

The Ten Commandments: Posted on our Hearts and in our Homes

Why Idols Begin with the Letter “I”

Exodus 20:1-2, 4-6

June 12, 2011

Dr. Steve Horn

Introduction to Text: We are continuing our series today on the 10 commandments. There are a couple of reasons that we should look again at these commandments. The commandments provide for us an ethical framework for all of life. Though part of the Old Testament Law, the commandments give us an ethical framework for any orderly society.

Beyond that, we ought to consider what the Bible tells us in Romans 15:4: “For whatever was written before was written for our instruction, so that through our endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we have our hope.”

Here is the particular reason that I want us to consider these 10 commandments. This year we have isolated the theme of family as one of our central talking points. Precisely, we have learned from Deuteronomy 6 that God assigned the family the primary role of teaching the next generation to follow God. In Deuteronomy 6, God tells Israel that they are to teach these commands to their children. What commands? God gave these commands as overarching commands to lay the groundwork for the other commands.

We will read verses 1-2 as the introductory words to all of the commands and then read verses 4-6 which give us the second commandment.

Text: ¹ Then God spoke all these words:

² I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the place of slavery.

⁴ Do not make an idol for yourself, whether in the shape of anything in the heavens above or on the earth below or in the waters under the earth. ⁵ You must not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the fathers' sin, to the third and fourth [generations] of those who hate Me, ⁶ but showing faithful love to a thousand [generations] of those who love Me and keep My commands.

Introduction: One of the things that I hope that we learn in this series is that this list of 10 is a list of commandments for those already in relationship to God. In other words, the commandments were “given to people already redeemed, not so that they might be redeemed.”¹ We should not be surprised nor even offended when those who do not believe in and worship God do not keep these commandments. These commandments do not give evidence of how to enter into a relationship with God; these commandments show the results of somebody already in relationship to God.

As we begin to look at the second commandment perhaps there are two initial thoughts that we have. First, if we are not careful, we might look at this command and say that it is the same as the first. Actually, commandments 2-4 all serve as an elaboration of sorts on the first commandment. As such,

¹ Peter Enns, *The NIV Application Commentary*, 426.

the first commandment tells us that we are to worship on the one true God. The next three commandments, including commandment 2 which we study today, tells us how we are to worship that one true God.

The second concern as we begin is if we are not careful, we will look at the commandment and say, "Well, there is one thing for sure—I am in no danger of breaking this commandment." I do not worship any idols, especially any images of God, and I am not tempted even remotely to do this. Well, stay with me, because obviously God had a reason for giving us this commandment.

Understanding the Commandment

Again, I think it is really important to understand that this commandment follows the first commandment about having no other god. Jehovah God is not repeating Himself, but instead He is concerned with Israel making an image that would represent Him. There is a two-fold commandment here. Obviously we are not to have a false god in the form of an idol, but there is another issue here. God is commanded us not to make an idol of Him. This is precisely the issue in Exodus 32 and the making of the Golden Calf.

Exodus 32:1-4-- ¹ When the people saw that Moses delayed in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said to him, "Come, make us a god who will go before us because this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt—we don't know what has happened to him!"

² Then Aaron replied to them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters and bring [them] to me." ³ So all the people took off the gold rings that were on their ears and brought [them] to Aaron. ⁴ He took [the gold] from their hands, fashioned it with an engraving tool, and made it into an image of a calf.

Then they said, "Israel, this is your God, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!"

Now, somebody might say, "Well, what's the big deal?" If the true God is being worshipped, what does it matter that an image of God be made? In fact, somebody might even argue that having something to worship might even be an aid to worship. Here's the problem:

Any attempt to define, describe, or designate God becomes a distortion of the image of God.

You see, brothers and sisters, it is not enough to worship the one true God; we must make certain that we correctly worship Him. Jesus said that we ought to worship God in spirit and in truth.

I think there is something else that casts light onto the understanding of this commandment.

Any attempt to create an image that represents God detracts from the one image that God Himself gave to us to represent Himself.

- John 14:9 ⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have I been among you all this time without your knowing Me, Philip? The one who has seen Me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"
- Colossians 1:15 ¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation;

- Hebrews 1:3 ³ He is the radiance of His glory, the exact expression of His nature, and He sustains all things by His powerful word. After making purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

Fine, you say, but I'm not in danger of even falling under temptation to break this command. Well, we are going to come to that specifically in a minute, but I want to show you first something a little peculiar about this particular commandment. You will notice that there is some elaboration to this commandment in the form of a caution. One commentator said that it is the elaboration of this command that communicates how difficult this command was to keep.²

Understanding the Caution Associated with the Commandment

We struggle with a couple of things in regard to this caution. First, some might struggle with this idea of God being a "jealous" God. We usually associate jealousy with sin, and in some circles jealousy is a sin. But, I have no trouble with God being a jealous God. In fact, God's jealousy is a view of His holiness. I owe Him the allegiance of my entire life. If He was not a God who demanded jealousy, He would not be jealous toward me. I am perfectly fine with God being a jealous God.

We also struggle with the caution associated with this commandment because it sounds contradictory to everyone being judged by his or her own sins. In fact, the Bible says in Deuteronomy 24:16 that "Fathers are not to be put to death for their children or children for their fathers; each person will be put to death for his own sin."³

So, God is not saying here that He will punish successive generations, but instead God is reminding us of a basic principle about all sin. We do not sin in isolation.

Our sin does have effect upon successive generations.

In part this is true in that we impact how our children feel about God. In regards to this sermon this morning, if we reflect negatively or incorrectly on the image of God, our children will enter adulthood with a wrong view of God.

Let me give you one extremely serious and scary illustration of this. In the New Testament, Paul used the analogy of marriage to reflect the relationship of Christ with His Church. This particular analogy is a two-way analogy equally representing the kind of relationship that a husband and wife ought to have as well as the relationship the bride of Christ, the church, ought to have with Christ.

Moms and Dads, by your marriage relationship, you are either offering your children a correct view or a corrupt view of the image of Christ with His Church!

Understanding the Contemporary Impact of the Second Commandment

So, now we come to a place of understanding the contemporary impact of this second commandment. What should we post on our hearts and in our homes about this second commandment? Still, some of you may say that you are not tempted to have idols (that is carved images) of God. Let me point out two ways that we fall particularly close to the breaking of this commandment.

² John I Durham, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 286.

³ Ezekiel 18:4 as well.

First, let me say that our danger with the second commandment is more mental than it is physical, but in that mental ascent, we are breaking the spirit of the second commandment.

- **Beware of Molding God into What We Want Him to Be**

Have you ever said, “To me God is like ...?” Or, have you ever said, “My God would never do that.” He is not your God; He is God. Any attempt to define, describe, or designate God is to distort the glory and the power of God.

The real tragedy of hell will not be that people worshipped a false god; the real tragedy will be that they failed to worship the one true God. They will have lived life and missed the revelation of God.

- **Beware of Making Worship More about Us than God.**

The second way that we break this second commandment is when we make worship more about us than we do God.

Some years ago, I was in Dallas on a Sunday. I was trying to decide where to go to church. I thought it was a good opportunity to go to Stonebriar Community Church, otherwise known as the church where Chuck Swindoll preaches. I wanted to hear Chuck Swindoll. I had heard him on the radio and read many of his books. Now, I was going to see him live. Soon after the service began, someone came out on the platform and said, “For all of those who came today to see Chuck Swindoll—he’s not here!” Most everyone heard the humor in the announcement and laughed. I did not laugh, because that is why I had gone. I looked at my watch and thought maybe I had time to drive across town to hear another preacher. Too embarrassed to leave so soon after the announcement, I decided to stay. I can’t tell you exactly what the guest preacher said that morning, but I heard a message that morning. I heard from God that morning on the purpose of attending the worship gathering. Why had I come—to hear a man or worship God?

If we are not careful, we will wind up worshipping “worship” instead of God. That is, we will worship “the things of worship” instead of God. We might worship the leaders of worship. We might worship the style of worship. We cannot allow the particulars of worship stand in our way of worshipping God. Supposedly, a very well known national pastor said, “The reformation erred in that it was God-centered and not man-centered.” Another said (writing to pastors and worship leaders), “We must approach every Sunday with an attitude that we are going to wow the audience.”⁴

I entitled this message “Why Idols Begin with the Letter ‘I.’” Here’s the reason for the title. Anything that we do in our worship of God that is more about us than it is God, we have broken the second commandment. It is not enough to worship the one true God; we must worship that one true God in truth—correctly.

And you know what? We will struggle with that so again just as the first commandment does, the second commandment points out to us how desperately we need a Savior. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Recognizing that the wages of sin is death, we need a Savior.

⁴ Both quotes are from sermon by John Sartelle, 1998, at Independent Pres in Memphis. He attributed the first quote to Robert Schuller. He did not attribute the second quote to anyone.