them, after they have been destroyed before you, and that you do not inquire about their gods, saying, 'How did these nations serve their gods?—that I also may do the same.' 31 You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way, for every abominable thing that the Lord hates they have done for their gods, for they even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods. 32 "Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it or take from it."

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In the history of theology, this has become known as the regulative principle of worship, meaning that worship is specifically

and most specially regulated by God. We are free to follow the practices of the world in our worship of God simply by claiming that God has not forbidden us to do so.

The duties of this commandment, however, made clear in Deuteronomy 12, are that we are permitted to do only those things in our worship services which God has commanded. So when it comes to worship, we are not left to the freedom of our own conscience. We are not left to our own devices and imagination. We do not have the authority to offer to God our sacrifices of worship in any way we please, as long as we avoid things he prohibits. We are not free to apply this commandment merely by restraining ourselves from hanging statues on the wall and bowing down before them. We must worship God only in the manner he prescribes. And in that way, we can know for sure that our worship will be acceptable and pleasing to him!

Now, let me emphasize, this is no excuse for pride. Nor a cold formalism. I have seen this idea terrible misused, to give those who boast of the external form of their worship while the heart is far from God. I don't want to breed any sort of self-righteousness. No Pharisaical hypocrisy. No legalism. Just a desire to honor God, to love God, in the way that he teaches us to love him.

What, then, of the specific prohibitions?

II. WHAT IS FORBIDDEN IN THE SECOND COMMANDMENT?

Thomas Watson answers this way: "In the first commandment worshipping a false god is forbidden; in this worshipping the true God in a false manner."

And what does that mean, most obviously from the words of this commandment itself?

A. You must not make any visual representation of God.

v.8

A carved image, an image of God fashioned by the hands of men. That could be a statute. It could be a picture.

You see, as I've emphasized, God is a spirit. And the essence of a spirit is that it does not exist in the physical realm capable of being seen. And we ought not to ascribe any physical or visual impressions to him. We cannot represent him in the realm of our visual sight. Thus there are two parts in this command, the first restraining us from daring to subject God, who is incomprehensible, to be represented by a form which we imagine in our own minds. The second forbids us to worship any images in the name of religion.

Simply put, we are forbidden to attempt to define God visually just as we are forbidden to worship those visual images. Consider what Moses wrote in,

Deut. 4:12 "Then the Lord spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice. 13 And he declared to you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, that is, the Ten Commandments, and he wrote them on two tablets of stone. 14 And the Lord commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and rules, that you might do them in the land that you are going over to possess. 15 "Therefore watch yourselves very carefully. Since you saw no form on the day that the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, 16 beware lest you act corruptly by making a carved image for yourselves, in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, 17 the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, 18 the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth."

You have not seen God. Therefore you cannot fashion him in

the image of anything in all of creation.

We know God as his attributes, his holiness, justice and goodness, for example. And even with pictures which ascribe a particular image to Jesus are corrupting the glory of the eternal God. Yes, Jesus did live and dwell among us as a man. Clearly, "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation." So we can perceive of Jesus in his humanity, but we ought not to create an image of that humanity as if we actually knew what he looked like. Nor should we so emphasize his human nature as to think we can picture that human nature apart from his divine nature.

Bottom line is that you ought not to have pictures of Jesus portrayed in a visual picture or likeness. Calvin expresses it simply: It is wrong for men to seek the presence of God in any visible image, because he cannot be represented to our eyes...God is insulted, not only when His worship is transferred to idols, but when we try to represent Him by any outward [likeness]."

And then,

B. You must not worship God according to your own human imagination.

Paul makes reference to the teachings and traditions of men and calls them "will worship," in,

Col. 2:20 "Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations— 21 "Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle," 22 which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men? 23 These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh."

Self-made religion. Self-imposed religion. Literally, will-

worship, worship according to the free creativity of our own will, worship that is determined by the will of man not by the revelation of God. Calvin makes this astute comment in his Institutes, “If all will-worship, which we devise without authority, is an abomination to God, it follows that no worship can be acceptable to him save that which is approved by his word.”

And that means when we worship, we read the Bible, we listen to the preaching of that Word, we sing his praise, we pray, we receive offerings, we profess our faith, confess our sins, take vows, and celebrate the sacraments. And that’s it. Those are the acceptable sacrifices of worship which God has prescribed.

So we don’t have movies or dances, puppet shows, skits or plays. We don’t have performances geared for our entertainment or the applause of the performers. We don’t have interviews, casual discussions, or even announcements. We don’t have elaborate ceremonies or light shows. The elements of our worship services are carefully chosen to be those which God has defined for us. This is how he wants us to worship him. And it is all about him, isn’t it? Not about us!

It is all designed for his glory and his honor, and the glorious reality of his grace is such that when you are consumed with the exaltation of his glory, your own soul will be greatly nourished and satisfied.

So, then,

III. WHAT ARE THE SPECIAL REASONS FOR THE SECOND COMMANDMENT?

This commandment is not given in a vacuum. It is not given without good foundation and encouragement to us. There are essentially two good reasons provided for us here, but relating to the nature and character of God himself. The first is that,

A. God is a just and jealous God.

v.9

Look at that word “jealous” first. That’s a hard concept for some people to grasp, that God is jealous, for in our general use of the word it means something very harmful and sinful. Jealous usually means something related to envious, even covetousness or bitterness. Jealous means that we resent what God has given to other people. And it is very much a product of our sinful nature.

But there is another sense of that word that can be used of something very, very good. It refers to the intensity of loyalty that seeks to protect and preserve that which is rightly yours.

A husband and a wife need to be very jealous to protect the sanctity of their marital relationship. No one is therefore allowed to intrude into the most intimate aspects of that relationship. It is theirs alone. Likewise, as a father, I am jealous to protect my children and provide for their well-being and security. I won’t let anyone hurt them, not if it is within my power to do so. They are the object of my deepest affection, and I am zealous to do them good always.

To speak of God as jealous is to speak of him in this way. He has established a special relationship with us as his people. A family relationship. We are his treasured possessions. And it is in the good and perfect nature of God to be jealous for our loyal affection and loving attention. We are to love him, and ultimately him alone. We are not to offer our affection to mere idols, to any likeness or image that we conceive of, for God is jealous for us to worship him alone.

It is a really big deal! Just like faithfulness in marriage is a really big deal!

For example,

Ex. 34:13 “You shall tear down their altars and break their pillars and cut down their Asherim 14 (for you shall worship no other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God), 15 lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and when they whore after their gods and sacrifice to their gods and you are invited, you eat of his sacrifice, 16 and you take of their daughters for your sons, and their daughters whore after their gods and make your sons whore after their gods. 17 “You shall not make for yourself any gods of cast metal.

Also, Deut. 4:23 “Take care, lest you forget the covenant of the Lord your God, which he made with you, and make a carved image, the form of anything that the Lord your God has forbidden you. 24 For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.”

And so you don't mistakenly think this is some antiquity, Old Testament concept of God that is no longer true, consider,

Heb. 12:28 “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. 29 For our God is a consuming fire.”

That jealousy is clearly related to his justice. Even as the commandment states with a warning, “visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generations of those who hate me.”

That verse deserves a careful explanation, for surely it cannot mean that children are held guilty and punished for the sins of their parents. And I say it cannot mean that because of what we read in,

Ezek. 18:20 “The soul who sins shall die. 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.”

So what does it mean? Simply that God so often works with families as families, and the effects of his judgment upon the sins of the father will clearly have implications in the lives of the children. Consider this example. Suppose a father refuses to love and worship God, and therefore refuses to introduce his children to the Lord. Most often, the children as well remain unbelievers. And not because they are punished for what their father did, but for their own. God simply determines to leave them in their sins.

Or even more simply, particularly for all of you with children, how often it is that your sins are actually repeated and made evident in your children. That, too, is this principle of God's justice. None of us live with complete independence from others, and especially parents have great influence upon what comes to their children, both for the good and for the bad.

So God, in his jealousy, justly withholds his grace from those who are idolatrous in their worship. And that judgment is so often seen generation after generation, even to the fourth generation. Thus, the warning attached to this commandment.

With a great promise! That,

B. God is a faithful and merciful God.

Notice the great contrast. The warning is given clearly, as we've seen. But the promise of mercy goes well beyond the threat of judgment. Both are real, but recognize how much greater is his promise of mercy. He will visit “the iniquity of the fathers upon 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.” And that would be thousands of generations!

Calvin writes, “the Lord, as it were by the way, commends the riches of his mercy by extending it to thousands, while he limits his vengeance to four generations.”

The idea is this, then. You should worship God in the manner he prescribes because he is a faithful and merciful God. And that promise just keeps on going and going, to all generations. The reference to a thousand generations is obviously not intending to limit that mercy to only one thousand, but that number represents the fullness of all the generations until Jesus returns.

So, beloved, worship the Lord in a manner acceptable to him, for the great promise of his covenant is that he will be your God and the God of your children. He will be merciful to you, and to you who love him and keep his commandments, you can claim that promise as you anticipate the heritage of your own descendants.

And so give God no cause to be jealous. Just as a good and faithful wife will never give her husband reason to doubt or question her, so too we before our heavenly father. And as you consider the threats of his warnings, consider all the more the superabundance of his covenant faithfulness.

Please don't chafe under this commandment. Don't rebel against it, thinking that in your own human wisdom you can come up with more meaningful elements of worship than God has already prescribed. Don't imagine God or picture God with any physical or visual impressions, but worship him as he is revealed in all his glory through the written word, knowing and loving him as he makes himself known.

And people of God, in the awareness of your own sins with regard to this commandment, confess those sins to a God whose mercy extends from generation to generation.

Ps. 103:8 “The Lord is merciful and gracious, Slow to anger, and abounding in mercy. 9 He will not always strive with us, Nor will He keep His anger forever. 10 He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor punished us according to our iniquities 11 For as the heavens are high above the earth, So great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; 12 As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us.”