

How To Worship

Exodus 20:4-6

Pastor John Miller

Let's read Exodus 20:1-6. Moses said, "And God spoke all these words, saying: 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me.'" That's the First Commandment. And this is 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 nor 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 generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy..."—in the Hebrew, it's "loving kindness"—"...to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments."

Last time we spent some time asking, "Why should we study the Ten Commandments, the Decalogue, that was given over 3,500 years ago?" They are seemingly so out of step with the views of our society today. Number one, we are studying the Ten Commandments, because God Himself spoke them. Verse 1 says, "And God spoke all these words." So the Ten Commandments are divine words. Number two, God spoke commands, not suggestions. They are universal words. Number three is that God wrote them in stone; they are immutable words. So they are divine, universal and immutable words. They also are gracious words.

As we go through the Ten Commandments, we are learning of God's grace as He gives the Law. That's because the Law drives us to Christ to experience His grace. And it is gracious and merciful of God to give us these Commandments, which are for our good and for God's glory.

Now I want to remind you that there were two tablets of stone. Commandments 1-4 refer to our vertical relationship to God, and these were on the first tablet of stone. God must come first. Commandments 5-10 deal with loving "your neighbor as yourself," and these were on the second tablet of stone. And Jesus put all these Commandments on these two tablets of stone into two Commandments. He said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength...You shall love your neighbor as yourself." And on these two hang all the Commandments, the Law. So these two tablets of the Decalogue deal with our relationship to God, which comes first, and our relationship to others. Until we are vertically and properly related to God, we cannot be horizontally and properly related to others.

Now we come to the Second Commandment, which is found in verse 4. "You shall not make for yourself a carved image."

The 17th century Puritan preacher, Thomas Watson, said, "In the First Commandment, worshipping a false God is forbidden. In the Second Commandment, however, worshipping the true God in a false manner is forbidden." So these two Commandments, at the surface, seem

to be very closely related. Some actually try to combine the two; the Roman Catholic Church combines these two Commandments into one.

But they are actually two, separate issues. In the First Commandment, it says we are to worship only God. In the Second Commandment, we are to worship the only true God in spirit and in truth; we are not to worship Him by the making of idols or images. So the two Commandments complement each other, but they are not contrary to each other. The First Commandment deals with the object of our worship, and the Second Commandment deals with the manner of our worship, how we must worship. Who we worship and how we worship are both important.

Many years ago, A. W. Tozer wrote a book called, *Knowledge of the Holy*, and in the introduction to his book on the attributes of God, he said, "A right conception of God is basic not only to systematic theology but to practical Christian living as well. It is to worship as the foundation is to the temple. Where it is inadequate or out of plumb, the whole structure must sooner or later collapse. I believe there is scarcely an error in doctrine or failure in applying Christian ethics that cannot be traced finally to an imperfect and ignoble thought about God." How true that is.

So we must think right about God. It is absolutely essential that we think right about God. Commandment number one: "...no other gods before Me." Commandment number two: "You shall not make for yourself a carved image."

I first want to point out the prohibition, verse 4 and the first part of verse 5. "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 nor serve them." This is what we are not to do.

In this Commandment, God is forbidding the making of figures or objects representative of God as objects or aids to worship. This is absolutely forbidden; "You shall not make for yourself a carved image."

Does this Commandment forbid all art that is religious? Some people like to have a picture of Jesus in their home. When I was a younger Christian, I had an attraction to pictures of Jesus. I'm a bit of an artist myself, and I had some pictures of Jesus that were my favorite. But I found that as I grew in the Lord and in my understanding of God and His Word, I graduated away from looking at pictures of Jesus, because all of them are inadequate. And the Bible doesn't give us a description of the physical appearance of Christ.

Of course when I had a picture of Jesus, He looked like a hippie back in the '60s. So I thought it was cool; I could relate to this guy. I went to work for a Christian organization and had long hair and a beard, and they were praying for me to get saved, because I was so weird looking. Finally I told them, "I look more like Jesus than any of you. What's the problem here?" We don't know what Jesus looked like, but we need to be careful.

I don't think the Second Commandment is forbidding Christian artwork or a portrait of Christ. When God gave Solomon the instructions for building the temple, artistry was used in the building. There were two cherubim on the Ark of the Covenant facing one another and with their wings touching. The curtain separating the holy of holies from the holy place had angels woven into it. Solomon's temple was full of glory and splendor. So artistry isn't prohibited; it's that it isn't to become an idol or a substitute for God. We're not to worship them or bow down to them and serve them.

Notice God said we are not to make "a carved image." In Romans 1, before we read of Paul preaching the Gospel, he talked about the degeneration of man. We read of how man started with the knowledge of God and then degenerated into making idols of "birds and four-footed animals and creeping things." Man basically started with God but then fell away from God and began to worship and serve the creation rather than the "Creator, who is blessed forever." So Romans describes man's propensity or bent toward falling away from God and wanting to worship a god that he creates in his own mind and with his hands. He creates idols or figures as substitutes for God.

Notice He also says, "You shall not bow down to them nor serve them." So we shouldn't make them, bow down to them or serve them. In the Old Testament, one of the great sins of the people of Israel was that they turned away from Jehovah and worshipped the gods of the heathen around them. That was idolatry. Until their Babylonian captivity, they were idolatrous. Then in the New Testament, they were somewhat delivered from that, but they still had the issue of creating a god of their own making.

When Jesus was tempted by the devil in the wilderness, the devil said, "All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me." The devil "showed Him all the kingdoms of the world." But Jesus said, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve.'" The devil didn't say "serve"; he said "worship." But Jesus knew that whatever we worship, we end up serving.

This Commandment basically says that you don't make idols, you don't bow down to them, you don't worship them and you don't serve them. So be careful of icons, substitutes, statues or relics that get in the way of you worshipping the true, living God. It's very dangerous.

Now some people would say, "Well, what's the big deal if I look at a picture or statue of Jesus or of Mary or some other icon?" Years ago there was a woman in New Mexico frying a tortilla in a pan, and the face of Jesus appeared in the tortilla. Then thousands of people flocked to New Mexico to "the shrine of the tortilla of Jesus." And I've heard of people taking pictures of the face of Jesus in the clouds, and there are angels here and angels there. There are a lot of crazy ideas.

Those who worship God must worship Him "in spirit and truth." So be careful of idolatry; it's a very dangerous thing.

Let me give you five dangers of idolatry. This could be a very long list, but I've limited it to five. Number one, idolatry limits God. Years ago J.B. Phillips wrote a book titled, *Your God is Too Small*. He also translated the New Testament, the J.B. Phillips translation. His book was about the idea that your god is smaller than the God of the Bible, Jehovah. We should have the God of the Bible rather than the god of our own imagination or of our own making. So idolatry limits God.

And we know that God is eternal, that He is transcendent and He is infinite. God is eternal—He always has been and always will be, and that's why He's called the "I am," in verse 2, or "Jehovah" or "Yahweh." He is the covenant-keeping God.

He is also transcendent. What does that mean? It means that He is above, beyond and outside of everything. We know, see, smell, feel, touch, and understand, but God cannot be known apart from revelation; He is transcendent.

And not only is God eternal and transcendent, He is infinite. The heavens cannot contain the true and living God of the Bible. He is infinite. But to reduce God to a little idol, statue or icon is limiting the true and living God.

When Paul went to Athens, in Acts 17, he saw the city wholly given to idolatry. I've made a few trips to Greece and Athens and had the privilege of preaching on Mars Hill. But during Paul's time, it was full of idolatry. Paul said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious. I even found an altar... 'To the Unknown God.'" The Athenians were pantheistic and polytheistic. They didn't want to leave out any God, so they had this altar "To the Unknown God." Then Paul said, "Him I proclaim to you."

So Paul spoke to them about the God who made all things. He's the God of creation. Paul said, "In Him we live and move and have our being." And he described the Bible definition of God as eternal, transcendent and infinite. Then Paul said, "We ought not to think that the Divine Nature..."—or "Godhead"—"...is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising." God is not to be limited to gold, silver, stone or the works of man's hands. It's very dangerous to do that. The First Commandment forbids polytheism, and the Second Commandment forbids idolatry.

Number two, idolatry is dangerous because it obscures God's glory. Where God is limited, He never is described as the eternal, transcendent, infinite God. And idols always obscure the glory of God.

It's interesting that when God was giving Moses the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, at the foot of the mountain people were dancing naked around a golden calf. They told Aaron, "Make us gods that shall go before us; for as for this Moses...we do not know what has become of him." They didn't know where the God of Israel was; they couldn't see Him on the mountain. So Aaron collected all their gold jewelry and from it made a golden calf. The Egyptians worshipped golden calves. So the people took off their clothes and danced around the golden

calf. And quite often idolatry leads to immorality. If you have a wrong view of God, it wrongly affects the way you think and the way you live your life.

Then Moses came down from the mountain and saw this drunken orgy around the golden calf. In anger, he broke the two tablets of the Ten Commandments. But it's interesting that after fashioning the golden calf, Aaron said, "This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!" But then he said, "Tomorrow is a feast to the Lord." He just made this golden calf and then had the gall to say that they were going to worship Jehovah the next day. They combined the worship of the golden calf with the worship of Jehovah. They were confused; perhaps they thought this gold calf was representative of Jehovah who lead them out of the bondage of Egypt. So this kind of worship obscures the glory of God.

Number three, idolatry localizes God. God is omnipresent. It means He is present everywhere at once. In Psalm 139:7-10, the psalmist says, "Where can I flee from Your presence?...If I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there Your hand shall lead me." I can't get away from God. God is present everywhere all the time. But idolatry localizes God.

John 4 is a great counterpart to this Second Commandment. Jesus met a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. He ministered to this woman. He said, "Go, call your husband." She said, "I have no husband." Jesus said, "You have well said, 'I have no husband,' for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband." Then the woman said to Jesus, "Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain..."—Mount Gerizim—"...and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship." She wanted to know the place where they were supposed to worship. Then Jesus said, "The hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father...The true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth." So it is not a place but a Person.

This is the positive teaching of this negative Commandment. We're not to worship an idol made with men's hands, limited by time and space. We are to worship the transcendent, eternal, omniscient, infinite God.

Number four, idolatry materializes God. John 4:24 says that they who worship "must worship in spirit and truth." It says "in spirit" because God is a spirit. We must worship Him in "truth" as opposed to worshipping the works of our hands. God doesn't want a soulish experience. He doesn't want an emotional experience. He wants a spiritual encounter. "Truth" is God's Word, as God is revealed in His Word. So we must worship God "in spirit and truth," because God is spirit.

And number five, idolatry places man's sinful imagination above God's divine revelation. This is the overarching thought. Idolatry puts man's sinful imagination of what God is like in place of God's divine revelation.

I heard of a little girl in a fourth grade, Sunday school class who was drawing a picture intently. The teacher ask her, "Sweetheart, what are you doing?"

She answered, "I'm drawing a picture of God."

The teacher said, "Don't you realize that God is spirit, and no one knows what God looks like?"

The little girl said, "They will when I get done."

We must be careful not to create in our own minds as well as physically a representation of God and who He is. We must submit to the authority of Scripture. God can only be known by His revelation. You can't know Him by "search" and "find." God must come to you. Psalm 19:1-2 and 4 says, "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork. Day unto day utters speech...Their line has gone out through all the earth." Creation speaks of its Creator. And He who creates is always greater than what is created. That's why when you make an idol, it is not only less than the infinite God, it is even less than you, because it's dead. So the creation testifies of God.

The Scriptures also testify of God. Again in Psalm 19:7, it says, "The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple." God is revealed in His Word.

And Jesus Christ is the ultimate revelation of God the Father. Jesus told Philip, "Have I been with you so long, and you have not known Me, Philip; He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father.?' " The doesn't mean that Jesus was the Father, but Jesus revealed the Father; He was God incarnate.

John 1:18 says, "No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him." Jesus has declared the Father, revealed Him or made Him known. We get our word "exegesis" from that verse, "explain God." And Hebrews 1:1 says, "God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by..."—in and through—"...His Son." Colossians 1:15 says, "He is the image of the invisible God." So looking at Jesus we can understand God and who He is in His very nature.

The prohibition against idolatry is deeper than making material images of God. You might feel content right now and say, "Well, I don't have a statue of Jesus on my dashboard. I don't have a statue of the saints. I don't pray to the saints or to any icon." But God is talking about more than just a material idol; it forbids the dreaming up of mental images of God that are false.

Remember that all of these Ten Commandments go deeper than the surface. Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder'...But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment." He also said, "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery,' but I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

So how does this Commandment go deeper? It's not just fashioning an idol out of wood, stone or clay to make a god and bowing down and worshipping it. It's forming an image in your mind and making it a god, or what you perceive a god is like. People form a false image of God in their minds.

Some view God as a cosmic Santa Claus. He's a jolly fellow in heaven, "makin' a list and checkin' it twice and gonna find out who's naughty and nice." If you're good, God bless you; if you're bad, God punishes you. Some view God in heaven as an angry judge, who is just waiting for us to get out of line so He can strike us or throw us into prison.

Another view is that God is a loving grandfather who would never judge sin or send anyone to hell. You can see how dangerous this becomes when we create our own idea of God to fit our own fancy or lifestyle. "I want to do this, so this is what God will allow." Or "The god I believe in is the god of love, and he would never send anyone to hell or judge anyone." That's convenient for you; you can just invent or create your own god to suite your own fancies. It's very dangerous.

And those people usually create a god that accommodates their sinful lifestyle. They say, "Our god says, 'Sex outside of marriage is okay.' God is love, so he won't judge us." And they forget that God is also righteous, holy and just. They haven't read the Bible. God is jealous over us and zealous and protective over His relationship with us. So it is very dangerous to create gods in our own minds and in our own image.

I think of the "faith teachers" or known as the "prosperity, health-and-wealth preachers." I think it is so tragic that they have created a god that isn't the God of the Bible. Their god wants you healthy, wealthy and prosperous. Does God love you? Yes. Does God want to bless you? Yes. But nowhere in the Bible has God promised that if you follow Him, He'll make you healthy or wealthy.

Some of the most godly people I know are suffering physically. There is no guarantee that God will heal you. Can He and does He heal? Yes. But they have created this god whereby you just rub the genii, "in Jesus' Name" and poof—prosperity, health and wealth. That's not the God of the Bible. That's the god of your own imagination. That the god of your own ideas.

Or some theologically eliminate hell or judgment. Or their moral standards have dropped, and they accommodate that by a god who is loving and kind and will never judge sin. It's not so; that's not the God of the New Testament.

So idolatry dishonors God, it robs Him of glory, it deceives the worshipper, it destroys their relationship to the true and living God and leads to an empty life that is unsatisfying. In Colossians 3:5, Paul said that "covetousness...is idolatry." If you covet your car, or something like that, you are an idolater.

Notice not only the prohibition in our text, but secondly, the protection, verse 5. "For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and

fourth generation of those who hate Me.” The first part of this verse, “I the Lord your God, am a jealous God” freaks people out. The only thing I can think of for that reaction is that the word “jealousy” is a word we see as a vice rather than a virtue.

But let me calm you down about this verse. Whenever the Bible says that God is “jealous,” His jealousy is righteous, holy and good. There are different kinds of jealousy. There is a sinful, self-centered jealousy that thinks of only oneself. And then there is a righteous jealousy, just as there is a righteous indignation.

I’m not an Oprah Winfrey fan, but she claims that when she was in church as a young person, she heard the preacher say, “God is jealous,” and it really turned her off. It so turned her off that she left “orthodox Christianity” and created her own god. She said, “The god I worship is not jealous.”

But the Bible says that God is jealous. So obviously she misunderstands what it means for God to be “jealous.” God’s holy, righteous jealousy is the concept that the relationship of you worshipping your Creator, your Redeemer, your Savior and the very fact that He is God—He said, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage”—means that He is deserving, it is right, He is the covenant-keeping God, we love Him supremely and preeminently and don’t worship any other gods or idols. So it’s a righteous jealousy.

It’s like a marriage relationship. If you’re married—you have a husband or a wife—you should be jealous of their affection, jealous over their love. Not in a sinful, evil way but in a way that says it isn’t right that they love another. If your spouse’s affection, love or attention goes to someone else, that is not holy or righteous or good. It’s detrimental to the marriage and dishonors God. So you should be zealous, jealous and protective of your relationship. You should put parameters around your marriage to protect it.

God does the same thing. He’s jealous or zealous over you. That is His holy, righteous jealousy.

The reason God mentions that, in the context, is because He doesn’t want us to have “other gods before [Him],” and He doesn’t want us to make any other “image,” because He is “the Lord your God.” He is jealous of us.

And God’s jealousy of us means we should be jealous of Him. If I don’t worship any other gods, then I have the true, living God. If I don’t substitute other gods as idols for God, then I have the true, living God. So I should reciprocate and respond to God’s jealousy or zeal by being jealous or full of zeal for God and love Him.

So you have to ask yourself, “Am I jealous for God? Do I get angry when others things rob God of glory or steal Him off the throne of my heart?”

Notice, thirdly, the punishment, verse 5. “...visiting the iniquity...”—or “punish the sin”—“...of

the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Me.” There is a false teaching that has floated around the church for many years called “generational curses.” Those who teach this have adopted a secular psychology to promote this doctrine that even if you’re a Christian and have been born again, if you had a parent or grandparent or great-grandparent who was involved in the occult, witchery, idol worship or Satan worship, it can bring demonic attack upon your life. That’s not what God is saying in this text. Notice the text says, “of those who hate Me.”

When you become a Christian and are born again, the Bible says, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.” So that breaks the so-called “generational curse.” Christ puts in a new heart, gives you a new Spirit and a new relationship with Him as you love the Lord, serve Him and worship Him. You are starting a new relationship with God. And that breaks the cycle.

Now you can be adversely affected by your parents’ sin. There is a sense in which children can suffer because of the sins and disobedience of their parents. We know that. But the verse says it is for “those who hate Me.”

So the question we need to ask is, “Do you love the Lord and obey the Lord?” It’s God’s grace. Many times He will chasten us to awaken us to our need for Him in order to draw us back to our relationship with Him.

Verse 6 says, “...but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.” This is the promise provision. Isn’t it cool that God ends this commandment with this statement? It’s intended to be a contrast. In the Hebrew, it starts “...but showing loving kindness.” The word “mercy” is the word for the Hebrew “loving kindness.” And God shows it “to thousands,” not just to third or fourth generations, not just to my children or my children’s children or my children’s children’s children. But He shows it to “thousands” of generations.

This is the blessing we want, in verse 6. We want God’s loving kindness to be upon us. So what do we do? “Love [Him] and keep [His] commandments.”

Many times when I’m talking to young people, I’ll say, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength,” and obey His Word. God will bless you. His loving kindness will be on your side.

I look at my own life as a fulfillment of this passage of Scripture. I had a grandmother who loved the Lord, parents who loved the Lord, married a woman who loves the Lord, raised children who love the Lord and I’m praying for my grandchildren to love the Lord. What a blessing!

So there is a natural punishment and consequence because of a jealous God when we disobey Him and disregard His Word. But there are benefits and blessings to those who “love [Him] and keep [His] commandments.” It goes on to “thousands” of generations.

There is an intended contrast here. The punishment or the curse comes “to the third and fourth generations,” but the blessing of God’s “mercy” or “loving kindness” goes to “thousands” of generations.

By way of application, there is the blessedness of obedience. We should love God preeminently, worship Him “in spirit and in truth,” the truth of who He is as revealed in both the written Word, the Bible, and in the ultimate, living Word, Jesus Christ.

I found it interesting that in 1 John 5:21, the Apostle John wrote, “Little children, keep yourselves from idols.”