

THE 10 COMMANDMENTS - PART 3

Dead idols and the Living God

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Preaching passage:	Exodus 20:4-5
Subject:	Why we should not make any craved images, bow down and worship them
Complement:	because the LORD God is jealous and will hold us accountable for our behavior.
Exegetical idea:	We should not make, bow down to, and worship any craved images because the LORD God is jealous and will hold us accountable for our behavior.
Homiletical idea:	Our God is the great and awesome God!
Purpose:	To encourage my hearers to recognize God as the great and awesome God.

Introduction

In my opinion, making a carved image and then bowing down to it is a foolish idea. Think about it for a moment. A person cuts down a tree. Half of the tree, he chops up and uses the wood to make a fire. He cooks some food over the fire and warms himself, saying “Ah, I am warm; I see the fire.” Then he takes the other half of the tree and carves it into a god, bows down to that carved block of wood and says, “Save me; you are my god!”

Ridiculous! And I’m not the only one who thinks that’s foolishness. The LORD God thinks that’s foolishness too! That scenario that I just quoted...about the man cutting down the tree...I didn’t make that up. I quoted that from the words of the LORD, recorded in Isaiah 44. That hunk of wood knows nothing. It understands nothing. If the man puts that wooden idol in his house, and the man’s house catches on fire, the man has to rescue his god. The god can’t rescue him. Do you see how ridiculous this is? If the man doesn’t rescue his wooden god that he has carved, the god will get burned up in the fire! If a person makes a god of stone, he can crush it! If a person makes a god of metal, he can melt it!

That’s why the LORD God says through the prophet Habakkuk, “Of what value is an

idol, since a man has carved it....he makes idols that cannot speak. Woe to him who says to the wood, "Come to life!" Or to a lifeless stone, "Wake up!" (Hab 2:18-19)

It's so foolish. So why doesn't the LORD God treat making a carved idol as foolishness and just ignore it? Why did the LORD God devote the 2nd of 10 sayings from the mountain to this issue? "....." (Exodus 20:4-5) Apparently, the LORD God has strong feelings about this issue. That's why He also said through His servant Moses, "Cursed is the man who carves an image or casts an idol..." Deut 27:15

But why is the LORD God so opposed to the practice of making carved images, bowing down to them and serving them? Let me suggest two reasons. First, if the carved image represents anything other than the LORD God, then making a carved image and bowing down to it is a direct transgression of the first commandment. If you remember our previous study on the first commandment, the LORD God declared: "I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods besides Me." The LORD God is saying to us personally, "Let me be your God!" He is the LORD God, the only true God, creator of the heavens and the earth. But He wants to be our God. He wants to be your God. He wants to be my God. So one reason why the LORD God would oppose the practice of making carved images, bowing down to them and worshiping them is this: if those carved images represent anything other than the LORD God then we are directly transgressing the first commandment. We should have no other gods besides the LORD God, creator of the heavens and the earth.

There are many parts of the world where people still carve gods for themselves out of wood and stone. Just like the gods of Egypt, some gods look like birds of the air, some look like

animals or humans, some look like water creatures. When a new family is formed, the husband and wife bring their gods with them to their new home. When Rachel, the wife of Jacob, left her father's home, she brought her family gods with her in her saddle bags. And she even lied to her father so that he wouldn't find them. It's not easy to break away from those family traditions that have been followed for generation after generation.

In other parts of the world, people may not carve idols out of wood or stone but they carve idols in their imagination. They idolize movie stars and sports heroes. They collect pictures and memorabilia about their idols. And all they ever talk about is their idol. They bow down to their idols in their minds and serve them. And that is just as much a breaking of the 2nd commandment as carving an idol out of wood or stone, isn't it? So whether you are carving an idol out of wood or stone, or carving an idol in your imagination and bowing down to it, the LORD God says, "You shall not...." There are no other gods besides the LORD God, creator of the heavens and the earth. That's one reason why we should not make carved images and call them gods.

But I want to suggest a second reason why the LORD God opposes the practice of making carved images, bowing down to them and serving them. Sometimes people try to make carved images to represent Him. They want to shrink the LORD God down to something that they can grasp, something that they can handle. Their rationale sounds good. They say, "I just want to sense God's presence near, and so if I make this idol, this carved image, to represent Him, then it is easier for me to sense His presence."

But there is something terribly wrong with that logic. By shrinking the LORD God down to something that they can handle, they distort the truth about our great and awesome God. He is

the Almighty One. He cannot be portrayed with a chunk of wood. He cannot be confined in a block of stone.

Listen to the Word of God through the prophet Isaiah:

Isaiah 43:1-3, 10-13. “.....” Listen also to these inspired word, written 3,000 years ago by the Psalmist David. “.....” Psalm 139:1-3, 7-9. Surely, the LORD our God is an awesome God! What do you say?

Solomon spoke words of truth at the dedication of the Temple of God in Jerusalem, when he said, “The heavens, even the highest heavens cannot contain You. Much less this temple I have built.” 2 Chronicles 6:18

And that is why it is such an offense to God when people try to shrink God down into a carved idol—a chunk of wood or a block of stone. That distorts the truth about the greatness of our awesome God. So why do people make carved images, carved idols to represent the God of heaven? Any ideas? Either consciously or subconsciously they are creating the illusion that they have control over God. If they are doing something that they don’t want God to see, they can just cover His eyes. If they are having a conversation or a heated argument that they don’t want God to hear, they can just cover His ears. If they don’t want God around for a while, they can just put Him in the closet, or take Him to another room.

I know. It’s a ridiculous idea.. And I’m sure that most people don’t consciously say to themselves, “I’m going to manipulate God!” But in reality, that’s what they are trying to do. To shrink God down to a manageable size, so that He can be controlled.

I ’m concerned that some of us have a similar attitude when we pray. Instead of filling our prayers with praise and thanksgiving, and bringing our requests to God with a humble

submission to His will, we can easily fall into the snare of trying to manipulate God with our prayers. “Oh God. I’m giving you one last chance. Help me, Lord. If you don’t help me, I don’t know what I’m going to do!” It sounds rather religious, but actually it’s a veiled threat!

We can’t control God! We can’t manipulate the Almighty One! He is not our errand boy! Our servant! We need to pray like the Psalmist David, “I will bless the LORD at all time, His praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul shall makes its boast in the LORD. The humble shall hear of it and be glad. Oh, magnify the LORD with me and let us exalt His name together. We need to pray like Saul at the time of his conversion, “Lord, what do you want me to do!” rather than “Lord, here’s what I want You to do!” We may not make a carved image in an attempt to have control over our God, but we might try to manipulate God just the same.

We may also fall into idolatry in different ways. Some people build ornate Christian churches to remind themselves of the greatness of God, but the end up worshiping the building rather than worshiping God. Others start worshiping a church organization rather than the God it was designed to serve. So rather than looking at others to see if they are breaking the 2nd commandment, we need to carefully examine our own lives, our own families, our own church. The LORD God says, “You shall not.....” Are we misrepresenting the truth about our great and awesome God in any way? Are we allowing Him to be the great and awesome God that He is?

There is some wording in the last half of this second commandment that has caused a lot of confusion and concern. I might be easier to just ignore the second half of the 2nd commandment for that reason, but that would be a mistake. The LORD God includes the words in the second half of this 2nd commandment and we need to listen to them and understand them.

Look at the second part of Exodus 20:5. “For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God,

punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me.” At first reading, I don’t like the picture of God that emerges from these words. What does it mean that the LORD our God is a jealous God? That specific Hebrew word is used 5 times in the books of Moses, always in reference to God. When this passage was translated into the Greek Septuagint, scholars used the Greek word ἰσχυρὸς , from which we get the English word “zealous.” Perhaps the words of the apostle Paul can also help us to answer that question. Paul is writing to the Christians in Corinth, recorded in 2 Corinthians 11:2. “I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy.” Here again, the Greek word is ἐπιζητέω , from which we get the English word “zealous.” Godly jealousy is a passionate zeal that is motivated by love. Paul is passionately concerned about the well-being of his spiritual children. And if Paul is passionately concerned about his spiritual children, how much more is the LORD our God passionately concerned about us. He loves us with an everlasting love. He longs for us to know the truth about His loving and merciful character. He longs for us to receive Him as our great and awesome God. And that’s why He is so offended by carved images. No matter how big they are, no matter how ornate they are...these carved images, these idols tell only lies about God!

But I have another question about the closing words in this 2nd commandment. I like that part which says that the LORD our God shows love to a thousand generations of those who love Him and keep His commandments. I like that part. Because his commandments, his 10 sayings are just words of blessing from our loving God. Certainly, the picture of God that is revealed in the life and ministry of Jesus is one of compassion and mercy. God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world but that the world through Him might be saved. So I’m attracted to the part of the 2nd commandment that portrays God showing love to a thousand generations of

those who love Him and keep His commandments.

But the part that troubles me is the closing part of this 2nd commandment which says that the LORD our God “punishes the children for the sin of the fathers to the 3rd and 4th generation of those who hate Me.” I don’t like the sound of those words, do you? Punishing the children for the sin of the fathers? I thought that Jesus said, “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son what whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” So what does this mean that the LORD our God punishes the children for the sin of the fathers to the 3rd and 4th generation?

That doesn’t sound fair. And it isn’t fair! It isn’t fair that a father should not only live in rebellion against God but teach his children to also be rebellion against God. That isn’t fair for the children, but that’s the ugly nature of sin. I was visiting a family in Pittsburgh, PA. We were holding some meetings in that city, and a lady was attending those meetings. When we visited her in her home, I noticed the scares on her face. She looked like a boxer. Now I know that some women have taken up the so-called sport of boxing, but there was a deep sadness on this woman’s face. She told us a tragic story of pain and abuse. Her husband had physically abused her for many years. He could lie and make excuses, but the scars on his wife’s face did not lie. She was married to an evil monster. But that wasn’t her greatest sadness. Her eyes began to fill with tears as she told us that just recently her 17 year-old son had beaten her. The sins of the fathers are all too often passed down to the children. And no, it isn’t fair. But those children are still held accountable for their sin. However, an evil parent must be held doubly responsible for the devastation that they pass on to their children.

I have told people who don’t want to live for God, I have told people who want to live for

the Devil, who want to use and abuse themselves in a futile search for never-ending pleasure...I've told them...please don't have children. Please don't bring little ones into the world and then drag them down to destruction with you.

I have a close friend who walked away from God when he was a young man. For many years he lived a dangerous and destructive lifestyle. But there is one decision that my friend made that I really respect. He decided that he would not father any children if he was unwilling to responsibly care for them.. I really respect him for that.

Because even though it's not fair, the sins of the fathers, and the mothers, have devastating consequences on the children. And parents who hate God can teach their children to hate God too. People who are addicted to alcohol can put beer in their baby's bottle and laugh about it. People who are thieves can train their children to steal in order to fulfill their own selfish desires. And their children will be held accountable for those sins.

What a mess our world is in? Our world desperately needs to know the truth about our loving God. They need to know that the LORD our God, creator of the heavens and the earth, is not a demanding Deity, passing down a list of arbitrary rules just to exercise His power and authority over us. The LORD our God is a loving God who gives us words of blessing to guide us and to protect us.

And in the 2nd saying that God gave to Moses on the mountain, the LORD our God is saying, "Don't do anything to diminish the truth of who I am!" Don't serve dead idols. Serve the living God!

My prayer today is this: (And I have written it on the back of your bulletin insert, in case you would like to pray this prayer with me) **LORD God, I recognize you today as my great and awesome God. Please forgive me for the times that I have misrepresented you. Please continue to show me what a great and awesome God You are and help me to share the**

truth about You with others! Amen.