

# Graven Images: False Worship of God

## *2nd of the Ten Commandments*

The Ten Commandments are the essence of God's moral law. Each one of the Commandments is repeated and expanded in the New Testament. The Commandments are God's rules for life. They are basic standards of conduct. They spell out in a concise way what sin really is. The Ten Commandments were given that every mouth may be stopped and that all the world may become guilty before God (Romans 3:19). They help us see how sinful we are and show us the extent of our failure to obey God's laws. As we honestly look at these laws, we say, "I am guilty of this and I am guilty of that"—and seeing our guilt, we say, "I must do something about it"—and thus the Law becomes a schoolmaster to drive us to the Savior, Jesus Christ.

Many who claim to be Christian can't even **name** the Ten Commandments, much less attempt **to live by** them. The psychiatrist (Dr. Karl Menninger) wrote a book entitled "What Ever Became of Sin?" He says, "Where are the preachers who ascend Mount Sinai and confer with the Almighty and come back to us with the Tables of Stone under their arms?" Preaching against sin is not a popular task.

Some erroneously equate the Old Testament with **law** and the New Testament with **grace**. The truth is that the Old Testament (as well as the New Testament) is full of God's grace dealing with penitent people, and the New Testament (as well as the Old Testament) is full of God's moral law. When we read that "love is the fulfilling of the law" (Romans 13:10), we are not being told that love has displaced the Commandments, but that love provides a motive by which we can obey them. Now that Jesus Christ has died and given Himself for our sins—and loved us while we were yet sinners—we respond with a corresponding love to Him.

It is just as much a part of New Testament doctrine to preach obedience to God's moral law as it is to proclaim the death of Jesus Christ. When Paul tells children to obey their parents, he reinforces the instruction in the New Testament by quoting the Fifth Commandment (Ephesians 6:2). This is pretty good evidence that the Ten Commandments are intended to continue to be a regulator of Christian behavior.

The Second Commandment says "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or . . . in the earth beneath, or in the water under the earth; thou shalt not bow down thyself to them nor serve them." The Second Commandment is somewhat related to the First Commandment. Both deal with the sin of idolatry. The First Commandment forbids false gods; the Second Commandment forbids false worship of the one true God! The First Commandment says "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." There are false gods and we must not worship them. The Second Commandment says "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image." There are wrong ways to worship the true God and we must be alert to such erroneous forms of worship.

## 1. The Commandment Forbids the Misrepresentation of God

Man's worship of God can never be correct until he holds in his mind a right concept of God. Some think of God as being like **a grand old man** who did some wonderful things for Moses and the Children of Israel many years ago, but in our day of science and progress he is simply out-dated. Others think of God as being like **a little old lady** down the street. He is so nice and gentle and kind. He tries to calm you when you are afraid, and so forth. Still others think of God as **a man with a big stick**. Every time you want to have some fun, he is there with his stick to prod your conscience. There may be some truth in each of these descriptions of God, but none expresses all the truth. The God of the Bible has revealed himself as an all-powerful eternal Being who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and yet righteous and just in all His doings.

God is invisible. In His full essence, God has no material substance and no bodily form, and so God cannot be seen. God is a spirit (John 4:24) and a spirit does not have flesh and bones (Luke 24:39). The benediction in 1 Timothy speaks of God as "eternal, immortal, and **invisible**." In Colossians 1:15 we read about the image of the **invisible** God. These passages teach that God does not have a material or bodily nature. And since sight sees only objects of the material world, God cannot be seen with the material eye.

It is true that God revealed Himself to men for brief periods of time in various physical forms. He appeared to Moses in the burning bush, and to Job in the whirlwind—but no human being has seen God in His full essence (See John 1:18). God cannot be apprehended by the senses. 1 Corinthians 2 intimates that without the teaching of God's Spirit, we can never know God. God is not a material Being; God is an invisible Spirit.

What does all of the above have to do with the Second Commandment? The answer is that idolatry consists not merely of kneeling down before gods of wood and stone, but idolatry includes entertaining thoughts about God which are unworthy of Him. There are false **mental** images of God just as there are false **marble** images of God! The gods of the Egyptians and Babylonians in Bible times all had their visible forms. When a stranger came to Babylon and asked to see the god, the visitor could be taken to the temple and shown the image. But it was not so with the God of the Bible. Our God is the One who spoke to Abraham, and to Moses, and the One who brought all things into being—but like the wind which "bloweth where it listeth," our God cannot be seen.

What is God like? God is not like anything we can see. God is not like anything nor anybody. If we insist on trying to imagine God by comparing Him with a material object, we end up with an idol—an idol of the mind instead of an idol made with hands. For many people, God is a composite of all the religious pictures they have seen, and all the nicest people they have known, and all the noblest ideas they have ever entertained. But actually God's essential nature is incomprehensible. God can be known only as we look at the Scriptures—only as the Holy Spirit reveals His attributes to the seeking heart (1 Corinthians 2:11).

In 1 Kings 8:27, Solomon says, "Behold the . . . heavens cannot contain thee, how much less this house which I have built?" In Jeremiah 23:24, God says, "Can any hide himself in secret places that I shall not

see him? Do not I fill heaven and earth saith the Lord?" It is difficult for us to grasp the fact that the God of the Bible is not a being who lives in a body, but instead a spirit who fills heaven and earth. Yet so it is. God is a spirit. He exercises control everywhere and in every place.

## 2. The Commandment Condemns Corruption of Divine Worship

By "the corruption of worship" we refer especially to the use of images as aids to worship—idols, candles, crosses, statues of Jesus, images of Mary, etc. The Second Commandment is held by some to mean that it is wrong to take photographs of people and to paint pictures of landscapes, because it says that we are not to make "any likeness of anything that is in heaven above or that is in the earth beneath." But God forbids likenesses and images **only when** these are intended to be used as objects of religious veneration. The Second Commandment does not forbid **the ordinary use** of pictures and paintings and works of art. (We must read the entire passage that comprises the Second Commandment, and the latter part of the Commandment says, "Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them").

What the Second Commandment forbids is **the worship of** images. Our Lord is talking about objects of worship—religious images. If God had intended to prohibit pictures and engravings and other works of art, then He violated His own Commandment when He planned the Old Testament Tabernacle—for when God gave instructions telling how to build the Tabernacle (and this was only days after He gave the Ten Commandments)—He commanded builders of the Tabernacle to construct likenesses of animals and fruits and even angels (pomegranates and cherubim, etc.). God ordered that these items be made because each had a special significance, but never were these things lifted up as objects of worship.

God expects us to rejoice in the beauties of nature—the blue of the sky, the beauty of the sunset, the majesty of the hills, and the quiet of the countryside. These are not gods. They are merely works of God—and only if these things become objects of worship are they prohibited by the Second Commandment. The Second Commandment does not forbid the ordinary use of works of art. What it does condemn is any attempt to represent God by some likeness—and then to use that form as an aid to worship Him.

The Second Commandment strikes at a desire deeply rooted in the human heart, to bring in aids for the worship of God (beyond those symbols which God has appointed in the New Testament). God is invisible and intangible, and thus some think they must have crucifixes and statues and paintings in order to communicate with Him. But as we noticed earlier in this lesson, God is an invisible spirit, and He is not exactly like anything in the material world. We can only discern God by faith, as we see Him revealed within the pages of the Scriptures. God is eternal and self-existent. There is no end to His being and no limit to His power. And the moment a human being makes an image, he limits God and denies God's full essence. Natural man has a craving in his mind for something he can see and feel and touch. He wants to bring God down to his own crawling level. He has no idea of a religion of heart and of faith and of the spirit.

I have frequently mentioned to fellow Christians my dislike for pictures of deity. Most paintings of Christ are openly repulsive. To see the calmness, dignity, and sadness usually represented on His face, is to see

a fragmented Christ. What about those parts of the Bible which describe His eyes as a flame of fire, His legs of burnished brass, and His voice sounding like the thunder of dashing waves (Revelation 1:13-16)? The paintings that most of us have seen limit Christ to merely one aspect of His being. Thus the Bible student often has a distaste for paintings of the Godhead.

As the Apostle Paul stood on the huge rock in Athens (a place known as Mars Hill), he could see the Acropolis and the Parthenon (a temple dedicated to Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom). Everywhere, there were altars and temples and images—all around him. These were religious people, but they were trying to worship a God they had never known—and so they surrounded themselves with many representations of deity. Paul was moved to speak to these people. He said as recorded in Acts 17:29, “Forasmuch then, as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like gold or silver or stone, graven by art and man’s device.” In Acts 17:24, he had said to these same people — “God dwells not in temples made with hands”—and now he says that we ought not to think that God can be “graven by art and man’s device.” The use of pictures and paintings and engravings as aids to worship God, only corrupt our worship because they limit God.

### **3. The Commandment Requires That Worship be Kept Simple**

The latter part of the Second Commandment (as recorded in Exodus 20:5) says that God is a jealous God—and this implies that our worship is to be centered exclusively on Him. We must be careful about externals which are distracting.

Satan is going to do all he can to keep us from worshiping God aright. Proper worship must be spiritual in character. We must worship God in spirit and in truth. The phrase “in spirit” means that our worship must not be a mere outward formal thing. The phrase “in truth” means that there must be complete sincerity in our approach to God.

Some think that one must have an ornate service and beautiful aesthetic surroundings in order “to create an atmosphere for worship.” They enjoy the tone of a pipe organ, the works of art in a church building—with the false belief that they have been worshiping God—whereas they were merely being aesthetically stimulated. But remember that the true worship of God does not depend upon some high-powered entertainers, nor on the beautiful setting in which we may find ourselves, nor in the formality of the meeting. Rather, true worship of God depends upon the clarity with which the message of the Word of God goes forth. That is why preachers need to concentrate on the task of preaching the Word of God clearly.

The early Christians met together for worship in barns and in large rooms in the homes of fellow believers. The first church building was not erected until about 230 A.D., and the earliest meetinghouses were plain structures without pictures, images, and stained glass windows. It was only when the church became lukewarm and worldly in the days of Constantine that church buildings were embellished with works of art. I was impressed recently when visiting an older meetinghouse with the simplicity of the place—the level floor (no raised pulpit), the simple architecture, and the lack of pictures and ornaments. Think about this question: Do those who insist on elaborate ritual for worship, manifest more of the fruit of the Spirit, and more of the characteristics of Christ in their lives, than those whose form of worship is

more simple? Most know the answer. I have been in services already where they had all the form and ritual and ornate paintings and stained glass windows—and it was so cold it seemed like icicles were hanging from the lights.

Our worship services should always be kept simple. Preaching and teaching the Word should be central. Invocations and a lot of formality are really unnecessary. When ushers “put on the dog” and everybody marches down the aisle exactly in step, and everybody sings the doxology, and the organ plays while the preacher prays—these things are designed to stimulate the senses. And then too, many of these formalities take up time so that there is only a short period for the message. There is scarcely any time left for turning toward God—for hearing the stern preaching of God’s law, for hearing the denunciation of sin, for being challenged to faith and repentance.

The First Commandment says, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me.” There are false gods and we must not worship them. The Second Commandment says, “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.” There are wrong ways to worship the true God, and we must be alert to such erroneous forms of worship. One of those erroneous forms is to fail to recognize that our God is a jealous God and that our worship is to be centered exclusively on Him. We have the obligation to do away with those formalities that distract from the clarity of the message from God’s Word.

The Second Commandment makes it clear that Christianity is a religion of faith. It involves trusting someone you have never seen. Two little girls were counting over their pennies. One said, “I have five pennies.” The other said, “I have ten.” “No” (the first girl said), you just have five pennies—the same as I.” “But (the second child quickly replied), my dad said that when he comes home tonight that he would give me five cents—and so I have ten cents.” The little girl had complete faith in her father. She knew his promise could be counted upon. And just so, we can trust the words of Jesus. He says, “Verily I say unto you, he that believeth in me hath everlasting life” (John 6:47). If you are willing to trust in Jesus and rely upon Him and become submissive to Him—He will take your stained life and cleanse you and make you a new creature.

-Harold S. Martin

---

#### **BIBLE HELPS**

*Robert Lehigh, Editor*

PO Box 391

Hanover, PA 17331

United States of America