

“When Our Imagination Runs Wild”
Sermon Series on the Ten Commandments #3
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(Ex. 20:4-6; Hab. 2:18-20)

Introduction.

When my three sons were growing up, one of the things they loved to do the most was to play dress up and make believe. I suspect your kids did too. They had very active imaginations, and I always got a kick out of how they could come up with the wildest ideas and entertain themselves for hours. My granddaughters are just the same.

Our imaginations are wonderful gifts from God, and with them we create, we communicate, and we collaborate. Our imagination is part of what it means to be made in the image of God. But like all good things, one’s imagination can get off track. Your imagination can be used for withdrawing from reality and moving into fantasy, and it can also be used for evil or to hurt other people. And while children love to make-believe, in adult relationships we need realism. If one imagines other people to be different from who they really are, problems will result in the relationship. Psychologists and counselors know this all too well. And what is true of human relationships is also true of our relationship with God.

So, the Second Commandment addresses the question, "How should we use our imagination in relationship to God? And in particular, how should we form our thoughts about God, and how should we worship Him?" If the First Commandment answers the question “*Who* should we worship?” the second one answers “*How* should we worship?” Let’s take a closer look at this commandment today.

I. The Historical Background to the Commandment.

As I shared with you last week, the worship of idols was a common practice in antiquity. Literary and archeological evidence for the worship of idols reflects that it was widely practiced in the ancient world in Mesopotamia, Palestine, Egypt, and in the Roman Empire. Usually an idol was made of wood or stone and sometimes it was covered by a precious metal such as gold or silver, and it was fashioned in some way to reflect the deity it represented. The worshipper would bow down or pay homage to the god depicted by the idol, and often sacrifices were made to curry favor.

The land of Canaan into which the Israelites were preparing to enter was populated by people who had a widespread practice of worshipping idols. The Canaanites had an extensive pantheon, headed by the god El. But for practical purposes, Baal was more significant. He is known in the OT as the fertility god and the god of storms. Asherah and Ashtoreth are also mentioned in the Bible, and they were the goddesses of sex and war. In the land of Canaan there were important agricultural rituals which were associated with the worship of these gods and goddesses. Often Baal was represented as a bull, and Asherah by a phallic-like symbol of a pole. Canaanite temples have been excavated in Syria and Palestine, and the discoveries confirm what the Bible says about the worship of idols in the ancient Near East.

The Second Commandment wasn't given in a vacuum. God was concerned that the people of Israel would be tempted to adopt the practices of the Canaanites and abandon the worship of Him as the one true God. So in the Second Commandment He set out parameters which would keep them from accommodating the culture they were going to rub up against.

The sad reality is that shortly after the giving of this command, Israel violated it in the worst way. In Exodus 32 we're told that when Moses stayed up on Mount Sinai longer than the people expected, they persuaded Aaron, Moses' brother, to make a calf out of the gold from their earrings and other jewelry. When Moses returned to the camp with the Ten Commandments written on tablets of stone, he threw them down and broke them into pieces at the foot of the mountain. He took the calf they made and melted it down, ground it to powder, mixed the powder with water, and made the Israelites drink it.

Gods' clear instruction to Israel was to turn away from any form of idol worship, and He wouldn't tolerate it in any way. Later on the prophet Habakkuk would ask the Israelites a pointed question: *"Of what value is an idol, since a man has carved it? Or an image that teaches lies? For he who makes it trusts in his own creation; he makes idols that cannot speak. Woe to him who says to wood, 'Come to life!' or to lifeless stone, 'Wake up!' Can it give guidance? It is covered with gold and silver; there is no breath in it. But the Lord is in His holy temple; let all the earth be silent before Him"* (Hab. 2:18-20).

God was so concerned about this business of idols because He didn't want the Israelites to live a lie. To bow down to an idol is make believe. It's to pretend that it is something when it really isn't. Carved wood and stone, even covered with gold, are lifeless objects. They have no power; they have no glory. Only God has glory, and He refuses to share it with anyone or anything else.

II. The Meaning of the Second Commandment.

Some people mistakenly think that the meaning of this commandment is to discourage the creation of any art related to God, and some Christians use this passage to justify their opposition to the use of a crucifix, or iconography, or any depiction of God in art at all. But I think that misses the point of what God was saying in this command.

The Hebrew word which is translated “idol”, or as it is sometimes translated “graven image,” is *pesel*, and it literally means “to project an image.” In the NT the Greek word εἰδωλον, from which we get our English word “idol,” means “to cast a shadow.” So the meaning of the prohibition in the Bible is that no shadow of God, no projection or image of God should ever be made. Idolatry happens when I project onto something a meaning that it doesn’t have, or when I ask of it something it can’t supply.

This is true of little statues, but it’s also true of other things, and even people, as well. For example, C.S. Lewis wrote a novel entitled *Till We Have Faces*, and in it he tells the story of young woman who was deified because people believed she caused crops to grow. It wasn’t true, but they claimed it for her. And then when the crops failed, they wanted to kill her. They turned her into a god, and then she let them down. You should never idolize a person, because whenever we idolize another person, they will eventually let you down and leave you disappointed.

The good news of the Second Commandment is that we don’t have to project any shadow. We don’t have to place any meaning on anything and try to create a god out of it, because there already *is* a God. And He has spoken for Himself and made Himself known through His Word. Now, sometimes that’s not very satisfying. It’s difficult to relate to a God you can’t see, and we’d rather have a picture of Him. But the point is any picture you make of God is going to try and limit Him, and any image you come up with tries to confine Him. And God cannot and will not be contained by our imaginations, as great as they may be.

I’ve talked to people who have said, “I like to think of God this way or that way.” For example, they like to picture God as a God of love as revealed in Jesus, but they have a problem with the God of justice and judgment they read about in the OT. (I guess they avoid reading about Jesus cleansing the Temple!) Or they like to picture God as saving everyone, and they have a problem with the whole idea of hell. But it’s not up to us to imagine God as we may want Him to be. He is who He is, regardless of what we may imagine Him to be.

In his landmark book *Habits of the Heart* Robert Bellah reports of a woman named Sheila Larson he interviewed who describes her religious beliefs like this. She said, “I believe in God. I’m not a religious fanatic, I can’t remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It’s called Sheilaism. It’s just my own little voice.”¹

I think there are a lot of people in the world who believe like Sheila. We all have a tendency to make God in our own image, and when we do this we try to limit Him, and even control Him. This has been the problem with idolatry all along. The essence of idolatry is its attempt to control God. We try to bribe Him, we attempt to drive a bargain with Him, and by certain rituals and sacrifices we think we can compel Him to do what we want.

But who God is and how we can know Him and how we are supposed to worship Him has already been revealed to us in the Bible, and we should be careful not to let our imagination take us beyond what that revelation says. When your imagination runs wild and you begin to imagine God is ways that are contrary to what Scripture teaches, you've in danger of trivializing God and making Him into a manageable deity who is smaller than He really is. Abraham fell on his face before God, Moses hid in terror, Isaiah cried out, "Woe is me!" and the apostle Paul was knocked off his horse. God is not someone to be trifled with, and the Bible says He is a consuming fire, so be careful.

III. The Meaning for Us Today.

When I've travelled on mission trips in the Third World to countries like India and the Dominican Republic, I've been amazed to see the way in which people still worship idols today. I'll never forget going to the D.R. and Haiti and discovering how people there still use little voodoo dolls and amulets in idol worship in an effort to gain power or ward off evil spirits. And I remember going into a Hindu temple in Bombay, India, and observing all the little statues, the superstition, and, frankly, the bondage of idol worship in that country. There was a special fertility tree in the temple on which couples would tie yellow ribbons hoping this would help them get pregnant.

It's easy for us to sit back smugly in our modern western culture, and write off the Second Commandment as not pertaining to us and think we don't do foolish superstitious things like that. But God won't let us off that easy? Listen to what Joy Davidman, who was married to C.S. Lewis, once wrote:

What shape is your idol? I worship Ganesa, god of worldly wisdom, patron of shopkeepers. He is the shape of a little fat man with an elephant's head; he is made of soapstone and has 2 small rubies for eyes.

What shape is your idol? I worship a Cadillac convertible. All the days I give it offerings of oil and polish. Hours of my time are devoted to its ritual; and it brings me luck in all my undertakings; and it establishes me among my fellows as a success in life.

What shape is your idol? I worship my beautiful house. Long and loving mediation have I spent on it; the chairs contrast with the rug, the curtains harmonize with the woodwork, all of it is perfect and holy. I live only for the service

of my house, and it rewards me with the envy of my sisters, who must rise up and call me blessed.

What shape is your idol? Is it your house, or your clothes, or perhaps even your worth-while club? I worship my job. I worship my golf game, my bridge game. I worship my comfort. I worship my church; I want to tell you the work we have done in missions beats all the other churches in this city. I worship my girlfriend; she is the best thing that has ever happened to me. What shape is your idol?²

Idolatry is more than worshipping little statues. It involves how we think about God and the things to which we look in order to give us meaning, power, purpose, value or hope. J.I. Packer writes, “How should we form our thoughts of God? Not only can we not imagine Him adequately, since He is at every point greater than we can grasp; [but also] we dare not trust anything our imagination suggests about Him, for the built-in habit of fallen minds is to scale God down. Sin began as [a] response to the temptation, ‘You will be like God’ (Gen. 3:5), and the effect of our wanting to be on God's level is that we bring Him down to ours. [Of course] this is unrealistic, but it is what we all do when imagination is in the saddle.”³

When it comes to the Second Commandment, all of us are guilty of breaking it, and each of us needs to come to the foot of the cross on bended knee and ask forgiveness from the one true God who knows how our imaginations can run wild and has provided for our redemption in the blood of His eternal Son Jesus Christ our Savior. What shape is your idol? Confess it to God, name it, and ask Him to free you of it.

Conclusion.

The ultimate reason we should avoid idol worship is because when God first created the world, He made men and women in His own image. We are made in the image of God, and we are intended to reflect His glory. And the reason God tells us not to make any images of Him is because He already has an image. We are God’s image! As John Calvin wrote, “God cannot be represented by a picture or a sculpture, since He has intended His likeness to appear in us.”⁴ Or as Christopher Wright has written, “The only legitimate image of God...is [us who have been] created in His own likeness.”⁵ We aren’t allowed to make God’s image but only to *be* God’s image.

I close with this story. In 1590 the Japanese War Lord, Hideyoshi, was the ruler of the whole nation of Japan. And he commissioned the building of a colossal statue of the Buddha for a temple shrine in the city of Kyoto. It took 50,000 people 5 years to build this great Buddha and its temple. The work was finally completed, and shortly after the dedication of the shrine, the great Japanese earthquake of 1596 shook the city of Kyoto, and it caused the roof of the temple to crash down upon the Buddha and knock the statue on its side. Hideyoshi was so

disappointed that he literally shot an arrow at the fallen Buddha and said to it, "I put you here at great expense, and you can't even look after your own temple!"

Hideyoshi learn just how disappointing it can be to worship an idol. If you make anything or anyone other than God your idol, one day it's going to fall over, it is going to disappoint you, and it won't be able to help you. If we make work an idol, if we make family an idol, if we make pleasure or possessions or power an idol, they are going to disappoint us and let us down. God alone deserves our worship, and in Him alone will we find what we're truly longing for. May God grant us the grace to live by this commandment today and in the coming week. It's a design for life which can help us flourish as followers of Christ. Amen.

¹ Robert Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, and taken from http://www.robertbellah.com/lectures_5.htm.

² Adapted from Joy Davidman, *Smoke on the Mountain*, pp. 30, 31.

³ J.I. Packer, *I Want to Be a Christian*, p. 272.

⁴ John Calvin, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 121, 122.

⁵ Christopher Wright, *Deuteronomy*, p. 71.