



The Second Commandment

PROTECTS TRUE THEOLOGY

“You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. ⁵You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, ⁶but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.”

EXODUS 20:4-6

KEY IDEA: The true God is to be worshiped in the right way.

OUTLINE:

- A. GOD PROHIBITS FALSE IMAGES. (v.4)
- B. GOD PROTECTS HIS GLORY. (v.5a)
- C. GOD UPHOLDS HIS WORD. (vv.5b-6)

DISCUSSION:

- How does one successfully remove an idol from his or her life?

LESSON:

What is the connection between the first and the second commandment? They both seem to speak about *not having any other god than the true and only God*. However, there is a sharp distinction. The first commandment teaches us that *we are to have the one true God*—the God who has revealed Himself in the Bible as our God—and that we are to have no other gods before the true One. The second commandment builds on the first, but in the second, God teaches us *how we are to worship this one true God*, that is, without ever making any image or likeness to represent Him to aid us in our worship.

The first commandment gives us *the subject of our worship*, and the second commandment gives us *the manner of our worship*. To put it another way, the first gives us the “*WHO*” of worship, and the second gives us the “*HOW*” of worship. The second commandment is not so much about *prohibiting you from worshipping the wrong god*, but rather, it is prohibiting you from *worshipping the one true God in the wrong way*.

In this lesson, we will consider *why God prohibits images, protects His glory, and upholds His Word*.

A. GOD PROHIBITS FALSE IMAGES. (v.4)

"You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth."

1. **God forbids the creation of any material likeness to aid our worship of Him**, whether it be *figurines, statues, altars, or icons*. The second commandment *does not* forbid the making of an image for artistic purposes. God does not hate art. God Himself commanded Israel to make beautiful, ornate images of the cherubim and curtains for the temple (*Ex.25:31; 26:31*). Neither does the second commandment forbid the making of images *for civil or secular use* like statues or monuments. In Matthew 22:15ff, we find an occasion where Jesus acknowledges the use of images for secular use.

- Then the Pharisees went and plotted together how they might trap Him in what He said. ¹⁶ And they sent their disciples to Him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that You are truthful and teach the way of God in truth, and defer to no one; for You are not partial to any. ¹⁷ Tell us then, what do You think? Is it lawful to give a poll-tax to Caesar, or not?" ¹⁸ But Jesus perceived their malice, and said, "Why are you testing Me, you hypocrites? ¹⁹ Show Me the coin *used* for the poll-tax." And they brought Him a denarius. ²⁰ And He said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" ²¹ They said to Him, "Caesar's." Then He said to them, "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's."

The point was that which bore Caesar's image belonged to him, but men made in God's image belonged to God, and He deserves their obedience and worship. The second commandment prohibits *the making of images as an aid or help to worship*. John MacArthur points out that "total censure of artistic expression was not the issue; the absolute censure of idolatry and false worship was the issue."

2. **God refuses to be worshiped by means of images.** The mention of "*what is in heaven or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth*" is meant to make it clear that *God is the Creator, not the creation*. Watson once said, "God is to be adored in the heart, not painted for the eye."³ Images present to the eye of the worshiper something claiming religious veneration (reverence) (*Deut.4:12, 15-18, 23-24*). This is why the prophet Isaiah challenged the people in his day about the impossibility of making any image of God by saying, "*To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare with Him?*" (*Is.40:18*). There is nothing to *represent* or *replace* Him. Nothing in the heavens compares to Him (*sun, moon, or stars*)—for He rides upon wings of the wind and appoints the number of the stars and calls them by name (*Ps.104:3; 147:4*). Nothing in the earth beneath (*men, animals, trees, plants, etc.*) compares to Him. Neither is there anything in the sea comparable to Him. Creation *declares* His glory; it does not *contain* His glory (*Ps.8*). Creation is *finite*; God is *infinite*. There is nothing more insulting to God than to represent Him by that which is finite.

- **Isaiah 66:1-2a**—Thus says the LORD,
"Heaven is My throne and the earth is My footstool.
Where then is a house you could build for Me?
And where is a place that I may rest?
² "For My hand made all these things,
Thus all these things came into being," declares the LORD.

³ Thomas Watson., *The Ten Commandments*, p.35

Because God is the Maker of all things, the attempt to make any object in His image robs Him of glory. In Isaiah 42:8, God declares, *"I am the LORD, that is my name; I will not give My glory to another, nor My praise to graven images."* John Calvin rightly says, "God should be purely worshiped by us according to His nature and not according to our imagination. When we make images of God, we are re-creating Him in our image."

Jesus explained the rationale behind the second commandment in John 4:23-24, when He said, *"But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."* The use of images and other material things as a focus or help to worship *denies* who God is (Spirit), and *how* we must worship Him (in spirit and truth). God is spirit. He does not have a physical form. To make a true image of God is impossible. The danger of the construction of images is that they confuse *the Creator* with His *creation*. God has revealed what He is really like in His Son (*John 14:9; Col.2:9*). He has also left evidence of His eternal power and divine nature in creation (*Rom.1:20*), but when people see this evidence, they suppress it. Even further, as a result of being in a fallen condition, they seek to *"exchange the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures"* (*Rom.1:23*). The second commandment bans the use of relics of the saints, sacred monuments, and any effigies to assist in the worship of God. The second commandment forbids image worship and is about worshiping the right God in the right way.

APPLICATION: This apparently was still a challenge for the early church, and it is for us today. In Acts 17:24-31, Paul preached the Gospel to the most educated and scholarly religious people of his day who were seeking to worship the true God through idols or images. In 1 Corinthians 10:14ff, Paul warned believers about the association with those who worship false gods (*Cf. 1 John 5:21; 1 Thess.1:9-10; Phil.3:17-19*). Both the psalmist and Isaiah ridicule the absurdity of making idols and images (*Ps.115:3-8; Is.44:8-20*).

B. GOD PROTECTS HIS GLORY. (v.5a)

⁵"You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God."

In the first commandment, God reminded the people that He is *a gracious God*—"...who bought them out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (*Ex.20:2*), but here He reminds us that He is also *a jealous God*. A gracious and jealous God describes the attributes of the living God. What does this mean?

Jealousy has both a positive and negative connotation to it. The Hebrew word for **"jealous"** (*qanna*) is an adjective expressing ideas of zeal and/or the stirring of very strong emotion. In all five Old Testament uses, this attribute of Jehovah describes one who is committed to defend His honor (*Ex.20:5; 34:14; Deut.4:24; 5:9; 6:15*). It also reflects a zero tolerance for the worship of other so-called gods.

When we think of jealousy, we often tend to think of it as a negative and selfish emotion, but there is such a thing as *righteous jealousy*. A husband has the right to be jealous of his wife's affections, and a wife is right to be jealous of her husband's affections. I do not want my sons to walk around, calling other men, "Dad." Jealousy is a right and good thing when it is a passion to protect what is rightfully yours.

In an argument from the lesser to the greater, God is passionate for what belongs to Him—and we as His creatures belong to Him (*Ezek.18:4*). God says in Exodus 34:14, “for you shall not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.” Jealousy is understood here in both a positive sense (God is jealous for His people—Cf. *Zech.1:14; 2:8 Is.62:4*) and in a negative sense (God is jealous of His people). God is jealous that His people should not go after false gods or worship the true God in a false manner. Therefore, our adoration and worship are due to Him alone as the Sovereign Creator and Redeemer of His people (*Ex.34:14; Deut.4:23-24*). God is right to desire us to exclusively worship Him as God because there is no other god than He.

- **Leviticus 26:1**—You shall not make for yourselves idols, nor shall you set up for yourselves an image or a sacred pillar, nor shall you place a figured stone in your land to bow down to it; for I am the LORD your God.
- **Deuteronomy 16:22**—You shall not set up for yourself a sacred pillar which the LORD your God hates.

C. GOD UPHOLDS HIS WORD. (vv.5b-6)

“visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, ⁶but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.”

The first reason against image worship is because God is a jealous God. The second reason is two-fold:

1. God visits image worshipers in anger.

The word “**visiting**” does not picture a friendly “visit” but a visit to pay back perpetrators for their idolatrous belief and behavior. The word for visit (*paqad*) has the basic meaning of intervening or to inspect or punish iniquity (*Deut.4:24; 5:9; 6:15*).

Thomas Watson—“Sin makes God visit in anger...Sin twists the cord that pinches us. It creates all our troubles. It is the bitterness in our cup and the gravel in our bread. Sin is the Trojan horse that causes all the trouble. Sin is the womb of our sorrows and the grave of our comfort. God visits our sin.”⁴

How are children affected by the iniquities of the forefathers? Is this a generational curse?

- First, it is crystal clear from Ezekiel 18:19-32 that no child is punished by God for their parents’ sin. (*Cf. 2 Chr.25:4*)
- Second, although children are not responsible or guilty for their father’s iniquity, they are *influenced and affected* by it.

Rod Matton—“Sons and remote descendants inherit the consequences of their father’s sins, in disease, poverty, captivity, with all the influences of bad example and evil communications. The deception that Abraham practiced was picked up by his son and grandson. With each generation, the deception increased (*Gen.20:2*—lie, *Gen.26:7*—lie, *Gen.27:32*—greater lie.) David’s iniquity and lust for women affected Solomon (*1 Kings 11:1-3*), and Rehoboam (*2 Chr.11:21; 12:1*). What a father does in moderation, his kids may do in excess or extremes. Our kids amplify our weaknesses and compromises. The crack in the door that we give to sin, our children will open completely. The Bible stresses the importance of acknowledging the iniquities of forefathers (*Neh.9:2; Dan.9:16*).”

⁴ Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, p.44

The key verb under this heading is the term **"hate."** God visits the children *"of those who hate Me."* "Children who repeat the sins of their fathers, evidence it in personally hating God; hence they too are punished like their fathers."⁵ The word for **"hate"** (*sane*) means to detest, abhor, loathe, be hostile, have a feeling of open hostility and intense dislike. To be unwilling—the opposite of to love. The present tense signifies that this person has an ongoing, unabated willful hostility toward Jehovah. This is why God visits them with punishment—for their persistent iniquity. Here is a warning to harness image worship—it will influence our families, generations after us. The cure for a generational curse has always been repentance. When Israel turned from idols to serve the living God, the "curse" was broken, and God saved them (*Judg.3:9-14; 1 Sam.12:10-11*). Yes, our sin affects our children, and one special sin for which God visits is idolatry and image-making. God is a jealous God who will not allow any rivals. He views idolatry and image worshiping as hating Him and promises to visit in punishment. But in the very next verse, God promises to also visit in mercy.

2. God visits in mercy.

⁶ "but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments."

The good news is that mercy is a thousand times better than wrath. God's grace lasts a thousand times longer than His wrath. What a warning against breaking God's law and incentive to keeping it. A godly parent does not invite God's wrath, but helps to keep off wrath from their child.

To show **"lovingkindness"** (*hesed*) is the idea of faithful love in action. God's *hesed* denotes persistent and unconditional tenderness, kindness, and mercy. A person may force God to punish them because of their actions, but they can never force God to show mercy.

- Mercy is free and voluntary. (*Hos.14:4*)
- Mercy is powerful. (*Luke 8:1-2*)
- Mercy is superabundant. (*Ex.34:6-7*)
- Mercy is abiding. (*Ps.103:17; 136*)

The greatest sign of God's anger is to *give people up to their own sins* (*Ps.81:12*), but one of the greatest acts of mercy is when God places *the bridle of restraining grace upon us* in mercy (*Gen.20:6; Heb.12:10*). The pinnacle of God's mercy is when He *saves us* (*Titus 3:5*). Saving grace is His crowning mercy, and so the Christian is not to despair, but be encouraged to go on to serve the Lord!

- **Micah 7:18**—Who is a God like You, who pardons iniquity
And passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of His possession?
He does not retain His anger forever,
Because He delights in unchanging love.
- **Psalm 86:5**—For You, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive,
And abundant in lovingkindness to all who call upon You.

If the argument of mercy does not persuade you to serve God, what will?

⁵ Walter Kaiser, "Commentary on Exodus" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol.1, p.481

God's mercy is for those who **love Him**. God wants us to love Him above everything else, for love for God is the final test of a man's faith (*John 14:15; 1 Cor.13:2; Gal.5:6*).

Thomas Watson—"Love is the first and greatest commandment. Love is the queen of all graces. It outshines all others as the sun outshines the planets. In some respects, love is more excellent than faith...faith unites us to Christ. Faith puts upon us the embroidered robe of Christ's righteousness...but love is more excellent in respect to the continuance of it. It is the most durable grace. Faith and hope will shortly cease, but love will remain...this grace alone will accompany us in heaven."⁶

How must our love for God be characterized?

It must be pure and genuine. Not perfect, but pure in the sense that *we love God for God Himself*. It is easy to love people for what they do for you, and the same is true of God. But we must love God not for His *benefits*, but for His intrinsic excellence! God is awesomely beautiful and unchangingly good!

It must be with all our hearts. Half-hearted love is distasteful to God. Lukewarm love nauseated Christ (*Rev.3:15-17*). To love God with the whole heart means to love Him with the whole of our being—the *mind, the affections, and the will*. It is an unrivaled love. Every other love must be subsidiary and subordinate to our love for God.

How can we know whether we love God?

- He who loves God desires His presence. (*Ps.84:2*)
- He who loves God does not love sin. (*Ps.97:10*)
- He who loves God is not much in love with anything else. (*Gal.6:14*)
- He who loves God cannot live without Him. (*Ps.143:7*)
- He who loves God will do whatever it takes to get Him. (*Song.3:2*)

Plutarch reports of the Gauls, an ancient people of France, that after they had tasted the sweet wine of Italy, they never rested until they had arrived at that country. He who is in love with God never rests until he has a part in Him.

- He who loves God loves His people. (*1 John 5:1*)
- He who loves God is concerned not to dishonor Him.

REVIEW: What does God command in the second commandment? God prohibits the creation of any likeness to Him to aid worship for several reasons:

- Because He is a jealous God.
- Because He views image worship as hating Him and visits it with punishment.
- Because He visits loving obedience with mercy and lovingkindness forever.

⁶ Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, pg.57

APPLICATION:

THE COMMANDMENTS and CHRIST—How did Christ fulfill the second commandment?

THE COMMANDMENTS and THE CHRISTIAN—How do we violate the second commandment today, and what will help us fulfill it?

What is your takeaway from this lesson?

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