

Worshipping the right God in the right way.

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[0 : 00] Okay, this morning we're going to look at the second commandment we'll find in the second book in the Bible, the book of Exodus. So I'm going to read from Exodus chapter 20, verse 4 to 6, and then read from Exodus chapter 32, verse 1 to 8.

So starting in Exodus chapter 20, verse 4 to 6, when the words are on the screen. Exodus 20, verse 4.

You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them.

For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me.

But showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

Okay, then on to Exodus chapter 32.

[1 : 13] Exodus 32, reading from 1 to 8, the incident of the golden calf. The beginning of Exodus chapter 32.

When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered right here and said, Come, make us gods who will go before us.

As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him. Aaron answered them, Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing and bring them to me.

So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. He took what they handed him and made it into an idol, cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool.

Then they said, These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt. When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord.

[2 : 22] So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed earth offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterwards they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.

Then the Lord said to Moses, Then the Lord said to Moses, Go down, because your people whom you brought up out of Egypt have become corrupt. They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol, cast in the shape of a calf.

They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.

Amen. Amen. May God bless to our hearts this reading from his word. Our gracious and loving God, we thank you that you speak.

And when you speak, we are to listen. And so we pray today that you help us to listen to your voice. We pray that you would open up our hearts and that we would hear from you.

[3 : 29] We pray that by your spirit you would change our lives and help us to apply the truth of what you teach us today. For we pray in Jesus' name.

Amen. We heard a story recently of a little girl who was at a drawing lesson in school. She was six and she was at the back of the class drawing away.

And the teacher thought that the little girl hardly ever paid attention to anything that was going on. But this time she was fully engaged in what she was doing, enjoying her picture.

And so the teacher was fascinated. And she walked to the back of the class and went to the girl and she asked her, what are you drawing? And the girl said, I'm drawing a picture of God.

And the teacher said, but nobody knows what God looks like. And the girl said, well, just wait a minute. And they soon will. I say this because when it comes to God, there is a lot of confusion around today with questions such as, is there a God?

[4 : 35] Are there many gods? If there is a God who is there, then what is he like? And if he's there, then how do I relate to him? Lots of confusion, lots of questions about God in our society today.

Well, when we come to the Ten Commandments, the Ten Commandments help us navigate our way through all the confusion when it comes to God. And we find them in Exodus chapter 20 in the Bible.

And so today we're going to look at the second commandment. And it's about the way that we worship God. The first commandment says, earlier in Exodus chapter 20, You shall have no other gods before me.

So it commands who we must worship by forbidding the worship of all other gods. And so we should worship the right God, the one true and living God.

That's what the first commandment is saying. The second commandment tells us that we must worship the right God in the right way. So verse 4 says, You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything, in heaven above, or on the earth beneath, or on the waters below.

[5 : 46] You shall not bow down to them, or worship them. So the first commandment addresses the object of our worship. And then the second commandment addresses the method of our worship.

The object of our worship, and then the method of our worship. So the first commandment forbids false gods. And then the second commandment forbids false worship. And so we're commanded to worship the right God in the right way.

In other words, we should worship God as he really is. Worship God as he has revealed himself to us. And not as we would imagine God to be.

And it matters whether you call yourself a Christian or not. Because if we get God wrong, then we're never going to get our worship right.

Which means we could waste our whole life in doing the wrong thing. And so let us think about three things this morning. First, what God forbids.

[6 : 48] Second, why God commands. And third, how we obey. So first, what God forbids. Second, why God commands. And third, how we obey.

So first of all, what God forbids. In verse 4. Let me read it again. You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above, or on the earth beneath, or in the waters below.

So God forbids people making images of him. Because images, or idols, that are meant to represent God, aren't God. They will demean, and they will diminish God.

So they'll be false, and they will be misleading. Because whatever is created, is going to be less than God, who is the creator. Because if God is the creator of all things, then created things, whatever they are, can never represent him.

They can never do him justice. And so as the verse says, an image in the form of anything in heaven above, or on earth beneath, or in the waters below, that will never do God justice.

[7 : 54] It will never help explain who God really is. Now, Rengret is one of my favorite artists. One of the Dutch masters. And he's probably most famous for his self-portraits.

He's done so many self-portraits. And they're brilliant. But they're only images of him. And so any one of his self-portraits can't adequately represent him.

And we know that now. But even when he was alive, there was so much more of him than his self-portraits could convey. Because they were just an image. They were just a picture.

And so it is a shocking insult to God to suggest that something that is made can compare to him.

And so God forbids any kind of image that would wrongly represent him.

And so in Isaiah chapter 40, we read this. With whom then will you compare God? With what image will you liken him? So it's saying that a mere image can't compare with God.

[9 : 00] And it's not that God is against images. Because later on in Exodus, God commands ornate and beautiful art for the tabernacle. Which is a place of worship.

But God is against anything that is used to reimagine him. Because any image is an idol. And idolatry is a shocking sin against God.

And so the Old Testament is full of examples of God's people worshipping man-made idols instead of worshipping the one true and living God. And the most famous incident is the one we read.

A moment of gold in Exodus chapter 32. The incident of the golden calf. So while Moses was on the mountain talking with God, his brother Aaron made this golden calf from all the people's jewellery.

And then the people started to worship it. And they even said, these are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt. Well, they weren't worshipping other gods.

[10:03] That's breaking the first commandment. Because he even said that with the calf there will be a festival to the Lord. So they were using the golden calf as an image to worship God.

Which is breaking the second commandment. And so God's anger burned against them. And then there are plenty other examples in the Old Testament in Israel's history of their idolatry.

And so God forbids any kind of idol to aid our worship of him. Now, of course, we would never think that we would be so stupid as to bow down and worship some kind of mental image pretending that it's God.

But before we think that this doesn't apply to us or doesn't have any relevance for us, the essence of the second commandment forbids more than just mental images like gold or silver or bronze. It also forbids mental images of God. That is, images that we create of God in our minds. Images that get God wrong.

[11:12] Which is actually the source of all the mental images. All the idols that come from our minds. And so yes, we must not make mental images of God.

That's what the commandment is saying. But neither should we make up mental images of God. Because imagining God in our heads is just as wrong as imaging God with our hands.

And so we probably don't have a big idol in our lounge that we worship as God. Yet we can have mental images of God in our heads. That can also be wrong.

So reimagining God is always dangerous. And it happens when we say things like, I like to think of God like this.

Or I don't like to think of God like that. And it tends to be, I like the God of love and compassion and mercy and grace. But I don't like the God of wrath and judgment and anger.

[12:16] But can you see what happens? And we emphasize the parts of God that we like. And ignore the parts of God that we don't like. And we'll get a distorted and twisted picture or image of God.

It's like taking a pair of scissors to the Bible to make up the God we want. Rather than the God who actually is. Let me try to illustrate. You may have heard of a novel by Rodion P. Young called The Shack.

And it was made into a film in 2017. And The Shack was an effort that tried to explain why God allows suffering.

And so lots of people read it. It was a New York Times bestseller. Which means it will obviously influence people on how they think about God. And it paints a picture of God in narrative form. And so I'll give you the plot. So spoiler alert. And there's a man and he's called Mac. And Mac gets a letter from God. God asks Mac to meet him at The Shack.

[13:20] I'm making this up. So Mac goes to The Shack to meet with God. And he spends the weekend with him. And in the book. And then in the movie. God the Father is portrayed as a middle-aged, slightly overweight African-American woman.

Who loves to cook. Called Papa. And in the book. Jesus is a man of the Middle Eastern appearance. And God the Holy Spirit is portrayed as a very slight, slim Asian woman.

Who's quite hard to see. And is called Sarai. And so the God of The Shack clearly isn't the biblical God. The real God.

He is a God of the imagination. A false image of God. And so a reimagined image of God is no God at all.

And so we'll never worship God in the right way if we mistake his identity. And so that's the first thing. That's what God forbids. Secondly, let's think about why God commands.

[14:26] Because God says why he forbids the making of images. Verse 5 and 6. You shall not bow down to them or worship them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God.

Punishing the children for the sin of the parents of the third and fourth generation of those who hate me. But showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

So God commands no loving down to. No worship of images. Because he's a jealous God. Now, we might think of jealousy as being a negative thing.

And some things it is. But God's jealousy describes the burning passion of his love. And so jealousy can be a good thing and a right thing.

And a healthy thing. Just think of a husband and a wife. A wife who loves her husband could not bear her husband being with another woman. It would make her intensely jealous.

[15 : 30] And so it should. Because rightly, she doesn't want her husband choosing another over her. And similarly, God is a jealous God.

And his burning love means he will not tolerate any rivals or his people's love. He wants his people to be devoted to him as he is.

And so the jealousy of God here leads to a warning and to a promise. God warns his people what will happen if they break the commandment. And then he promises what will happen if they keep it. So firstly, God's warning, 2nd half of verse 5, is about punishing the children for the sin of the parents. So the third and fourth generation of those who hate me.

And so the failure to let God be God, the failure to worship God as God, indicates hatred for God instead of love for God. And so breaking the second commandment brings God's punishment.

[16 : 34] And the consequence is punishment for the children dying to the third and fourth generation. And that doesn't sound very fair, does it? It sounds like God is going to punish the children for the sin of their parents.

And so what is this warning saying? Well, the key phrase here is, So if later generations grow up hating God, it's because they have followed the sinful ways of their parents.

Because parents do influence their children. I know that as a dad. Children grow up copying the attitudes and the actions of their parents.

And that's the sense in which future generations here will face punishment. And so this should be a healthy warning to those of us who are parents. That our sinful attitudes, our sinful actions, will have consequences for our children.

And so our love for God, and our worship of God, our obedience to God, will influence how our children relate to God. And so this is a serious warning that God gives here.

[17 : 47] But also along with it comes a promise. God's promise is about, as we read, showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

So God is promising his steadfast love to those who obey, to those who keep his commandments. And so the warning for punishment for those who hate me is in contrast to the promise of love for those who keep my commandments.

So see how the promise of love far outweighs the warning of punishment. The punishment goes to the third and fourth generation, but God's love extends way beyond, to a thousand generations.

So God's mercy is more than his judgment. And so his promise overflows with grace. And so God commands that we get him right and worship him in the right way because he is a jealous God.

He wants us to know him as he is. I once heard the story of a man who was separated from his fiancée for months at a time.

[19 : 02] And so what she did as a way to help him to remember her was she gave him a small china rabbit. And it winked. And it was meant to be just a reminder of her.

And the little rabbit became one of his prized possessions during their times of separation. But can you imagine if he became so fond of the rabbit that he then ignored the real person?

So that when she came back and was in his presence, he ignored her and he played with his china rabbit instead. It would be crazy. And yet that is what we can do with God.

We can be so taken with our images of God that we fail to know him as he really is and relate to him as we should. And so God is this jealous God who will not tolerate being treated in this way.

That's why God commands us to worship him as he is. On his terms, not ours. And so that's our second point. Why God commands.

[20 : 03] First, what God forbids. Second, why God commands. And then thirdly, how we obey. So God has spoken to forbid people, making an image of him and worshipping it.

And then he commands us because he is a jealous God. And so how do we then obey ascending commandment? How do we worship the right God in the right way?

Well, it starts by discovering who the real God is. Because God hasn't been played hide and seek. Where he is hiding, we have got to find him and discover what he is like.

God has never made it difficult for us to get to know him. God has revealed himself to us. Which means that we don't need to make an image of him.

Instead, we need to pay attention to what he has revealed about himself. And we do this by listening to what God says.

[21 : 03] Just imagine, what is the best way for somebody to get to know you? Maybe a picture. Maybe look at your Instagram account. Maybe have a friend describe you to this other person.

But far better for you to go to the person and introduce yourself. Because you're best at expressing the real you. Who you really are.

And be best communicated by you. And isn't that what God has done for us? And that's why he cannot tolerate us misrepresenting him.

He's got to great lengths to reveal himself to us. Because he is the living God who wants to enter into a relationship with the people that he has made.

And so he speaks to us. He spoke. Chapter 20, verse 1. He spoke these commandments to his people who he had saved from slavery in Egypt.

[22 : 03] And he gave them these commandments so they could enjoy a relationship with him now that they had been rescued. And so whether it's for the Israelites who first heard these words or for us today, the fact is God has spoken.

And we hear what he has said about himself in his word. And that is the source of all of our knowledge of God.

And it's what should shape our understanding of God. Not our thoughts or our imaginations or the culture or books or movies or anything else. It should be God's word that helps us get to know God. Because God has spoken for himself. He's revealed what he is like so that we can worship him as we should. Somebody might ask, well, what's the problem with images helping us to worship God? Are you saying that we should buy all the classic religious paintings? We should smash all the statues and beautiful places of worship, even though we should throw out our nativity sets?

[23 : 11] Well, no. But if we think that these things help us understand the real God and know him and worship him, then we're deluding ourselves.

But it was our 10th wedding anniversary. We spent a few days in Rome. And my favorite place to visit was St. Peter's Basilica and the Vatican Museum.

And inside St. Peter's there was a massive long queue. I wonder what was at the end of the queue. So I walked to the front and just waited to see what was going on. And the queue led to this huge statue of St. Peter.

And for years, people have either touched or kissed the foot of this big metal statue as some kind of worshipful act.

And when I looked at the foot, the toes had been worn away because the stone had been touched and kissed over many, many years. And yet, no matter how spiritual it seems or how it makes people feel when they touch a statue like that, is the kind of thing that the second commandment is warning us against.

[24 : 22] Because kissing, touching, revering anything in image or statue isn't helping us worship the right God in the right way. So how do we worship the right God in the right way?

Well, the answer is through Jesus Christ. God has revealed himself in the Bible and supremely in the person of his Son, Jesus.

He's revealed himself in the written Word and in the living Word. And so in the opening chapter of John, we read, And again, in John chapter 1, we read, No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God, is in the closest relationship with the Father.

He has made him known. And then later, Jesus said, Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. And so in the second commandment, God told Israel not to make an image of him, because God had planned to make an image of himself in Jesus.

And that's why we shouldn't make an image of God. It's because all our attempts to picture God will be wrong. Instead, we need to let God show himself to us.

[25 : 55] And he has in Jesus Christ. And so there is no excuse for getting God wrong amidst all the confusion in our world. Because all the guessing games about God, about what he is like, and how we should relate to him, are over in Jesus.

We have an image that has been displayed in human history for everybody to see. Jesus is the image of the invisible God, says in Colossians chapter 1.

So when we look at Jesus, we see God. Jesus is the true image of God. In Hebrews chapter 1, we read that the Son is the radiance of God's glory, and the exact representation of his being.

Which raises the question, well, why has God taken the initiative to reveal himself to us like this?

Well, he has done it. Not just so that we can know what he's like, but so that we can know him.

And so that we can be brought back into the relationship with him that we were created for. We read in Genesis chapter 1 that God created us male and female in his image.

[27 : 13] And we're supposed to reflect his image in the world. And yet we've spoiled his image by trying to live life without him. And so our sinful rebellion means we don't reflect God's image as we should.

And that's why we deserve God's punishment. But the great news is that God sent his Son, Jesus, into the world to repair his image in us.

And he does it through his perfect life of obedience, through his death for our sin, and through his resurrection. And so we will never worship God as we should.

We'll never worship God in the right way unless we do it through Jesus Christ. And then when we come to God through Jesus, God comes to live in us by his Holy Spirit.

And then he works to recreate us after his image so that we might reflect him in this world. And that's what it means to be truly human.

[28 : 17] What it means to be alive. Let's pray. Father, we thank you, our gracious and loving God, for your work in sending your Son to reveal to us who you are, so that we might not just know about you, but know you and be part of your family, so that we might then reflect with the help of your Spirit you in this world.

Father, please forgive us for when we get you wrong. Help us to listen to what you have said about yourself, how you have revealed yourself in your written word and in the living word of Jesus Christ. And we pray that we would live in a way that gives you honour and glory each and every day of our lives. We pray this in Jesus' name.

Amen.