

Sunday, June 19, 2022 | Ten

Exodus 20:4-6 | "Our God and No Idol"

A couple weeks ago, we kicked off a new 11-week series called "Ten," in which we'll be exploring the first set of commandments given to the Jews in Exodus and how they can still help guide the Christian today. Using parallel passages, we'll discover that the principles God tried to instill in Israel in the Old Testament find fulfillment through Jesus in the New Testament. And how, while the believer is no longer bound to the Law for salvation (i.e., justification), we can still use it to become more like Christ (i.e., sanctification).

In the first week, we studied what Christ had to say about all the commandments rather than dive headlong into the ten commandments. In Matthew 22, we learned that Jesus summed up the duty of man into two sentences: love God with everything and love others as yourself. On these two things, Jesus says, hang all the law and the prophets. Those two commands give context to everything else in the Bible and life. So much so that **a love for God and neighbor brings certainty in a world of uncertainty.** We can still make good decisions in uncertain situations even with no explicit command. The Scriptures can still speak into a 22nd context because its' principles are sufficiently broad enough to encompass all human experience. It is hard to go wrong when you are consumed with love for God and others.

Last week, finally got to the titular Decalogue by exploring the first commandment. The Ten Commandments were not created by a committee. They were, quite literally, given to us by the voice of God. They are not the sloppy byproduct of some internet poll but are timeless concepts forged within a divine mind. Therefore, since these ideas come from outside human reasoning, the Decalogue (i.e., the "Ten Words") and all other truths within Scripture embody objective truth. Who better to teach us how we ought to live than a being whose judgment is not clouded by shifting opinions, influenced by fluctuating emotions, or pressured by changing circumstances? And the first word upon which all the other divine words stand is this: Have no other gods but God. **And if there is no god but Yahweh, then we should have no other god but God.** Why would we give anything or anyone who is not a god that sort of devotion that only God deserves? What a waste of worship that would be. And is not Jesus worthy of all of our worship?

EXAMPLE: Granddad's Bible, Prison Badge, Picture

Today, we'll unpack the second prohibition in the Decalogue: *do not make idols*. And while it may seem like the first two commands are saying the same thing, they're not. The difference,

as we'll see, lies in the verbiage. The first command prohibits the *having* of other gods, whereas the second prohibits the *making* of anything that's supposed to represent God (i.e., idols, icons, images, etc.). It's a subtle distinction, to be sure, but it's no less important.

There are so-called "gods" in this world who will try to exert their will over our lives. The first commandment prohibits anyone from allowing themselves to be influenced by beings or things that are not Yahweh. Then, there are so-called "worship practices" in this world that are wrong. They often make use of things we might call "idols." If we use something we've made, we'll end up perverting our idea of who God is and who we are in him. Commandment two shows that Yahweh should not be expressed in any manmade thing because he is the one who makes, not the one who is made. However much we may try, the creature cannot create a perfect representation of its Creator. Moreover, this command also reminds us that our Creator has already created images that bear his likeness: *us* (cf. Gen. 1:26; Eph. 2:10).

READ: Exodus 20:4-6 (ESV)

⁴You 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.
⁵You 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.

The second commandment is comprised of **three** things:

i. A prohibition.

READ: Exodus 20:4 (ESV)

⁴You 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.

Imagine you've just left Egypt, where you and your ancestors have been slaves for centuries. During those long years, you were influenced by a monotheistic religion that expressed their worship through the use of items called "idols." These would often be carved from wood, but using stone and metal wasn't uncommon. These idols would be made in the likenesses of some sort of deity who often resembled something in nature (i.e., bull, bird, serpent, etc.). What might you be prone to think about the God who just delivered you? You'd likely translate the worship of your former masters to your new religion. You, too, would start making totems that

were supposed to represent your new God, Yahweh. And in fact, this is precisely what happens to the Israelites.

READ: Exodus 32:1-8 (ESV)

¹When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, "Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him."

⁵When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD." ⁶And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.

⁷And the Lord said to Moses, "Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. ⁸They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'"

The Israelites grew anxious when Moses seemed to tarry on the mountain with God. And, so, what did they do? They sought to make themselves a golden trinket that would help alleviate their fear. They ***did not*** make a new god in the form of a calf. Instead, they sought to make Yahweh into the image of a bull. But in trying to make God into a bull, they, ironies of ironies, made a false god and thus transgressed the first commandment. Furthermore, in thinking they were worshipping God by bowing down before the golden calf, they also transgressed the second commandment.

What height of stupidity this was to think that one could disobey God's commandments and still think they were worshipping God. Yet, in our culture today, we have many honest and well-intentioned folk who think they're worshipping God but are, in fact, worshipping a golden calf, a false representation of God, and an idol. All gods leave their mark. We are image-bearers of the things or beings we choose to worship. If stuff is our god, we will be covetous. If food is our god, we will be glutinous. If sex is our god, we will be adulterous. Likewise, if God is our God, we will be righteous.

And if your god is anything or anyone but the one true God, rest assured there are consequences.

ii. A punishment.

READ: Exodus 20:5 (ESV)

⁵You 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

Let me be clear: God will **not** punish an innocent child for a parent's or grandparent's mistakes (cf. Deut. 24:16; 2 Ki. 14:6; Jer. 31:29-30; Ezk. 18:1-4, 20). The "visiting the iniquity" is on the generations that "hate" God. However, idolatry has both communal and generational effects; what we do impacts more than just ourselves. Our decisions affect those around us as well as those who come after us. The people who look to us will perpetuate the sort of worship they see in us. Spiritual fidelity and infidelity are contagious. We see examples of this principle every day. Our bad habits have a way of being passed on to our children.

One clear example of this is substance abuse. According to one study, "children of alcoholics are **four times** more likely than other children to become alcoholics themselves. Most children of alcoholics have also experienced some form of neglect or abuse in the home."¹ This brings new meaning to the old adage, "Hurt people hurt people." Abusers, whether their form of abuse is substantive, physical, or emotional, have likely been abused themselves. Of course, this does not justify their behavior. Bad circumstances do not excuse us from making good decisions. Everyone is responsible for their own actions. But it does help us to better understand the impact our bad decisions have on those around us.

This lesson is appropriate because it is not only Father's Day weekend but Juneteenth. About Father's Day, **hate for the Lord** is as easily translated to those who look up to us as is a **love for the Lord** (cf. Ex. 20:5-6). Dads, if our kids do not see a love for God in our lives, they will not come to love God.

About Juneteenth, **hate for those who don't have the same skin color** is as easily translated to those who look up to us as is **a love for those who don't have the same skin color as we do**. In 1619, the first 20 slaves arrived on the shores of Jamestown, VA.² Thus, until the Emancipation Proclamation was finally put into effect across all the states in the Union in 1865, chattel slavery—i.e., people as property—was a vibrant and shameful part of our history for 246 years.

¹ General Editor, "Alcohol Use in Families," May 2019, *The American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Children-Of-Alcoholics-017.aspx, [accessed June 19, 2022].

² Berry, Daina Ramey, "Slavery in America: back in the headlines," October 21, 2014, *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/slavery-in-america-back-in-the-headlines-33004>, [accessed June 19, 2022].

For generations, little boys and girls were taught that slavery was just a part of the American way. It took a civil war nearly breaking our country to make right that wrong. How many lives could've been saved had parents raised their children to love everyone made in God's image regardless of how he colored their skin? How much better would our country be today if parents in the 17th century loved their neighbors as themselves.

To some degree, hate for God and others is something we're born with. We all have a sinful nature. Hate comes as naturally to us as breathing. We do not come into this world loving everyone and everything. Anyone with a young child knows this intuitively. But this is not to say that hate for God and others cannot be unlearned. Good parenting teaches our kids to hate the wrong things and to love the right things. It teaches them a love for God and others while simultaneously teaching them a hate for sin and its impact on the world (i.e., racism, slavery, etc.).

Godly parents do this not only because it is right to do but because, as our final point will show, the godly parents know that if they raise their children the right way, God will bless them.

iii. A promise.

READ: Exodus 20:5a-6 (ESV)

⁵You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God...⁶showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments

Just as bad habits incur God's cursing, good habits incur God's blessing. This final aspect of the third commandment harkens back to what I said last week:

"the "commandments" aren't so much a set of rules as they are a collection of principles or what we might call *words* of wisdom. Even the term translated as "commandment" or "law" in your bibles is best thought of as "teaching" in the context of how a parent might instruct a child.³ Good parents do not make rules to restrict their child's fun; they make rules to preserve and improve a child's life (i.e., "look both ways before crossing the street," "stranger danger," "be kind," etc.). Thus, right up front, I want you to be careful not to think of these principles as only being a set of rules. They are that, but they are also so much more. They are teachings that help guide us on how to live. They do not restrict. They liberate."

³ Motyer, J.A., *The Message of Exodus*, The Bible Speaks Today Series, (Downers Grove, ILL; InterVarsity Press, 2005), p. 213.

A negative command is the best kind of command because it only restricts us from doing one thing (cf. Gen. 2:15-17). Admittedly, due to our sinful nature, this often makes that one thing even more attractive. But the principle remains that a negative command is far easier to uphold than a positive command (i.e., “don’t hit someone,” vs. “do good”). God restricts one straightforward action with the second commandment: do not make idols. You can do a hundred other things. But this one thing you cannot do. And if you obey this very simple commandant, God promises to bless you and all the generations following in your footsteps.

There is, quite literally, no better insurance policy, investment, or inheritance that we could leave the next generation than to “love God and keep his commandments.” Some day, we'll all be dead and gone. Who's going to take care of our kids and grandkids and great-grandkids? If you've not instilled a Christian faith into them, they'll be left to go at life all alone. But if you impart to them a deep love for God and passionate devotion to his word, our descendants will not be left to fend for themselves; they will have God on their side.

So, what’s the takeaway?

Idolatry not only **downgrades** who God is, but it also **diminishes** who men and women were made to be.

READ: Genesis 1:26-27 (ESV)

²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God, he created him; male and female he created them.

So, what’s the takeaway?

Idolatry not only **downgrades** who God is, but it also **diminishes** who men and women were made to be.

Remember what I said earlier? "All gods leave their mark. We are image-bearers of the things or beings we choose to worship. " Well, what sort of marks do you bear? These marks have a way of showing themselves in some unique ways. To explain, let me give you three examples.

Suppose a church sees that the pastor puts a premium on a performance-based religion as opposed to principle-based religion. In that case, they, too, will put a premium on a rules-based faith rather than what it is, a relationship-based faith.

Or, consider an all-too-familiar scenario where a child sees that their parents make choices based on a desire for the "good life" instead of the godly life. Should this sort of lifestyle go unchecked, a child will dictate their steps by whatever they think the "good life" is to the exclusion of God because that is what was modeled for them.

Or, what do we think will result if some admirer sees that their mentor cares little for self-sacrifices and, instead, wants to succeed by any means possible? Unless there's an intervention, that protege will pursue success at all costs, no matter who they have to hurt to achieve their goal. After all, that is what was modeled for them, and that, in turn, is what they will model for others.

In each of those examples, an individual has made a good thing into a bad thing by making it the main thing. At its most fundamental level, this is what we call "idolatry." An idol is anything and everything we turn to other than God, which we look to for it to give us meaning or direction. This is why the second commandment is so important (cf. Ex. 20:4-6). We are not to find our purpose or guidance in any created thing, imagined or otherwise. Our Creator imbues existence with significance, and, as such, he is the only one who can instruct us how to live. He is the grand architect, and we are but residents in his incredible creation.

It always goes badly for us when we take God and try to turn him into a thing. Things cannot reason, and so they are unqualified to teach us how we ought to think. Things cannot communicate, and so they are incapable of showing us how we ought to talk. Things are not alive, so they cannot explain how we ought to live. And even if we're talking about something that can reason, communicate, and is alive, the principle remains. These thinking-talking-living things are still finite. God is an infinite being of immeasurable experience who knows all things, communicates uniquely, and is the source of all life. Reducing God to anything less than who and what he is reduces everything else in turn. The value of a thing is derived from the creator of that thing. If He is nothing more than a creation, then he is no better than his creation.

Our God is a living spirit (cf. Jn. 4:24) who cannot be confined to any one physical thing. But this does not mean he cannot be known. He can and has made himself known through his Word. This is why idolatry is so backward; it mistakes the echo for the voice (cf. Deut. 4:12, 15-19; John 1:1). And it is for this reason that we have the Scriptures. The Bible helps us make sense of the world we see. We do not **look** to things to determine how we ought to live; instead, we **listen** to God. We read the words of a supreme Being who stands outside the confines of reality. For He alone can show us how to live the only objectively good life there is to live.

To worship anything other than God is to live the poorest kind of life there is to live. But to worship God as he never intended, would make for an even poorer life. When one worships a false god, the sin is evident. But when one tries to worship the true God in an incorrect way? What a hopeless state that would be.

Video Description

Ten | Week 3 | “Our God and No Idol”

TEXT: Exodus 20:4-6

Today, we'll unpack the second prohibition in the Decalogue: do not make idols. And while it may seem like the first two commands are saying the same thing, they're not. The difference lies in the verbiage. The first command prohibits the “having” of other gods, whereas the second prohibits the “making” of anything that's supposed to represent God (i.e., idols, icons, images, etc.). It's a subtle distinction, to be sure, but it's no less important. Commandment two shows that Yahweh should not be expressed in any manmade thing because he alone is the one who makes, not the one who is made. However much we may try, the creature cannot create a perfect representation of its Creator. Moreover, this command also reminds us that our Creator has already created images that bear his likeness: us (cf. Gen. 1:26; Eph. 2:10).

To worship anything other than God is to live the poorest kind of life there is to live. But to worship God as he never intended, would make for an even poorer life. When one worships a false god, the sin is obvious. But when one tries to worship the true God in an incorrect way? What a hopeless state that would be because idolatry not only **downgrades** who God is, but it also **diminishes** who men and women were made to be.

Pastor's manuscript can be found here: