



The Right God, The Wrong Way

SERIES: *The Good Life: Finding Freedom in the Ten Commandments*

Last Sunday we began a series on the Ten Commandments. We saw that these weren't given as a requirement for salvation, but rather as a response to salvation. That's why the Ten Commandments begin with these words, **"I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt..."** God says, "Before you try to keep these laws, you need to know that I've delivered you. I've made you my people. I'm not giving you this law so you can earn that privilege, but rather so you know how to live in light of that privilege." This is even more relevant for us today. Jesus came to bring us out of our own Egypt; to save us from our own slavery to sin. We don't earn that, we just receive it by faith.

But here's the thing—you can't separate the privilege from the response. You can't have "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt" without the commandments that come after. The two go together. So, having been saved by grace, we don't ignore God's law, rather we gladly embrace it because we want to please the One who rescued us. Grace, to really be grace, will always be followed by good works. A lot of people want the privilege without the response; they want salvation without works; what Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace." But the grace of God in salvation will always be joined with a response of obedience to his word.

Last week we looked carefully at the first commandment: **"You shall have no other gods before me."** This week we're moving on to the second commandment: **"You shall not make for yourselves an idol."** These two sound almost the same. And in some traditions, these two commands are actually made into one command against idolatry. But I think they should be kept separate. Yes, both of these commands have to do with idolatry. Both of them tell us to keep our relationship with God pure. But they're dealing with two entirely different problems.

I. What is the meaning of the second commandment?

The first commandment tells us not to worship false gods. But the second is different. The second commandment isn't concerned with false gods; rather it's concerned with worshipping the true God falsely. **"Don't make for yourselves an idol."** The first command is about WHO we

worship; the second is about HOW we worship. The first command is about worshipping the right God; the second is about worshipping the right God the wrong way.

Maybe an illustration will help. I heard a story about a 24-year-old guy named Dave Davila, who took a job in Chicago and had to leave his close-knit family. But his mother missed him so much she took a digital photo of him and had it blown up to his actual height and mounted on heavy cardboard. So there's Dave, standing casually, hands in pockets, a blue button-down shirt hanging untucked over his khaki shorts. They all call him Flat Dave. At first, Flat Dave just stood quietly by at family gatherings. Then word spread throughout the town, and he became a celebrity. Complete strangers wanted to pose with him. His brother even said, "I think Flat Dave's actually better looking." Sometimes things get somewhat awkward for the real Dave, who they now call Thick Dave. He says, "I'm in Chicago talking to my mom on the phone, and she says, 'Hold on, I've got to load you into the van.' It's a little weird."

Now what's the problem there? The problem isn't that they've replaced Dave with another son. The problem is they're trying to stay close to Dave through an image of Dave. By the way, this is exactly what the Israelites did when they got impatient while Moses was up on Mt Sinai. They told Aaron to make them a god they could see and touch. And so Aaron melted down their jewelry and made a golden calf. But listen to what he said, **"This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt."** What's he saying? He's saying, "Same God as before, the God who led us out of Egypt. The only difference is we now have an image of him. We have something we can see and touch."

So what does this commandment mean? Simply put, it means we're not to use man-made representations of God for the purposes of worship. That's why the second commandment goes on to say, **"You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them."** The Israelites had been living with the Egyptians, who worshipped many gods, most of which they represented in the form of animals. The god Horus had the head of a falcon; the god Anubis had the form of a jackal. They bowed down to these

images. God says, "I don't want you to use any likeness of me in worshipping me."

This doesn't mean religious art is somehow wrong. One of my favorite books is, *My Name is Asher Lev*. It's about a boy who is a gifted artist, a prodigy, but he grows up as a Hasidic Jew. These Jews don't allow art of any kind in fear of breaking the second commandment. But that's not the point of the second commandment. God isn't opposed to art. When it was time to build the tabernacle, the Spirit of God inspired certain Israelites to **"to make artistic designs for work in gold, in silver, and in bronze, and in the cutting of stones for settings, and in the carving of wood, that he may work in all kinds of craftsmanship"** (Ex.31:4-5). That sounds like art to me. It's not wrong to create art. It doesn't even mean that symbols are wrong. The art in the tabernacle was all symbolic. We have a symbol right behind me in the cross. Jesus gave us a very powerful symbol in the bread and wine of communion. We don't worship those symbols, but we do use them in worship.

What's forbidden here is creating images of God that serve as objects or aids to worship. There is a fine line here. Symbols are one thing, but to somehow try to replicate the very image of God, whether it be in a painting or a statue, and then to use that as an aid to worship, is crossing the line. You go into the Sistine Chapel and you look up at Michaelangelo's depiction of God reaching out and touching Adam. It's a beautiful work of art. And it's as natural and good to appreciate that as we would a spectacular sunset. But there's a fine line. If somehow that likeness of God becomes a part of your worship of God, something is wrong.

Now deep down some of you might be thinking, "What's the big deal? Why did this make the top ten? What harm is there in using images if they help me get closer to God and worship him? What if I just use these things, whether it be a crucifix or a picture of Jesus, and they help me focus my thoughts as I pray? What could be so wrong with that? Let me give you a few reasons.

II. What are the reasons for the second commandment?

A. Man-made images of God inevitably distort the glory of God. John Calvin wrote, "A true image of God is not to be found in all the world; and hence...his glory is defiled, and his truth corrupted by the lie, whenever he is set before our eyes in a visible form...Therefore to devise any image of God is itself impious, because by this corruption his majesty is adulterated and he is figured to be other than he is."

Perhaps some examples would help. The Israelites believed there would be no harm in creating a likeness of God in the form of a golden calf or a bull. This was meant to be a symbol of Almighty God who brought them out of

Egypt. They were trying to honor God with what they thought was a fitting symbol of his great strength. But that symbol of his strength actually insulted God, because it fell short of depicting his true glory. What does that symbol say about his moral character, his goodness, his justice, and his patience?

Another example is closer to home for many of us. I'm talking about a crucifix. Many of us grew up with not just a cross but with the dead body of Jesus hanging on the cross. What could be wrong with that? But even that distorts his glory because it hides the fact that he was victorious over death and he's alive today. It depicts his love and vulnerability, but it conceals his strength and power.

You see, God is limitless in his power and his knowledge. You can't confine God spatially; he's everywhere at once. You can't confine him in time; he always has been and he always will be. No beginning and no end. How do you put all that into a statue or a painting or even a movie?

And if these images distort the glory of God they also mislead people. They pervert our thoughts of him. Michaelangelo was a great artist, but since when did God the Father have a long flowing gray beard and a pinkish tunic? Can you see how any image or likeness of God we create falls short, distorting the glory of God and misleading people as to what he's really like?

B. Man-made images of God rouse God's jealousy. Look again at v.9, **"You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God."** We talked about God's jealousy a few weeks ago in our series on Deuteronomy. This is a hard concept to understand because we think of jealousy in such negative terms. That's why we call it "the green eyed monster." But we all know that while some jealousy is indeed rooted in selfishness, there is an appropriate kind of jealousy that's rooted in passionate love. God's jealousy is not the insecure, insane or possessive human jealousy we all disdain, but rather it's the intensely caring devotion he has to the objects of his love. A God who isn't jealous over his people is as contemptible as a husband who doesn't care when his wife is unfaithful to him.

Now we might say, "But why is God jealous? Again, this is not about worshipping other gods. We're still worshipping the true God, but we're just using an image of God to help us." One of the things about God is that he's jealous for his name. Part of God's jealousy is a zeal to protect and maintain his own glory. So when we use an image of God in our worship we rouse his jealous passion because we're worshipping a distorted image of who he is. God cares as much about our worship of him being pure as he does about it being exclusive.

C. Man-made representations of God have

consequences for ourselves and those around us. The second commandment goes on to spell this out, **"...for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, and on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments."**

Notice this presents us with a contrast. It contrasts those who hate God and those who love God. Now this is a bit strange because since when did we ever talk about hating God? How did we get from worshipping images of the true God to hating the true God? Here's how: those who make images of the true God and use them in worship will end up not only with a distorted image of God but also a distorted image of what he wants from them. And that will get passed on to their children and grandchildren and great grandchildren. He's not saying he going to punish your family and your descendants for your sin; he's saying your choice to worship an image of him will infect your family with a disease which results in them hating him. It's like you set them off on a trajectory; at first you're not far off but the farther out you go the farther away from God you get. That sounds extreme but that's exactly what happens. We say, "Well, what harm is in it? I'm just trying to worship God. Who cares if I'm off a little bit in how I do that?" God says, "Yes, but worshipping the wrong image of who I am will lead you and especially the generations to come down a path that ends with them hating me." Let me tell you something: it is a solemn and dangerous thing to pass on to your children the wrong concept of God.

But there is another contrast here. Notice that while the disease of God-hatred continues to the third and fourth generation, on the flip side the lovingkindness of God extends out to a thousand generations towards those who love him and keep his commands! Isn't that wild? A thousand generations is a very, very long time; longer than recorded human history! It's kind of like he's saying God is far more interested in blessing people than in judging people. It's like the scales are tipped; God's character is weighted towards mercy. It reminds me of Psalm 30:5, **"His anger is but for a moment, His favor is for a lifetime."** What a great motive this is to keep the second commandment! We infect a thousand generations with a love and obedience towards God.

III. How can we apply this to our lives today?

Now you might be wondering how all of this might apply to us today. If you look around this church building, you won't find a lot of physical representations of God. If you went to another part of the world, that might be different, but we don't have this problem, right? But what

if we looked a little closer and deeper? Last week we talked about idols of the heart and how we worship other gods like family or money or sports. I wonder if we do something similar that relates more to the second commandment? How do we fall into the trap of worshipping the right God in the wrong way? I want to suggest that we can do that in several ways.

A. We worship the right God in the wrong way whenever we place seeing above hearing. One of the problems with physical images is that they can so easily distract us from listening to God's Word. Moses made a point of this in Dt. 4 when he reminds them that up on Mt. Sinai they didn't see God but they heard him. He said, **"Then the LORD spoke to you from the midst of the fire; you heard the sound of words, but you saw no form — only a voice"** (Dt.4:12). The way God revealed himself at Mt. Sinai wasn't through a visible image but through an audible word. This tells us something about how God wants to be worshipped. Instead of looking, he wants us listening. This is sometimes hard for us to swallow because we live in such a visual age. To accommodate that we bring big screens into the church and have banners and props and drama. Many of us are more visual learners and we feel these kinds of things communicate to us more powerfully than the spoken word. And I don't believe this is necessarily bad unless it somehow distracts us from hearing the word of God. And it can do that, so we need to be careful.

B. We worship the right God in the wrong way whenever we make an particular expression of worship more important than the essence of worship. The expression of worship has to do with style; the essence of worship has to do with God. We all have preferences in worship style, don't we? I hear about them from time to time. Someone comes up to me and says, "The music is too loud." Someone comes up to me the next minute and says, "The music is too mellow." The next Sunday someone comes up to me and says, "We need to sing more hymns." Someone else a minute later says, "We need to be more contemporary." The next week someone says, "We need more drama." The next minute someone says, "That drama was a bore." It goes on and on. And across the nation churches have been divided over this issue. Whenever our focus shifts from the person of God to the style of worship we're in danger of breaking the second commandment. Whenever we exalt a style to the place where we say, "I just can't worship unless it happens in this way or that way," then something is wrong. God is bigger than any worship style. Whatever our preference is, as long as it exalts the true God and focuses our attention and adoration on him, we should thank God for it.

C. We worship the right God in the wrong way whenever we imagine God to be someone we can manipulate.

One of the reasons people loved to make images of God was that it allowed them to manipulate God. They could take them with them. The thinking was, if I do this or that, then I'll be able to get the god to do what I want. We tend to do the same thing. We want a user-friendly god who will adapt to our desires and purposes. We think, "If I do this, he'll do that. If I pray a certain way, he'll give me what I ask for. If I have enough faith, he'll heal me or make me rich. If I follow God's priorities for parenting, my children will grow up and be good Christians. If I have my quiet time each morning, God will bless my day." It goes on and on. Whenever we try to manipulate God with actions we're breaking the second commandment because we're imagining him to be something he's not. God won't be captured, contained, assigned or managed by anyone or anything.

D. We worship the right God in the wrong way whenever we worship God for some of his attributes but leave out others. Some people want a God of love. So they focus on his love and compassion and mercy and leave out things like his holiness and his justice and the reality of both heaven and hell. Others want a big God who is holy and sovereign, way above and beyond any of us. So they focus on that and leave out the idea that God is also close to us; he's not just our ruler but he's also our Father. A few years back hundreds of women gathered in Minnesota because they were tired of worshipping a patriarchal construct of God. So they gathered to reimagine the true God in feminist terms. Don't get me wrong. They didn't go so far as to deny the person of Jesus Christ. They still saw themselves as Christians. But they wanted a more female friendly god so they gave God a new name—Sophia. That's the feminine name for Wisdom. They emphasized his feminine qualities. That's an extreme example of worshipping God for some of his attributes but leaving out others.

E. We worship the right God in the wrong way whenever we divorce our concept of God from the product it produces in our lives. When we worship God in the right way that impacts the way we live our lives. Worship brings us into an encounter with the living God and that encounter will change us if it's authentic. We live in a country where scores of people would claim to have a relationship with Jesus Christ but when asked about how that really impacts their lives and their decisions they are silent. You know what? That's wrong. If you or I think we can come in here and sing a few songs and pray a few prayers, feel some warm fuzzy feeling and maybe even get really convicted by the sermon, but then just go out and live the way we want to live, then we might think we're worshipping the right God but I'm not sure.

CONCLUSION

Do you know what's strange about all of this? Here's a mystery: the God who told us not to make an image of himself has in fact given us an image of himself. Do you know who that is? That's Jesus. In the book of Colossians Paul says Jesus is "**the image of the invisible God**" (Col. 1:15). The writer of Hebrews says Jesus is "**the exact representation of his nature**" (Heb.1:3). And Jesus himself said, "**He who has seen me has seen the Father**" (John 14:9). Now we don't know what Jesus looked like and we don't worship a physical image of Jesus. But in order to worship the right God in the right way we need to focus on the person of Jesus. And when we focus on the person of Jesus, we find ourselves becoming more and more like him. This brings us back right where we started. The privilege and the responsibility go hand in hand. You can't separate the two. When you worship the right God in the right way, your worship will be centered on the person of and work of Jesus and that will lead to a transformed life.

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