

## ***“Ten Commandments: Get the Picture?”***

*Isaiah 44:6-20 • Colossians 1:9-23*

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • January 26, 2020

This morning we continue our series on the Ten Commandments and today we are looking at the second commandment: “You shall not make for yourself a 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 or 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 generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.”

So let’s get right to the point. How many of you have carved idols that you worship? Go ahead, raise your hands if you do. Nobody? Great. I guess we can all go home early today. Well actually not so fast. Remember that the commandments are not just about outward actions but about our hearts. They deal with what we think and feel. Also remember that the commandments still speak to us today and so this applies to our lives right now. So let’s look at how.

The second commandment does prohibit making carved idols to represent God. Most ancient religions used some kind of representation of their deity. The Apostle Paul kept running into this in Roman religion as he traveled around. For example, in Ephesus the silversmiths who made and sold the statues of the goddess Diana started a riot when Paul came to town. And Acts 17 tells us that when he was in Athens, “his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.”

The fact is that humans are made to worship and everyone worships something or someone. Even atheists worship. They don’t worship the God who made them but they worship. They usually worship themselves. Last week we looked at the first commandment prohibiting other gods. We are not to put

anything else in God’s place. He is to be first in our lives, not just on Sunday but every day. Where the first commandment is about worshipping the correct God, the second commandment is about worshipping God correctly.

The best-known instance of idolatry in the Old Testament is the incident with the golden calf, found in Exodus 32. While Moses was on the mountain receiving the law from God, the people demanded that Aaron make a statue. He took their gold jewelry and carved it into the image of a calf and said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.” At first this sounds like a violation of the first commandment. They are worshipping a cow instead of God. But then we’re told that Aaron built an altar before the calf and declared, “Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD.” They weren’t worshipping another god. They thought the golden calf represented Yahweh. They thought they were worshipping the true God in a creative way.

Any time we try to worship God in a way that is different from what He has shown us in Scripture it’s a violation of the second commandment. We tend to get stuck on the idea of a carved image. But God says that we are not to make “any likeness of anything” that is in the sky, on land, or in the water in order to worship it as a representation of God.

But what is so wrong about having an image that represents God to help us worship? A picture is worth a thousand words, right? There are several problems. First, an image or an idol is limiting. God is not bound by anything. He is completely free. Idols undermine that freedom. For example, an idol can only be in one place at a time. God can be everywhere at the same time. God is infinitely more than you can ever know. The Scottish theologian T.F. Torrance calls this “open framework theology.” What he says is that we only grasp a little bit of what

God is like. The more we study and learn about God, the more we realize how much more we don't know. And this goes on forever because God is infinite. As we just sang, God is immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light inaccessible, hid from our eyes. When we create any kind of image of God, that image leads us to believe that we know God fully.

Second, our images of God obscure or distort our understanding of who God is. Maybe you've heard the explanation of the Trinity as being similar to water, which can exist as a liquid, a solid, and a gas. But that explanation leaves out most of God's attributes. Third, idols or images are incomplete. They are inadequate. When we were expecting our first child we went to the doctor and had an ultrasound done that showed us an image of our baby. You could see him move and kick. Then the doctor printed out an image of that ultrasound that we were able to take home. Of course we showed that image to anyone who would look at it. Honestly, though, it didn't look like much. The funny thing is that a few months later, once he was born, we stopped showing people that ultrasound image. We stopped looking at it ourselves. That image was incomplete. And when we had the actual baby in our arms we had no use for that low-quality black and white ultrasound image. It's the same way with God. It's foolish for us to worship incomplete images of Him when we can know God personally.

The commandment not to make any images of God isn't limited to physical images. Mental images of God are just as bad. Sometimes you will hear people say something like, "I like to image God as..." and then they fill in the blank. For example, someone might say, "I like to think of God as a great gardener," or "I like to imagine God giving me a hug." Often this kind of thinking leads to denying some aspect of God's nature. Some say things like, "I don't like to think of God as a judge, just as a loving Savior." Now he IS our loving Savior, but God is also judge. J.I. Packer says, "An imagined God

will always be quite imaginary and unreal." The point is that whatever you imagine about God will always be incomplete at best and dead wrong at worst.

The good news is that we don't have to imagine God because He has revealed Himself to us. Some of what God is like is revealed in nature. When you go to the Grand Canyon you can't help but grasp some of God's power and creativity. But that won't fully reveal God to you. We need what's called "special revelation." God has revealed himself to us in his Word. It's there that you learn who God is, what he is like, and what he expects from you. In the Scriptures you will discover that God has revealed himself most fully to us in the person of Jesus.

In our reading from Colossians 1 we learn that Jesus "is the image of the invisible God," and "in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." Jesus himself said, "I and the Father are one," and "if you have seen me you have seen the Father." Jesus is the complete, perfect image of God. If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. The main reason that we are not to imagine what God is like is that we have already been shown. Jesus is the fulfillment of the second commandment. As Colossians says, he is the God who created all things, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, and in him all things hold together.

God ends the second commandment by giving us the reason for keeping it and a promise. The reason we are not to have our own images of God is because he is "a jealous God," punishing those who hate him. A better translation might be that he is "zealous." He has a burning passionate love for you and wants you to love only Him. The idea here is the love of a husband and wife. Just as you would be very upset to find your spouse with someone else, God is even more upset to find us worshiping something besides him. That leads us to the promise. God promises to show his steadfast love to thousands of those who love him and keep his commandments.

Here's the bottom line. What God expects is for us to love and worship him correctly. That means that our worship should always be Jesus-centered. We are to worship God the way that he shows us in Scripture. The second commandment forbids us from worshiping according to our own preferences. That is idolatry and it's common in American Christianity today. Our worship should be

Bible-based, with lots of Scripture reading, preaching, and prayer. This is what Paul means when he prays that we "may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him...increasing in the knowledge of God." Let's worship the correct God correctly.

*Amen.*