

A God who Speaks: The Second Commandment

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[0 : 0 0] There has been a mild, a minor controversy, a mild and minor controversy in St. Albans for the last several months.

And it's mild and minor because most of you probably have no idea what I'm going to say that it is. But for a few people it's been a controversy and I've had to field a few phone calls and a few conversations.

Those of you who aren't guests and who have come to this church for several months or more might remember that behind me, right here, there used to be a statue of St. Albans.

And it's not there now. And it hasn't been there for several months. And this has caused, as I said, a minor controversy for some in St. Albans.

I don't think anybody has left the church over it or anything. But I had never really intended to speak about it from the front. But the second commandment or the second word, which is what we're going to look at today, as soon as I read it on Monday, because I always start my sermon preparations on Monday by reading the text and starting to really think about it, instantly I realized that I'd have to talk about the statue because it's gone around in some segments of the congregation.

[1 : 2 0] The reason that I removed the statue is because I thought that it was an idol, which isn't the case. I don't think there was anybody in St. Albans that was worshipping the statue.

In case I'm wrong, if you were doing that, you should stop, okay? But I don't think anybody was doing that. But this text this morning, given that it talks about idolatry and idolatry in worship, later on in the sermon, I am going to share precisely why it was that I removed the statue.

But in general, as we start to meditate and think about this temptation, or not this temptation, as we start to think about this second commandment, I'd just like to warn all of us about a very particular and powerful temptation that happens whenever we read the Bible.

And the great temptation is that we always think that the Bible applies for somebody else. We may be even cheer, inwardly cheer, when we read parts of the Bible which seem to show why other people are wrong.

And if that becomes a habit within us, it is a very, very great sin. And even when it happens to us occasionally, it is a very, very great sin. As we are warned by the words of Jesus, we are to come under God's word, willing and asking God's Holy Spirit to move on our lives so that we might hear God's word to us.

[2 : 5 0] And sometimes, to our horror, God's word speaks to us in such a way that we realize that we might have to make very substantial changes in our life. And so the question is, some of the people who talked to me about the statue and whether in fact I was doing it out of reasons of idolatry, they said, for instance, that the very same reasons for having the statue are the same reasons that we have the stained glass windows in the church, which I happen to think in most cases are very beautiful.

But the question would be is this, is as we read these Ten Commandments, let's say that as we read the Second Commandment, we come under conviction by God that he is telling us that we should not have something like stained glass windows.

Are we willing to try to obey? I mean, that's a very, very important question. It's easy to desire to obey when it's something trivial. It's easy to think, yes, I can obey when it's something that I already want to obey.

It's always a great challenge to us when the word of God speaks about something that actually, God, to be honest with you, we really quite like doing this.

And it's going to greatly inconvenience my life if I have to change. That's always the test of obedience. So I invite you to take your pew Bibles or your own Bibles, those of you who brought your own Bibles from home.

[4 : 11] And Jill very wonderfully read the Ten Commandments as found in Deuteronomy. We're going to look at it in Exodus. So if you're using the pew Bibles, please turn with me to page 65.

And the second commandment or the second word, those of you who are guests this summer, where last Sunday we began a summer-long series on the Ten Commandments, each Sunday looking upon a new commandment every week.

And so this week it's the second commandment. And the Ten Commandments are found in two places in the Bible, Exodus and Deuteronomy. They are virtually identical.

In this particular case, it is word-for-word identical, the Exodus reading and the Deuteronomy reading. But I'm just using the Exodus reading so you've become familiar with it, and also because it's all on one page.

But page 65, and let's listen as once again we hear the second word. Begins at verse 4 and goes to verse 6. You shall not make for yourself any 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 : 22] You shall not bow down to them nor 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 fourth generations of those who hate me, but showing mercy to thousands to those who love me and keep my commandments.

And as I did last week, every time I read this, I'm going to say what the prayer book teaches me to say. Lord, have mercy upon us and incline our hearts to keep this law. And if you want to join with me when I say that, Lord, have mercy upon us and incline our hearts to keep this law, feel completely and utterly free to do that.

The first thing that we see about this commandment or this word from God is that we are to live and worship by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

Some of you might be really good with your Bible.

And as soon as I say that summary statement, it might sound a little bit familiar to you. In fact, you might even recognize it as being the response that Jesus gives when he's tempted in the wilderness by the devil.

[6 : 39] If you go back later on in reading your Bibles, in Matthew chapter 4, after Jesus has been baptized by John the Baptist, the Holy Spirit drives him into the wilderness.

And in being driven into the wilderness, he spends 40 days in fasting and prayer. And towards the end of that 40 days of fasting and prayer, the devil comes to Jesus, and there is, in a sense, a spiritual struggle between Jesus and the devil.

And the first temptation which the devil gives to Jesus is, knowing that Jesus is hungry, the devil, in effect, says to Jesus, Jesus, you have the power to deal with your hunger.

You can turn these stones into bread. And Jesus' response is to quote Deuteronomy chapter 8 back to the devil. And he says, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

And Jesus here is speaking a fundamental spiritual principle, that we do not live by bread alone, or in a sense, by liturgy alone, or by singing alone.

[7 : 45] We live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. And this general spiritual principle is at the root of this second commandment.

The first commandment commanded us that we are to have no other gods, that we are to be loyal to God alone. The first commandment, in a sense, is very similar to what happens in a marriage service.

In about, I don't know, how many weeks is it? Are Patrick and Crystal in five weeks or something like that? We're going to do a wedding ceremony for Patrick and Crystal. And they're going to stand right there. And they are going to promise to me, representing, in a sense, God and the state and their family and everybody else, that they will forsake all others and cleave only on to the other.

And then they will exchange solemn vows, saying right there in that spot, they will turn and face each other. And they will say, Patrick will say that he forsakes everyone other than Crystal.

I don't know if there's three billion women on the planet. He's saying, I'm forsaking two billion, 999 million, 999,999, and it's only you, Crystal.

[8 : 58] And then Crystal is going to say the very same thing about Patrick. And that, in a sense, is what the first of the commandments is calling us to do.

Because the Ten Commandments are actually the key to Israel and all people who are Christ's. It is the principle of a covenant with God.

And so it begins by saying, we, in a sense, are invited to say to God, God, I will have no other God but you. No matter how many gods people think there are, no matter how many people claim to be gods or try to take the place of God in my life, I will be loyal and I will cleave and obey and only be yours and no other.

And the second commandment, then, is not, in a sense, duplicating the first. The second commandment is really answering the question, how do we worship?

How do we worship? How do we worship the only God whom we are to be solely and exclusively loyal to? That we are to give not even the vaguest hint that we are loyal to any other God.

[10 : 08] That we are called by God to know Him alone, through Christ alone, by faith alone. That's the New Testament that teaches us how we come to know God. But God is to be alone in our affections as God.

And how are we to worship, given that this is whom we are called to know? The second word teaches us that God is spiritual, that He is non-physical, that He is personal, and that He speaks.

And here's the key, that God is self-revealing. That God is self-revealing. That it's not, in a sense, a matter that, you know, to know God, I sort of give 50% and God gives 50%, or I give 100% because I'm a seeker, and God just is sort of waiting around for me to find Him.

The fact of the matter is that the Scripture time and time and time tells us that God is seeking us, that He desires us to be His children and His people, and that the primary posture and the primary call upon our lives is, in a sense, finally be still and turn and face Him, and in a sense, you know, let Him come into our lives.

Let Jesus be the Savior and the Lord of our life. And so the text of Scripture here is emphasizing that God is self-revealing, and that He reveals Himself through His Word.

[11 : 41] The heart of worship is to know God. By being open to His Word, Jesus, we know that as New Testament people, but not only to be open to His Word, but also to be open to the Word of God, to fill ourselves with His Word, to fill our minds and our hearts and our wills, to fill our souls, our very person, with His Word, and to learn to obey.

Jesus, in John 14, verse 15, says, If you love me, keep my commands. You know, in a sense, with an idol, we can serve an idol, but you can't obey an idol.

Obedience involves words, and love always involves obedience. Love always involves obedience. There is no love without obedience.

And there can be obedience without love, but there is no true love without a willingness to obey the Word and the will of the other to whom we love.

So, in a sense, the first commandment describes what our chief end is. The Westminster Confession, originally designed by Anglicans, although mainly used by non-Anglicans nowadays, says that the human being's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.

[13 : 04] And that's, in a sense, expressing the first commandment. And the second is describing the key means to that end, that we are to trust in God's self-revealing power by being completely and utterly open to His Word.

And by being open to His words, we are to see that this commandment tells us that all images, the use of images in worship, are forbidden. The second commandment is not about alternate gods, but about us trying to worship the true God by the ways that we want to worship Him.

In this particular case, in particular, by trying to draw an image of God. And the commandment warns us that by trying to worship the true God according to our own means and our own power leads us to idolatry and a hatred of God.

It's a very, very strong word of command. Now, here the question is, are we willing to meditate upon the second commandment? Are we willing to let it form us every time we think about a new change in church architecture, every time we think about a change in worship?

Are we willing to meditate upon this second word from God? Are we willing to have it be so deeply part of our life that we're even aware of it when it comes time to think about worship?

[14 : 36] Now, this gets me very briefly as an aside about the statue. Most Christians acknowledge that when it comes to worship, the incarnation changes things.

In other words, as part of God's self-revealing power, not only has God revealed the Word of God and spoken the Word of God, but that God sent the Word and the Word was made flesh and walked amongst us in the words of John 1, verse 1.

The Word became flesh and walked amongst us, dwelt amongst us. And that Jesus is the perfect revelation of God. He is the one who narrates God and interprets God.

He is the one that not only reveals God, but opens truly for us human beings the door to heaven so that we can actually come into God's presence and become His adopted children by grace.

And so Christians throughout the ages have differed a little bit about how the incarnation relates to the second commandment. I think that it's completely acceptable in Sunday school material to have pictures of Jesus and pictures of Bible stories.

[15 : 53] I think it's completely acceptable in a church to have a window like we have at the front of our church, which in a sense is only pointing to Jesus, whom you can see, could have seen if we were able to go back in time, we'd be able to see Jesus, and points us to the biblical testimony and the biblical witness and the great act of salvation which Jesus won for us.

I think it's completely acceptable to have pictures like that that completely and utterly focus us and in a sense serve the Word of God by helping us to think about the Word of God and be led by the Word of God to God's saving act in the person of Jesus Christ.

The statue was removed not because I thought that it was an idol and not because I thought that there's anything wrong with occasionally drawing or representing some saint or some Christian who'd lived a noteworthy life as a way of reminding us of their life.

I'm not a huge fan of biography, but I'm a small fan of biography, and the autobiography of C.S. Lewis has been a powerful thing in my life. I loved to read the biography of Simeon.

I've loved to read the biography of John Stott, and biographies can be a powerful means by which we can be drawn close to Christ, and from that I don't inherently see anything wrong with drawing pictures of these people.

[17 : 24] The statue, just so you know, of St. Albans was removed because of our vision statement. And in our vision statement, by an overwhelming majority, we said that we believe that God is calling us to be an evangelical Anglican church, which evangelizes, and on and on and on and on.

That's what we said, that we see God calling us to be. In a sense, it could be, and it should be, that St. Albans will be an evangelical Anglican church which believes the Bible, which evangelizes, which builds community, which worships in traditional and contemporary forms, and on and on.

It's at the very, very front of your bulletin. So throughout the years, I've had a variety of complaints about the statue, but I have felt uncomfortable in removing it in terms of any type of authority that I have.

But I can say this about the statue. First of all, statues are very, very rare in Anglican churches. And that's because Anglican churches are originally a creature of the English Reformation.

In other words, being reformed by the teaching of Calvin and by the other early English reformers. Statues in a church, an Anglican church, tends to communicate to people who come in that it's an Anglo-Catholic church.

[18 : 48] Well, how can we have it? It almost be like having a big sign at the front of the church that says, we are an Anglo-Catholic church, while our vision statement says we're an evangelical Anglican church. That type of inconsistency has to be dealt with.

And thirdly, why is it that virtually no, in fact, I would say no, reformed church ever has a statue in it? And that's because historically, churches with statues in them are churches that believe in praying to the saints.

That's just historically the case. And so to see a statue in a church implies that this is a church which believes in praying to the saints and asking for the saints to intercede for us.

And, I mean, I don't think necessarily anybody in St. Albans was doing any of this, but that's what the statue communicates, that we are a church that believes this. And so my hope is that the statue can have, I mean, I think it's appropriate for us to remember our past, to remember that our past is sometimes very different than the present and to have ways of remembering and honoring that.

And I think there should be some place like that for St. Albans as we remember the heritage of this church. But it seems to me, apart from the Second Commandment, although from the Second Commandment we could maybe have discussions about that as well, that it was appropriate to remove the statue because of our vision statement.

[20 : 12] So for those of you who are wondering, no, I didn't think it was an idol. And I didn't think that it had to be removed because people were worshipping it. But I do think it had to be removed because of our vision statement.

And the Second Commandment would also require sober second thought and conversation around it. About the windows, you know, once again, you know, the question is always, if in fact, every time from now on we consider a change in the church, every time we consider a change in worship, it's really appropriate for people to say, George, how does this fit in with the Second Commandment?

And for us to get on our knees and pray and ask that God, that everything that we do is in keeping with what God desires us because this scripture, this word from God is telling us that God, that we are to live and worship by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

That's how we are to live. We are to live and worship by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God because God is a self-revealing God who reveals himself as he speaks to us and he invites us to hear his word and obey.

Lord, have mercy upon us and incline our hearts to keep this law. Very briefly, just a couple of final things because I don't want to make you think that I'm sort of, that I'm ignoring the other parts of this word.

[21 : 41] It has not only a prohibition about images used in worshiping God but has some very powerful things to say about God. Just read with me, I'm going to read again the full second word or second commandment.

You shall not make for yourself any 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. You shall not bow down to them nor shall you 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 fourth generations of those who hate me but showing mercy to thousands to those who love me and keep my commandments.

Lord, have mercy upon us and incline our hearts to keep this law. Very briefly, this commandment tells us of the deep, deep love of God towards his people.

That's why the word jealousy is there. It tells us of the deep, deep love of God to his people. We are called to a person, not a law.

[22 : 48] We are called to a person, not a principle. We are called to a person, not an abstraction. We are called to a person and not an inexorable and unstoppable process.

We are called to a person, the person of almighty God and this God who truly does exist has a deep, deep love of his people and he calls us into a covenant with him.

And jealousy in this text points to proper love. You know, maybe some of us have met people who have a problem with jealousy. They imagine slights to love.

They just imagine them constantly and often when we hear the word jealousy, we instantly think of people who have a problem with imagining slights to love that don't exist and people who by imagining slights to love don't exist fly off the handle and one of the things that the devil does to in a sense pervert us from hearing God's word is to instantly think of such a bad example.

But there's in fact a godly jealousy. My kids don't always know this but my wife and I and my wife is the real guardian of this.

[24 : 10] We worry sometimes about who the kids will be starting to have as friends. You know, we see that they want to start to be friends with a certain person and we, you know, Louise and I will start to notice it and we talk about it and, you know, it'll be part of her prayers and my prayers because, you know, we only want our children to have friends that are going to be good for them.

You know, we don't want them to have friends that are going to lead them astray, lead them into evil, lead them into danger and if we started to sense that they were developing friendships or attachments that would lead them, you know, into evil or lead them into great trouble or distress, we would be jealous in a sense for the children.

We would be passionate for our children. We would be thinking about all that we could possibly do to steer them away from such a bad friendship and lead them to that friendship and relationship which will only build them up and will only be good for them.

And so, the jealousy language here in this prayer, in this commandment, is expressing God's deep love towards his children and the way he feels when he sees and what he thinks when he sees us engaging in practices that if they reach their proper conclusion will lead us to hate him.

And God, because he loves us deeply, is jealous for us, desiring that we will only cleave to him and that we will forswear and abandon anything that would lead us to turn our back on God.

[25 : 51] Once again, you shall not make for yourself any 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.

You shall not bow down to them nor serve them. Lord, have mercy upon us and incline our hearts to keep this law. This text as well invites us to understand that we are not doomed, that today can be the day that you enter a new destiny and legacy.

You know, when I was, it's, listen again to this sort of troublesome language for many people. The end of verse 5 and 6, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me, but showing mercy to thousands to those who love me and keep my commandments.

You know, when I was young, when I was 20, I'm approaching 50. When I was young, it was impossible for me to even imagine that some of my decisions could have consequences for generations.

Now that I'm approaching 50, and you know what, sometimes parents can do things and it affects the children and the grandchildren and the great-grandchildren.

[27 : 17] We can make decisions when we are young people and old people that have a consequence that goes on, literally echoes into time for a considerable length of time.

And that's just the way the world is. many of us struggle with parents who are alcoholics and can maybe even point to parents who are alcoholics, grandparents who are alcoholics, great-grandparents of alcoholics.

Many of us struggle with the issue of sexual abuse or just real sexual fallenness in our past. Many of us struggle with the enduring consequences of maybe parents or grandparents who have been involved in the occult.

And I could just tell you that it's a regular feature of counseling to deal with people who are dealing with generational issues. The fact of the matter is that evil can echo on in our lives.

And this text of Scripture is not in a sense telling us of something that God is going to in a sense inflict upon us. It is just describing the real consequence of us choosing evil.

[28 : 28] But the wonderful thing about this text, the text, the commandment doesn't tell us this so that we can feel inevitably doomed. It doesn't tell us this so we can say, oh no, my parents were raging alcoholics and therefore not only am I doomed, but my children are doomed and potentially even my grandchildren are doomed.

The text is not telling us that we are doomed. The text is telling us that we deal with a God who loves us and that we can choose to enter into covenant with the God who loves us, to worship him and know him in such a way that our destiny is not harm for future generations, but that our destiny is by that obeying him and loving him that literally thousands of generations will be blessed.

It is in a sense setting before us the seriousness of our choices and the possibility of entering into a covenant with God and learning to obey his word so that literally, literally, thousands of generations after us can be blessed.

The text not only talks to us about forgiveness, but tells us about providence and of hope. It says to us that even if we come here and maybe we are 80 years old and our lives have been lives of, in a sense, being outside of a covenant and a relationship with God and maybe we have made a huge mess of our lives and with our families.

Maybe we come here as single people without any children. The text actually has no definite articles of the father and of the son. It's just basically talking about this process of continuing on and the text tells us that even now at this point in time no matter what we have done with our lives and what we have made with our lives or whether we have any physical generation that comes after us or not is that we have an invitation from Almighty God that we can come into a relationship of love and obedience with him and that as we enter into this relationship of love and obedience with him and try to be faithful that God can give us an enduring legacy that will stretch to a thousand generations.

[30 : 52] Many of you have heard of the power of a woman by the name of Diane in my life who was, you know, when I met her just towards the last year and a year and a half of her life she was in St. Vincent's Hospital.

She was completely and utterly bedridden. The disease that afflicted her had so removed her power of speech and movement that I could only understand every second word and I had to go to visit her and the first few times I visited her I was terrified of going to visit her and then I started to realize that I was going to visit her not so I could minister to her but so she could minister healing to me.

And this precious one who had come to faith in Jesus Christ in a sense her faithfulness and her witness and her prayers without any children so to speak can have a power over my life and by me sharing this with you with other lives it just goes on and on and on.

I think of the power of Hugh in my life that when I met Hugh he was a grumpy guy in many ways. He was an angular and cantankerous guy but he'd spent 50 years on the street 50 years as a street person before he came to faith in Jesus Christ and for the first couple of years I came to church every Sunday he'd be at the back pew right where John O's sitting and he was just this strong guy who would pray for me and he taught me so much about how to minister to the poor and how to deal with certain things and he has no physical children that could be passed on any type of legacy but his faithfulness his faithfulness can have an effect that goes from generation to generation to generation to generation and so even in the midst of this second commandment what God is saying to you and me is this failure isn't final doom isn't final a legacy of whatever we've done with our lives if we've done things that have been unbelievably horrible in our lives that does not have to be the final word about you and the final word about me there is a God who loves you there is a God who loves me he wants us to come into a relationship with him and when we say yes to that relationship and learn to obey even if we do this at a late date in our lives the legacy that can flow in our lives and the lives of others can flow for a thousand generations so there is no better time than today to choose to know God through the person of Jesus Christ let's bow our heads in prayer father we give you thanks and praise that you are not the God of a second chance you are the God of unending chances we give you thanks and praise that you are a God who loves us unfailingly and unstoppably we give you thanks and praise that no matter what we have done in our lives that you desire to have us as your children as your child as your precious possession and treasure we give you thanks and praise father that we can get off the path of three or four generations of echoing evil and that by faith in Christ and in obedience to your word and command we can enter a legacy that will lead to blessing for a thousand generations we acknowledge before you father that it is not because of our power or our righteousness that such a thing can happen but purely because of your providence purely because of your power loving father we ask that you would help us to come to you through your son Jesus Christ help us to be open to your word and teach us to love and to obey your commandments in Jesus' name we pray amen