

The Second Commandment: Images and Idols

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 28 January 2018

[0:00] Amen. Amen.

So I want to start out with a question today. My brothers and my sisters, is there anything better than knowing Jesus Christ? Is there anything better than knowing that He is in fact your Lord and your Savior?

Is there anything better than knowing that your sins are forgiven and that you are a beloved child? Of the true and living God? Is there anything better than knowing that Jesus is your great reward? Anything better than that? There's nothing that can compare. Yet we are so often tempted to forget, aren't we? And when we forget, we are drawn to idolatry, worshiping something other than God. Having something other than God is the thing that we love most. And as our reason for living. That's idolatry. The theologian and reformer John Calvin once said, that the human heart is an idol factory. [1:41] Well, that stings a bit, doesn't it? But if we're honest, we know that it's true. I am prone to wander, Lord, I feel it. How about you?

I think this is the reason why we get not just one, but two commandments on the matter of idolatry. Because it's our basic problem, isn't it?

This week's commandment, the second commandment, follows from the first. We are to have no other gods but the true and living God. And the second follows. Don't create idols and worship them.

Now, what does that mean for us? Do we have anyone here? Who's making statues or carvings and worshiping them?

Now, if you are doing that, please see me after the service. We need to talk. But, well, so what does it mean for us?

[2:36] Let's start with that most basic application of the second commandment. Don't worship statues, carvings, paintings, keychains, whatever. Don't do it. Don't do that.

I hope that sticks. Now, does that mean that we can't have photographs in our home or that the icon of Jesus that's hanging in the sacristy is a no-go?

Well, I have to say that not all Christians agree on this point. I don't know many who would say no to family photos, but some would take objection to pictures of Jesus, for example. Religious images, they would say, are forbidden by the second commandment.

And I grew up in a church where they would say that even the cross that we processed in with is forbidden. Now, that being said, most Anglicans wouldn't say so.

We look at what God appointed for the tabernacle, for example, and guess what? It included religious images. What God never appointed, however, was the worship of any kind of images.

[3:39] So, again, all that's to say, don't worship statues. But the second commandment, I think, as we think about its application, involves more than that.

What is the basic problem with worshiping graven images? The issue is first with worshiping something other than God, but more specifically with worshiping created things instead of the Creator.

We have a real knack for worshiping created things, don't we? I know I do. How does that ever work out for us? Not so great, but still, that tendency to worship created things runs deep.

I'd say, for example, that it's why we're so often tempted to false religion. Instead of worshiping God as He's revealed Himself in His Son, Jesus Christ, we are prone to worship gods of our own making and to bow down and worship them.

I mean, what is false religion other than worship of what has been created by man? Now, we've gone a step further in that direction in our contemporary age to the point where we say that it doesn't even matter what you believe as long as you're sincere.

[4:55] Religious pluralism. Because all paths lead to God. But Jesus is clear that all who come to the Father come by Him. To try to do otherwise is to worship created things rather than the Creator.

Now, in our time, that's regarded as a terribly intolerant thing to say. But I would suggest that it's because we live in a time in which we're all especially tempted to worship created things.

To worship things, ideas, invented by people instead of God. But that's just a drop in the bucket compared to the vast array of things we're tempted to worship.

And we all worship something, make no mistake. The acclaimed writer David Foster Wallace, who wasn't a Christian actually, once made this point. He writes, Here's something else that's weird but true.

In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship.

[6:05] Everybody worships. We all worship something, don't we? In this morning's Gospel reading, we heard Jesus warning us against worshipping the wrong things.

Lovingly warning us against worshipping things of the world, created things. What does Jesus say? Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal.

But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

So here's the trouble. We can worship created things, and often we do. We can worship treasures on earth. We can worship earthly things and false gods of our own making.

But here is the hard truth. The truth that Jesus so lovingly warns us about. Because as we lay up those treasures for ourselves on earth, as we worship, build our lives around earthly created things, we have to realize that the moths are going to come in, and they're going to annihilate those things.

[7:30] That thieves are going to break in and steal all of those things. If you don't believe me, think about anything that you enjoy that you're expecting to take with you into eternity.

Rust is going to claim all of those idols. Every last one of them. But, if God is our portion, and if Jesus is the joy of our heart and our eternal treasure, that is a different story entirely, isn't it?

Go back to David Foster Wallace for a second. He went on to say this. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough.

Never feel you have enough. It's the truth. Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure, and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you.

Whew. That's heavy, isn't it? Worship of idols, whatever those idols may be, leads only to one place, and that is death.

[8:48] I may worship my money. Will I ever take it with me? Might have all kinds of accounts and nest eggs.

But wire transfers into eternity don't work, as far as I can tell. I might worship my career. Well, what happens if I worship my career and I lose my job?

What happens, say, when I'm retired without having accomplished everything that I hoped I was going to accomplish? My career and my professional reputation is what I worship, then I'm in serious trouble.

Most of us here have either already retired, or will probably live beyond retirement age. So what's left when that career is gone, if that's what you're living for?

Or I may worship my body and my beauty. Now, I'm not usually tempted to do that, for obvious reasons. But that being said, I've been noticing that I'm finding white hairs in my beard.

[9:52] I know. It's horrible. I'm not so pretty, but it's about to get worse. But even if you are pretty, I can assure you, it's about to get worse.

Either way, I may worship other people. Now, there's nothing wrong with loving other people.

There's nothing wrong with loving them deeply.

There's nothing wrong with putting others before yourself. That's good. But to make other people, even my spouse or my children, the center of my life instead of God, is idolatry.

It will only lead to disappointment. When we look at it this way, and we think about the first use of the law to reveal our sin to us, to show us that we need a Savior, we see the sobering reality.

Every single one of us has committed idolatry. We have bowed to graven images by worshipping created things instead of the Creator.

[11:03] Remember what our Romans 1 reading from a couple of weeks ago said about us. Those who do such things deserve to die. Ouch.

We're in a bind, aren't we? Yes, we are in a bind with only one solution, the perfect life and atoning death of the Lord Jesus Christ. He lived perfectly for us, never having worshipped created things, so that His perfect righteousness is ours through faith in Him.

I can say that He died the death that I deserve for my idolatry and my place, and because He is my Savior, I know that the debt is paid and I am forgiven. idolatry that I am.

So praise the living God. This morning, if you have committed idolatry, I'm going to venture a guess and say that you have.

I want to emphasize there is a way to forgiveness and to eternal life, and that is through faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

[12:13] Now what about those of us who are already believers? In a sense, we're not off the hook. We think about the third use of the law, as we talked about, how it shows us how to live a life that is pleasing to God and obedience to Him out of gratitude for the salvation that we've been freely given.

So this is for those of us who have already come to Christ as well. Our idolatry is forgiven, so what are we to do?

Answer. Knock it off with that whole idolatry thing. God is our loving Father. Father, we have the promise of eternal life.

Jesus is our precious Savior. Why would we want to go on living for anything less? But we're tempted to do just that.

My stuff, my money, my reputation, my career, other people, my own desires. We're all tempted to worship this stuff, even if we are believers. I have been there, made that mistake, and bought the t-shirt.

[13:27] I'm guessing you have too. It doesn't help that we live in an age in which false teaching has invaded the church, false teaching that tempts us to idolatry.

Just one example. Think about the prosperity gospel. There's something that is false teaching that's influencing millions of people, and not just here in the United States, but around the world.

And here's what it teaches, basically. If I have enough faith, God will give me anything I ask for, especially health and wealth. In this system, God is just a means to an end.

I use God like a vending machine to get my health and my wealth. He's the genie, and I just rub his lamp. Now, here's the trouble. As Christians, Jesus assured us that we would encounter suffering and persecution.

He didn't promise us physical health and material wealth. He did promise us eternal life. And this particular error, this particular approach, hits home for me because I say this as someone who, as of yet, has chronic health problems that haven't been healed.

[14:51] Now, I don't think for a second that it's because I don't have enough faith, although I, of course, don't have as much faith as I should, I have to admit, but it's because for some reason God has seen this affliction as good for my eternal welfare.

So I praise Him, whether in health or in sickness, whether in wealth or in poverty, simply because He is God and He is worthy of worship and because Jesus demonstrated His love for me by dying for me and rising again.

I'll take that over all of the physical health and material wealth in all the world. And then, and this isn't just true of our age, this is true of every age, there's false teaching that would tempt us to follow our culture's values and the world's values instead of what's revealed in Scripture.

No doubt you have encountered this. We're faced with a choice. What are we going to follow? Are we going to obey God or men?

It's easy in our day and age to say that we obey God while really obeying men. And we're tempted to obey men because that gives us an opportunity to worship ourselves instead of the living God.

[16:13] What do I mean by that? St. Augustine of Hippo once said, he put it like this, if you believe what you like in the gospel and reject what you don't like, it's not the gospel you believe but yourself.

G.K. Chesterton once suggested that if your God never disagrees with you, it's probably an idol that you're worshipping. Not an exact quote there. Don't quote me on that, but general idea.

But make no mistake, brothers and sisters, we are faced with that temptation to believe not the gospel but ourselves, our opinions, not what God has revealed but what we find most comfortable.

Not to be obedient to Christ but just to go along to get along. This is nothing other than worshiping the creature. In this case, ourselves.

And it has infiltrated churches. Do you want to know why this temptation to worship the creature rather than the creator is a real bummer for us, especially in the Christian life?

[17 : 24] It leads to unhappiness. It leads to sorrow. It leads to misery. It robs us of our joy. And it does not demonstrate to an unbelieving world just how precious Jesus Christ really is.

C.S. Lewis once said, God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from himself because it is not there. There is no such thing.

We will never find happiness. We will never find peace in the worship of idols and the worship of graven images and the worship of created things. Our hearts were made by God for God.

They are restless until they find rest in him. Now, the created things of this world aren't inherently bad. That's not what I'm saying. There are things that we can enjoy.

I'm glad that things that I enjoy exist. Now, as kind of a nerd, I'm glad that comic books and video games exist. And you can go ahead and laugh at me if you want. But nothing in all the world, even the best things, nothing compares to Jesus.

[18 : 41] And so, I want to leave us this morning with the words found in this morning's epistle reading. little children, keep yourselves from idols.

in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.