

Exodus 20:1-6 2-25-18

Images and the Spirit Who is God

We continue our look at the 10 commandments of our God as recorded in Exodus chapter 20. **1-6** (ESV) *And God spoke all these words, saying, 2 “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. 3 “You shall have no other gods before me. 4 “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. 5 You shall not bow down to them or 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 the fourth generation of those who hate me, 6 but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.”*

Several years ago a friend recommended to me a movie entitled, *The Gods Must Be Crazy*. Have you seen it? It is definitely not your normal movie-going fare. The story begins out in the desert with a tribe of primitive African nomads who are living peacefully until one day an airplane flies over and drops an empty coke bottle into the desert sand. Well, these natives were greatly intrigued by this bottle. They had never seen or felt anything like it. And since it came down from the sky they assumed it must be a special gift from the gods. But they didn't know what to make of it or what to do with it. Thinking it had some kind of magical powers the bottle became the focus of fighting within the tribe. Everybody wanted the bottle, and in the midst of the fighting someone threw the bottle and wounded a child. In short, this peaceful tribe was turned upside down by the presence of the bottle among them. So, the tribal leader decided this thing was bad luck and the rest of the movie is about his walk to the edge of the world to throw it off the planet. A terrific plot don't you think?

Well, what was the basic problem of those primitive nomads? They didn't understand what the bottle was for did they? Had somebody explained it was designed to hold your cold drinks they would have been okay, but since they misunderstood its purpose and design, this relatively good thing became a major source of trouble. The same can be said of the moral law of God. The Ten Commandments came down to man from heaven, written by the finger of God on two tablets. The law was and is a wonderful gift but many people over the centuries have misunderstood its purpose and gotten into lots of trouble handling God's gift. Please understand that God never gave us His law as a means of salvation, as a way to gain eternal life. That is not now and never was His intention. Romans 3:**20a** (NLT) *No one can ever be made right with God by doing what the law*

commands. I hope you know that. I hope you understand that you will never earn God's favor through your obedience. That understanding will save you a lot of heartache. But I also desire for you to understand what is the purpose of God's law so that you can say with the psalmist 119:46 I shall delight in Your commandments, which I love.

Traditional reformed theology has taught that there are three primary purposes of the moral law of God which is expressed in the Ten Commandments. Here they are: Purpose #1 is to restrain evil. To restrain evil. The idea here is that although the law cannot change anyone's heart its directives and threatenings do have the effect of keeping evil from being totally unrestrained. This is the thought behind I Timothy 1:8-9 *We know that the Law is good, if one uses it lawfully, 9 realizing the fact that law is not made for a righteous person, but for those who are lawless and rebellious, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane.* Greg Bahnsen writes that *the law of God will tend to repress the rampage of sin in a person's life and in society. It halts the sinner with the authoritative demand of God, even if only for a while. So, the law has a certain preservative effect, even if it is not a sanctifying one.* I think a brief glance at our national history proves the point. It is statistically doubtful that we had more genuine Christians in our nation sixty years ago than we have now. But it is the belief of many that we had a more ethical and moral society. To what do we attribute that? Some of us attribute it to the restraining influence of God's law. Sixty years ago the Ten Commandments were taught in our public schools. The law of God was generally considered the basis for all moral judgments. It never converted anybody but it kept a lot of people from committing adultery and killing and stealing and telling lies. Human society was kept from utter corruption by the influence of heaven's law upon both saint and sinner. This is why theologians write about the political use of God's law. Calvin says (Bahnsen 272) *The law restrains malefactors and those who are not yet believers. The law is protection of the community from the unjust man. The second function of the law is this: at least by fear of punishment to restrain certain men who are untouched by any care for what is just and right unless compelled by hearing the dire threats of the law. But, they are restrained, not because their inner mind is stirred or affected but because, being bridled, they keep their hands from outward activity, and hold inside the depravity that otherwise they would wantonly have indulged.* The proclamation of God's law as authoritative and forever binding has been and still is to some extent a reinforcement of a man's natural, God-given conscience. Human beings are able to defeat the arguments of conscience but when they are confronted with God's law it becomes that much harder to do it. This is why, for so long, and still

today on some occasions, we ask people to take oaths by doing what? Huh? What were witnesses at a trial expected to do? Place their left hand on the Holy Bible, raise their right and swear before God they were telling the truth. Now, did that always prevent lying? Not at all, but it did often make telling a lie harder than it would have been. You see the point? Do you need that for your life? Do you need the commandments of God showing you how to live and what will happen if you don't? Some of you are thinking, *Not me, I'm Spirit-filled*. Well, you must be a lot more Spirit-filled than I am. I am so unsanctified that I seem to need every incentive I can get to obey God. Maybe you can relate to me? Some of you? I'm convinced that as long as the corruption in my heart is not eradicated I need law to restrain it from destroying me. This function of the law, whereby it restrains men from evil, applies to the saved as well as the lost. Psalm 119:**11** *Your word I have treasured in my heart, that I may not sin against You.* That it might restrain me from sin.

On to #2 - We have two more purposes of the law. #2 is that it exposes and convicts of sin. Lots of Scripture on this. Romans 3:**20** (ESV) *By works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.* **20b** *Through the law comes knowledge of sin.* In other words, the law shows me I'm a sinner, reveals my faults. Romans 7:**7** says, *I would not have come to know sin except through the Law.* James 1 compares reading God's law to looking in a mirror. You may have your collar up or your zipper down, or a knot in your hair and not know it until you look into the mirror. Like the law of God it exposes our sin. You see what you really are and you say, "Oh no, I need a Savior!" Galatians 3:**24** *The Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith.* That Greek word translated *tutor* denotes someone who is placed over a child as a caretaker, not only to teach a little something but to keep the child out of trouble until maturity. That is what the moral law does for us. It protects us and then leads us to Christ, showing us our need and pointing to Him as the answer. We hear people say all the time, "Jesus is the answer." But if Jesus is the answer, what is the question? The question is about forgiveness. The question pertains to sin and it is thru the law that we learn of sin. This is my experience. I grew up in the church, was always taught about Jesus dying for me on the cross, but it was all just interesting data until I saw my sin for what it is. And here is how it happened. I sat in a special Sunday School class in which a visiting speaker was talking about honoring our parents. That is commandment #5 by the way. I was apparently paying attention to the preacher. Hey, kids, you can learn something, you might even get saved, if you pay attention to the preacher! And, as I listened, God convicted me of my disobedience, showed me the ugliness of my sin, and, for the

first time, I really understood the significance of what Jesus had done for me. You see, the law is the frame or backdrop which brings out the beauty of the gospel. When the great evangelist Charles Finney would go into a city, I am told he would preach with power for three solid weeks on the law of God before he ever got to the message of grace. But when he finally called people to the cross they were ready to come and lay hold of the promise of God because they had seen their desperate need. The second purpose of the law is to expose and convict of sin.

Purpose #3 of the law is to guide the believer. The law of God is our moral compass. Psalm 119:**105** *Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.* Proverbs 6:**23ab** *For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching is light.* God's commandments show us the way to go, give direction to our choices, and dictate our values. And just as we need the restraining benefits of the law and the exposing benefits of the law we also very much need the guidance of God's law because even if you want to do what is right you cannot be sure what that is without a word from God. Now, hey, here is where a lot of Christians think some foolish things, in part, because they are poorly taught. Somebody hears that God has sent His Holy Spirit to believers to live within them and to lead them and that's true. But then, with or without the dubious help of some Christian teacher, this person determines that since the Spirit of God lives in me, the law of God must no longer be needed. I had a conversation years ago, in a swimming pool, with a Christian man who had heard me preach on radio about the importance of knowing the Bible and he said to me, "I guess you must be one of those fundamentalist who believe in the dead letter rather than the living Spirit." The dead letter rather than the living Spirit. You see his perspective? As he saw it, we don't need the Bible to guide us anymore, we just follow the lead of the Holy Spirit. And that sounds good and spiritual and all that but what this means to some people is that I do whatever I feel like doing. And they justify any behavior by saying, "God led me to..." Or "God was telling me to...." Or, "I prayed about it and felt a peace..." Dear ones, Jeremiah 17:**9** *The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?* As long as sin abides within us we need more than feelings to guide us. There is coming a day, hallelujah, there is coming a day when what you want to do and what you ought to do will be one and the same thing, but until that time laws are useful to make the way clear and to keep us from fooling ourselves. Feelings are not an adequate moral guide. Even Spirit-led believers are prone to self-deceit. By the way, who wrote this book? Who gave the commandments of God? Holy men who were moved by the Holy Spirit. If you want to be led by the Spirit then follow the commandments He authored.

One other thought before we go on - if you want to love God - you do the same thing. The law of God shows us how to love God. It teaches us how to respond to His grace. When God gave the commandments He had already redeemed the people from Egypt. He had already chosen them for Himself and saved them by many miraculous deeds. After these things He says, "Now here is how you live in relation to Me." In the commandments our God is telling us how to love Him. Love is a wonderful thing, a powerful thing, a terrific motivation, but love needs a guide doesn't it? I mean, I loved my wife the day that I married her, but I didn't know very well back then how to express that love. I know a lot better now - how to love her. You learn thru communication and talk and trial and error. Without love in your hearts you are sunk as a couple but love is not enough. I've done a lot of loving stupid things in my life. Haven't you? Some people think the golden rule is enough. Just do unto others as you would have them do unto you. But if I did that with Beth you know what she would get for her birthday? A gift card to KFC and some new gym shorts. People are different and you don't love women like you love men, you don't love one child the same as the other. There is a little verse in Ephesians 5 I think speaks volumes. Look at it **9-10** *The fruit of the Light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth, 10 trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. 10 Trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord.* I want my wife to teach me how to love her. I want to know what I can do to please her. And the same is to be true with God. Love needs to be told what to do and that is what God does thru His law. I John 5:**2-3** *By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe His commandments. 3 For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments.* And Jesus Himself expressed it as plainly as it can be put John 14:**15** *If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.* They are the believer's guide to a life that is right, to a life that is abundant, and to a life that pleases the Lord.

So, we are done with the introduction. Let's look now at the second of God's Big Ten. Exodus 20:**4** *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.* The first commandment forbids us having any other gods in our lives, the second commandment forbids us worshipping the true God in the wrong way. God is telling us how to worship Him and He makes plain here that He doesn't want us using idols or images to do so. Now this was extremely common in the days of Moses. The idea of an invisible god wasn't very appealing so people made visible, tangible deities to honor. They even made images intended to represent Yhwh Himself. The rationale of idolatry is quite logical really. The purpose of the idols is to convey abstract concepts

to the simple mind. The god depicted with many hands symbolizes thereby the omnipotence of the supreme being, and the many-eyed god sets forth omniscience and so on. That makes sense, but it's totally wrong and forbidden by God. An example of this going on is found in Exodus 32 and the story of Aaron and the golden calf. You remember that Moses was on vacation at his mountain hideaway and the people came up with this neat idea on how to improve their worship. They would make an image of gold. Ooooh, that would be neat to worship huh? So they brought their Egyptian gold to Aaron Exodus 32:**4** *He took this from their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool and made it into a molten calf; and they said, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt."* Who was this image representing? Not Baal, not Asherah or Molech. This was to represent the God of Israel. **5** *Now when Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the Lord."* That last word is YHWH. You see, they were not trying here to worship a false god. Their failure came in worshipping the true god in the wrong way. True God, wrong way.

What then is behind this prohibition against images? Two concerns I think. First is that the use of images dishonors God. No matter what you may choose to represent the Almighty Lord and His attributes, does that image do justice to Him? No way. So great is our God that any man-made image can only obscure His glory. The great puritan, Thomas Watson wrote, "What greater disparagement to the infinite God than to represent Him by what is finite; the living God by that which is without life; and the Maker of all by a thing that is made." Amen. The second concern is that images will serve to mislead men. They will distort our concept of who the true God is and will eventually go from being a tool to worship God to a replacement of God. One brother told me of how he brought his parents to a worship service here and the comment was made, "how can you worship without a crucifix?" Think about that. The remark is very revealing. How can you worship without a crucifix? That crucifix, that image of Jesus on the cross, had taken a place in this person's mind that should only be occupied by God Himself. It had gone from being an aid to worship to being an essential of worship. They were misled by the image.

Now, what is the argument against what I've said? What is the reason people give for their beads and their crucifixes and their devotion to saints and statues and buildings etc.? The line I hear is that these things make my worship more meaningful. They say this as if being meaningful is a sufficient justification. And when you boil it down that is an appeal to what? Your feelings. It feels good to me so it must be okay. We must get away from valuing worship simply by how it makes us

feel. The central issue is not whether you are satisfied in your worship but whether God is glorified. And He is only glorified by worship done His way. And God has told us what that way is. The Westminster Confession of Faith puts it well, "The acceptable way of worshipping the true God is limited by His own revealed will that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures." The second commandment reminds us that we must worship God's way. We don't sit back and imagine what God would like. We read what He has instructed us to do in His praise. Any worship or service offered to God is unacceptable if it violates His revealed will, no matter how fervently or beautifully it is offered. Some years back in New York somebody tampered with the walk/don't walk lights in the city. They replaced them with lights that said, "Repent." Can you imagine some guy coming out of an adult book store, he's crossing the street and this neon sign directs him to repent? Now, I'm told that fixing the lights like that would be very difficult. Whoever did it had great and admirable zeal. I find what he did clever and funny. His method may even be effective but I would suggest that it is not God's way of doing evangelism. And we have to serve God the way He wants, not how we want. Zeal doesn't make up for a failure to follow instructions. I expect you've heard a speaker use this story before. I've used it myself. A man walked up to a construction site and asked three bricklayers what they were doing. The first guy said under his breath, "I am making nine bucks an hour laying brick." The second guy said with a bit more enthusiasm, "I am expertly laying bricks." But the third guy who was really excited and into his work said, "I am building a great cathedral." You see the different perspectives and do you know what happened to the third guy who thought he was building a great cathedral? He got fired because he was supposed to be building a gas station. Zeal doesn't make up for not following directions. Jesus says, "God is a Spirit and those who worship Him must worship in Spirit and in truth." For us, that means with heart, with passion as well as intelligence and order.

Well, let's press on to apply the second commandment. First of all, let's avoid worship that violates the second commandment. The use of and devotion to icons, and crucifixes, statues and even Mary and the saints. God says you are not to make images of anything on earth or in heaven, for the purpose of worship. During the reformation there were many occasions in which people would be convicted of this and they would hold icon burnings after they had torn down these idolatrous displays that adorned the churches. But, how far are we to take this? Does the second commandment prohibit us from having pictures and statues of Jesus? Some have said an emphatic,

“yes” to that question. Others have said, “no.” Here’s a distinction that may help. That is the distinction between what is designed for teaching and what is designed for worship, what is for education and what is for inspiration. A picture of Jesus on a child’s Sunday School paper is there as an educational tool and need not, in my estimation be opposed. I think we do well to be careful even here. I think there is some danger and I don’t usually like the pictures of Jesus I see but I do not oppose them on principle when used as a teaching tool. The problem is when they are designed to enhance our worship. My wife was a bridesmaid in a wedding years ago in a church that had behind the pulpit a huge statue of Jesus in one of these poses. When she was coming down the aisle in the rehearsal the pastor said to her, “When you come down the aisle, honey, you just smile and look into the eyes of Jesus.” Ohhh! That I believe, violates the second commandment. Our God is not to be represented or worshipped under any visible form.

As Presbyterians our tradition has done fairly well at keeping the second commandment. At least the letter of it. We have steered clear of improper images. But I would close with a challenge to us. Some people say that images help them worship, that pictures and statues and so on stimulate them to praise. We can rightfully disagree with them. But can we also show them a better way? Can we show them what it means to worship the living God in Spirit and in truth? How rich that can be? What is it that stimulates our worship? If it’s not pictures and icons what is it? It is the truth as that truth encounters a Spirit-filled heart. And Brothers and Sisters, we have lots of truth to stir our hearts, but are you possessed by the Spirit of worship? John Piper writes, *The fuel of worship is the truth of god, the furnace of worship is the spirit of man, and the heat of worship is the vital affections of reverence, contrition, trust, gratitude and joy. But there is something missing from this picture. There is furnace, fuel and heat, but no fire. The fuel of truth in the furnace of our spirit does not automatically produce the heat of worship. There must be ignition and fire. This is the Holy Spirit. When you are filled with the Holy Spirit then you are ready to show that you can worship God His way and do it with fervency and joy, in truth and in spirit to the glory of the Father and His blessed Son.*