

American Idols

Exodus 20:4-6

Rev. Brian Bill

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In one of our previous churches, one of our members was transferred to another community, and before leaving, he wanted to donate something significant to the church. Since he was from a country where Christians are persecuted, he presented us with an incredible portrait depicting Jesus Christ created by an artist from that part of the world. The image was quite impactful – it stood six feet tall and four feet wide and took two years to complete.

Amazingly, the artist drew this picture using every word in the New Testament! In the top left corner, you could see the first word from the Gospel of Matthew and in the bottom right, the last word from the Book of Revelation. Using shading and other techniques, this portrait of Jesus was stunning. Surrounding the depiction of Jesus were 27 angels, representing the books of the New Testament.

We were grateful for this gift but struggled with where to put it. The first place we chose made us uncomfortable because we were concerned people might start worshipping the image. We decided to move it to a hallway. Later, when renovating our facility, we transferred the picture to our Life Center.

The next day, I was blindsided by a phone call from a long-time member who was extremely upset. This is a summary of what she said, *“I don’t know if I can remain a member because you’ve removed Jesus from my church!”* I was greatly grieved by this comment. Somehow, she had equated an artist’s image with Jesus Himself.

Pictures are powerful, aren’t they? For instance, many of us think of Jesus with fair skin, long blond hair and blue eyes. As a Jewish man from the Middle East, He likely had darker skin, dark hair and brown eyes.

Beth and I have two images etched indelibly on our minds from when we served as missionaries in Mexico City.

As part of our attempt to understand the culture, we made it a practice to visit various churches. One day, we found an open church; and as we walked toward the front, we saw a huge statue of the Virgin of Guadalupe displayed directly above the altar. This image was probably 40 feet high! As we walked closer, we

noticed a small statue of Jesus, only about two feet high, placed at the feet of Mary. We just stared with our mouths open in disbelief while our eyes flooded with tears.

For the next three years, we lived in Mexico. We were amazed and grieved by all the attention given to the Virgin depicted through statues and paintings. In early December each year, hundreds of thousands make pilgrimages to the Basilica in Mexico City from all over the country, many of whom crawl on their knees. Beth and I have been to this shrine to Mary on several occasions and have observed people climbing the rough cement stairs on their knees, leaving bloodstains behind. Worshippers couldn't wait to get inside to kneel before the supposed image of the Lady of Guadalupe imprinted on a cloak.

Please understand I am not a Catholic basher. That's my heritage and I care deeply for those who are Catholic. However, it must be clearly said – Mary has no place in our redemption. It is only by the shed blood of Jesus that you and I can have forgiveness of sin and open access to God the Father. Mary is not a co-redemptorist or a mediator. She needed to have her sins forgiven, just like we do. We must never give to Mary worship which belongs only to Jesus.

We come today to the second commandment found in Exodus 20:4-6: ***“You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or on 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.”***

Here are some observations.

- **This command does not forbid religious works of art.** After all, there are two golden cherubim carved into the cover of the Ark of the Covenant and angelic images were also woven into the temple curtains. There is nothing wrong with religious artwork unless the symbol becomes the substitute. For example, God commanded Moses to make a bronze serpent in Numbers 21:6-9 but later, according to 2 Kings 18:4, the people started worshipping it as an idol.
- **The second commandment is similar to the first commandment.** The first word deals with *whom* we worship; the second with *how* we worship. Philip Ryken says it like this: *“The first commandment has to do with*

worshipping the right God...the second has to do with worshipping the right God in the right way.”

- **This is one of the longest commandments.**
- **This commandment is repeated the most in the Bible.**
- **Most think this is the easiest one to keep.** By the time we're finished, we'll see we're more likely to break this one more than we think.
- **God's people broke this commandment throughout their history.** Even a cursory reading of the Old Testament reveals the battle between worshipping God properly and worshipping images of idols. It was the sin of idolatry that eventually led to the exile of both Israel and Judah. A case could be made that idolatry is the most punished sin in the entire Bible.
- **This is the only commandment with both a punishment and a promise.**

Let's review the Commandments. Anyone up for quoting them from memory? I asked for volunteers on Facebook this week but all I got was crickets. I'll give it a try.

1. One God
2. No idols
3. Revere His Name
4. Remember to Rest
5. Honor Parents
6. No murder
7. No adultery
8. No stealing
9. No lying
- 10.No coveting

Last weekend Pastor Kyle did a super job reminding those of us who are parents and grandparents to love God and live out our faith so we can lead our children and grandchildren to do the same.

Two weeks ago, we learned God doesn't want to be important; He expects to be everything. He doesn't desire to be prominent in our lives; Yahweh demands to be preeminent. *If God is not Lord of all, He's not your Lord at all.*

Let's consider the prohibition, the person, the punishment and the promise of the second commandment.

1. Prohibition. This unconditional prohibition is quite clear in verses 4-5: ***“You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them...”*** The phrase ***“shall not”*** means, ***“Don’t ever do it.”*** The words ***“you”*** and ***“yourself”*** are emphatic, meaning each and every one of us, individually, must avoid making images.

Some translations use, ***“graven images,”*** which simply means “carved,” “chiseled,” or “cut” and has the idea of being man-made. This is reinforced in Exodus 34:17: ***“Do not make for yourself any gods of cast metal.”***

At its core, the second commandment is *a prohibition against creating something with your hands or your heart that either reduces or replaces God.*

This prohibition covers everything – from the heavens to the earth to the sea. That means we’re prohibited from worshipping the sun, moon, stars, “mother earth,” birds, fish, crocodiles, and the Chicago Bears.

Notice how progressive idol worship is: ***“Shall not make...shall not bow down...or serve.”*** Once you build an idol, you will bow down to it; when you work at making an idol, you will end up worshipping it; when you surrender to it, you will eventually serve it.

The true God of Israel has no physical image because He is spirit. Deuteronomy 4:15-16: ***“Therefore watch yourselves very carefully. Since you saw no form on the day that the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, beware lest you act corruptly by making a carved image for yourselves, in the form of any figure...”*** Jesus expanded on this in John 4:24: ***“God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”***

Yahweh is invisible and cannot be contained, which was in stark contrast to the pantheon of gods worshipped by the pagan countries around the Israelites. In order to capture how quickly the second commandment was broken by God’s people, let’s fast forward forty days from the time Moses went up on Mount Sinai. The people were getting restless, wondering why he had been gone so long.

Turn to Exodus 32:1-6: ***“When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, ‘Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of***

him.’ So Aaron said to them, ‘Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.’ So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, ‘Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD.’ And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.”

God was not pleased with His people according to verse 8: *“They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’”*

When confronted by Moses, Aaron came up with the lamest excuse ever in verse 24: *“So I said to them, ‘Let any who have gold take it off.’ So they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf.”*

In her book, “Ten Words to Live By,” Jen Wilken writes,

“Think about the enormity of the lie the golden calf tells: It is small, but God is immense. It is inanimate, but God is Spirit. It is location-bound, but God is everywhere fully present. It is created, but God is uncreated. It is new, but God is eternal. It is impotent, but God is omnipotent. It is destructible, but God is indestructible. It is of minor value, but God is of infinite value. It is blind and deaf and mute, but God sees, hears, and speaks.”

I wrote down a few additional thoughts:

- Aaron crafted the golden calf as an image of God who had brought Israel out of Egypt. He wasn’t deliberately trying to worship a false god.
- This idolatry led to unbridled immorality. That’s what **“rose up to play”** means.
- God punished the people with a plague, leading to the deaths of over 24,000 people.

Aaron's sin of idol worship had long-lasting affects in Israel. It was like a skeleton in their collective closet that kept popping up. Several hundred years later, Jeroboam instituted idol worship, doubling the one golden calf to two. In 2 Chronicles 11:15 we read how he ***“appointed his own priests for the high places and for the goat and for the calves that he had made.”*** Nine years ago, when Beth and I were in Israel, we stood on that exact spot. It felt creepy knowing this was where Israel worshipped the golden calves.

Here are some reasons why God prohibits His people from bowing down to idols.

- **Every picture or image falls short of capturing God in His totality.** Imagine a friend said to you, *“As a way to remember you, I put a picture of a centipede up on my wall.”* How would you feel? Likewise, nothing a human can create can ever match the immensity of the Creator. Images always diminish, subtract, obscure and limit the Lord. In Isaiah 40:25, God asks, ***“To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like Him?”*** J.I Packer writes: *“The heart of the objection to pictures and images is that they inevitably conceal most, if not all, of the truth about the personal nature and character of the divine Being whom they represent.”*
- **When you create an idol, you are putting yourself in a position of sovereignty over the deity.** Some of us do this when we sit with arms crossed in judgment of God for what He's done...or not done in our lives. I appreciate Anne Lamont's insight: *“You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.”*
- **Images end up putting God in a box.** Our caricatures create expectations of what God should do for us. In short, we want to control Him. For many of us, we'd rather serve the God we want, not the God who is. Idol worship is absurd according to Isaiah 44:13-17 where we read of a carpenter who carefully chooses wood: ***“He takes part of it and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Also he makes a god and worships it; he makes it an idol and falls down before it...he prays to it and says, ‘Deliver me, for you are my god!’”***
- **Because our hearts are idol-factories, we long for something to worship.** We're prone to praise a picture or submit to a statue or invest our lives in an image, all in a search for something that will satisfy.
- **This command also forbids inadequate images of God in our minds.** Today, our idols are more inside ourselves than on our shelves. Our struggle is more with mental images, not images made of metal. One commentator

refers to this as “*ideaolatry*.” We worship ideas when we focus on just one palatable attribute of God, like His love, while excluding His wrath and justice.

Have you ever said something like this, “*My God wouldn’t do that*” or “*I like to think of God as...*” or even “*God wants me to be happy, so He’ll understand my immorality...*”? These images might not be carved into stone, but they’re indelible in our imaginations. After all, the word “image” is related to “imagination.” We tend to focus on the things we like about God while forgetting the rest.

After clarifying the command, God quickly reveals His person.

2. Person. Check out the middle part of verse 5: “***...for I, the LORD your God am a jealous God.***” This command is tied to God’s *name* – He is Yahweh, your God. He is the self-existent One. The prohibition is also tied to God’s *nature* – Because of *who* He is, we must do *what* He says. Leviticus 26:1: “***You shall not make idols for yourselves or erect an image or a pillar, and you shall not set up a figured stone in your land to bow down to it, for I am the Lord your God.***”

God refers to Himself as a “***jealous God.***” While we tend to view jealousy with negative connotations, the Hebrew refers to “*warmth of feelings, ardor, zeal, or heat.*” Biblically understood, God has a burning, passionate love for His people and does not want to see us bail on Him or fall into disbelief. His jealousy is right and righteous. He is fully committed to us and expects us to be fully committed to him. He is jealous for our undivided attention, for our whole-hearted allegiance to Him. *Because He is intensely zealous for His people, He is jealous to protect His property!*

When we give our love to another person or possession, His passion is ignited. Exodus 34:14: “***For you shall worship no other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.***” Psalms 78:58: “***For they provoked Him to anger with their high places; they moved Him to jealousy with their idols.***”

In the Bible, God is pictured as being married to Israel. As such, He has every right to be jealous for their affection and to long for their uncompromising commitment to Him. The Almighty sees idolatry as spiritual adultery. Time and again, He refers to His people as “***adulterous***” because of their unfaithfulness. For example, in the Book of Hosea, God commands the prophet to marry an unfaithful woman in order to convey how God feels about Israel’s spiritual infidelity.

Because of God's jealous and zealous person, He punishes those who break this command.

3. Punishment. This sobering truth is found in the last part of verse 5: “...*visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me.*” The word “*visiting*” refers to searching or “*paying attention.*” “*Iniquity*” means “*twisted*” or “*perverted.*” Idolatry is a perverted and twisted turning away from God which can generate consequences that cascade generationally.

This is one of the most frightening verses I know because my unholiness can become contagious to my children and grandchildren. If you worship an idol your kids and grandkids and great grandkids may end up paying the price. Parents, the decisions you're making right now will affect the next 100 years because there's a spiritual DNA that is passed along to our offspring. Long after we're gone, our children and great-grandchildren can suffer consequences linked to our sins.

Tragically, after Aaron led the people into idolatry, we later read in Leviticus 10:1-3 that his two sons, Nadab and Abihu, offered “*unauthorized fire before the Lord, which he had not commanded them.*” As a result, fire came out from the presence of the Lord and vaporized them. Aaron compromised and broke God's commands. His sons did the same and suffered the consequences.

The manner in which you live will mark your children and your grandchildren because they tend to resemble the environment they're exposed to.

- *If a parent practices lying and deception, children can grow up as liars.*
- *If a child lives with criticism, he learns to condemn.*
- *If a child lives with hostility, he learns to fight.*
- *If a child lives with ridicule, he learns to be withdrawn.*
- *If a child lives with shame, he learns to feel guilty.*
- *If a child lives with superficial faith, he learns to view faith as insignificant.*
- *If children see parents bowing to representations of God, they will conclude that the representations ARE God.*
- *If a child grows up in a home where worship is not a priority, worship will be an option seldom chosen.*

This is not to deny individual responsibility or to make you feel like you're stuck in a cycle of sin just because your parents or grandparents made bad choices. Jesus is the bondage breaker! Many of you are starting a new spiritual family tree. I love the promise found in Ezekiel 18:20: ***"The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son..."***

4. Promise. God is so gracious, isn't He? Look at verse 6: ***"But showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments."*** The word ***"but"*** shows a contrast to the consequences of sin. God ***"shows,"*** which means He ***"accomplishes"*** His steadfast love to thousands of generations! The phrase, ***"steadfast love"*** refers to His covenant commitment and is often translated as ***"mercy"*** and ***"loving-kindness."*** The Lord's loyal love is celebrated 26 times in Psalm 136 and is summarized in verse 26: ***"Give thanks to the God of heaven, for His steadfast love endures forever."***

Notice the promise is more powerful than the punishment. The blessing doesn't last just three or four generations, but for thousands! God's mercy is magnified and exponentially multiplied more than His judgment. I'm reminded of a line from one of my new favorite songs – ***"Our sins they are many, His mercy is more."***

Why would we want to bow before an image of an idol when God delights in bestowing His steadfast love on those who love Him? While there is punishment, there is also a promise for those who love God and keep his commands.

This command contains a clear prohibition and calls us to look at the Person of God. We're warned about punishment and we're warmed by His promise. Let's focus now on how we can apply this commandment in our context.

Action Steps

1. Surrender to God whether or not you like what He does. One person writes: ***"God will not be captured, contained, assigned or managed by anyone or anything, for any purpose."*** God wants us to trust Him and obey Him, not use Him. Matt Smethurst says, ***"If God never confuses you, troubles you, or disagrees with you, then you're not staring at transcendence. You're staring at a mirror."***

2. Be careful about covetousness and guard against greed. Colossians 3:5 equates greed with idolatry: ***"Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry."***

Giving back to God what He has given to you is one of the best ways to not worship the god of mammon or the idol of affluence.

3. Eradicate all idols from your life. An idol can be defined as anything (besides God) which becomes a controlling obsession in my life. These questions can help determine if you have some idol adoration going on.

- *Do I want this too much?*
- *Has this become too important to me?*
- *How would I feel if this were suddenly taken away from me?*

Most of us have an idol in our hand, pocket, or purse every hour of every day. Experts have identified a new condition affecting our mental health called, “nomophobia,” or “no-mobile-phone-phobia.” It’s the fear of not being with your phone. Has your iPhone or Android become an idol? Some of us even bow before it as we’re given notifications when we’re not paying enough attention to it.

In Acts 19:19-20, some new believers burned their books because they were leading them astray: ***“And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver. So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.”***

When they got rid of that which was keeping them from God, the gospel spread widely and grew in power. There might be a cost to eradicating idols – commentators believe these books were worth \$10,000 – but the cost will be greater if you hold on to what is making you unholy. As a new believer at the age of 19, after reading this passage, I broke my hard rock [vinyl] albums because of their influence in my life. Is there anything you need to demolish right now?

I appreciate Elizabeth Elliot’s insight: *“The Christian life is a process of God breaking our idols one by one.”* Are you ready to weed out those things that get in the way of true worship?

4. Become an intentional parent or grandparent. Determine to intentionally disciple your children and grandchildren. A couple weeks ago, our daughter Lydia sent a picture which shows her husband Jamie leading their family to church. I love how little Ezra joyfully follows behind.

I also came across a picture of a grandpa holding hands with his grandson. Both have an hourglass imposed on their bodies. The sand is almost out for the grandpa while the grandson has a lot of time left. The idea is we're to pass along God's truth before we pass on.

Watch yourself carefully because others are watching. Be intentional about introducing the next generation to the gospel. During our Awana Awards Night, we watched a video of five-year-old Nora Shattuck sharing how she was saved one morning while working on her Awana verses with her mom. Scott and Molly are living on mission as parents. On this Mother's Day weekend, note how powerful a parent's impact can be.

→ Play Nora Video.

In addition to Nora's parents, her grandparents are also making a grand impact – Tom and Sue Hammar and Alan and Paula Shattuck.

In her book *Gold Cord*, missionary Amy Carmichael tells of Preena, a young Indian girl who became a Christian and had never seen a picture of Jesus. One day, she received a package from abroad. She opened it eagerly and pulled out a picture of Jesus. Preena innocently asked who it was, and when she was told it was Jesus, she burst into tears. “*What's wrong?*” they asked. “*Why are you crying?*” Little Preena's reply says it all: “*I thought He was far more beautiful than that!*”

Whatever image you have of Jesus, He is far more beautiful than that! We don't need a visual representation of Him because Colossians 1:15 says, “***He is the image of the invisible God.***” Hebrews 1:3 adds, “***He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of His nature, and He upholds the universe by the word of His power.***” John 14:9: “***Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.***”

Genesis 1:26-27 says you and I were made in the image of God but because of sin that image is marred beyond measure. Jesus, who is the exact imprint of God's nature, kept the second commandment and took our punishment by dying on the cross for our sins and rising from the dead on the third day. He promises to be faithful for thousands of generations to those who repent and receive Him into their lives.

If you're ready to be saved right now, you could pray this prayer: “*Jesus, thank You for fully keeping the commands because I haven't and can't keep them. I*

confess I am a sinner and repent of my sins. Thank You for bridging the divide between my unholy behavior and a holy God. I believe You paid the price for my sins by dying on the cross and You showed Your power by rising from the dead on the third day. I now receive You as my Savior, my Mediator, and my Lord. Come into my life and lead me to follow You faithfully from now on.”