

No Graven Images

Exodus 20:4-6

The first commandment forbids worshipping a false god. The second forbids worshipping the true God in a false way. The first is about whom to worship; the second is about how to worship. Within this commandment two actions are prohibited: making images of God, and bowing down and serving them. The Lord chastises to the fourth generation of those who hate Him, but blesses to a thousand to those who love Him and keep His commandments.

No Images of the Invisible

God forbids making graven or crafted images, *any* likeness of anything in heaven, in the earth, or the in waters under the earth to represent Him in worship (v4). This comprehensive description of God's three-story world indicates our temptation to, and His insistence that we not, depict Him in some way. We know the ban is not of sculpture, painting or drawing altogether because the Lord is about to instruct Moses to build the tabernacle with sculptures of golden cherubim, carved pomegranates, the ark and lampstand, and all sorts of works of art and craftsmanship. But none of these works represent God nor will be used as objections of devotion. This point is made repeatedly: "And the Lord spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of the words, but saw no form; you only heard a voice. So He declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to perform, the Ten Commandments; and He wrote them on two tablets of stone" (Deut. 4:12-13). Moses saw the burning bush, and Israel saw the pillar of cloud and fire, but they were not to depict God through images: "I am the Lord, that is My name; And My glory I will not give to another, nor My praise to carved images" (Is. 42:8). The problem is trying to represent the infinite with the finite, the eternal and almighty with some stuff. You would insult your mother if you adored a picture of beetle in order to honor and remind yourself of her. How much more is God offended when people adore objects in place of Him? While we really do learn about the Creator by the things He creates, we can't isolate objects within creation as especially divine. It doesn't matter if people know that God is God, and that the image is not. An idol is dumb—speechless—whether it's of Mary, the archangel Michael, or Jesus (1 Cor. 12:2). Adding God's name to it makes it worse, as Aaron did when he made an altar and the golden calves and called Israel to worship the Lord: "Tomorrow is a feast to Yahweh" (Ex. 32:5). Jesus is the visible image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15), but we have no idea what He looks like other than having a beard and disfigured appearance while crucified (Is. 50:6; 53:2). God the Father is blasphemously depicted as an old man and Jesus as soft man with perfect skin and quaffed hair. This isn't Jesus, and nothing in the New Testament indicates the second commandment has been set aside or altered in any way. Images should not be made for devotional purposes.

No Bowing or Serving

The first commandment wonderfully emphasizes God's omnipresence: "You shall have no gods before Me." God is everywhere, and we don't honor Him through any particular object by bowing, serving, or thinking anything embodies a special

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dose of divinity. Some iconoclasts are equally superstitious about the power of the objects as those who venerate them. We designate certain objects as holy based on their use. The Bible is holy because God inspired it and gave it to us to read and grow by. The sanctuary is holy as is used to worship the Lord by His holy people. The bread and wine are sanctified by their use in the covenant renewal service, but there's nothing wrong with eating the leftovers or feeding it to the ducks after the service. These are God's tools; they are not God. He protects us from superstitiously ascribing divinity to an object by forbidding us from bowing to or serving it. There is nothing wrong with bowing to show honor to people given its not divine honor, but this is not something we would do in a worship service. Christians who bow to the cross, to the communion elements, or to anything in devotion to God are breaking this commandment. Scripture teaches this folly is the judgment of God (Is. 44:13-20). It's okay to have images of other things and render them appropriately (Matt. 22:20-21). But we don't have the image of God on anything except people, and we shouldn't honor them as God (Acts 10:26). You can imagine kissing a picture of someone who is away from you—for your benefit, which is why it's a little weird. But if the person is present and you still kiss the picture, you have serious issues. God is everywhere and doesn't want us serving things: "Take careful heed to yourselves, for you saw no form when the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, lest you act corruptly and make for yourselves a carved image in the form of any figure" (Deut. 4:15-16). Thomas Watson: "God is to be adored in the heart, not pained to the eye." The objective nature of bowing and serving rules out all false distinctions between veneration and worship. The one image Israel was given to look at for healing (outside the sanctuary), the bronze serpent, later became an idol that had to be destroyed (Num. 21:8; 2 Kgs. 18:4).

God's Jealousy & Blessing

The reason God gives for forbidding images is His own jealousy (v5). Jealousy is His name: would "for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God" (Ex. 34:14). The word *jealous* is related to the word for *zealous*. The Lord is jealous for His name, especially in worship, and therefore visits the iniquity of those who worship creation to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Him. The Bible defines love and hate for us. Bowing down is objectively idolatrous, and thus defined as hatred of God. Someone might be ignorant and think they are honoring Him, but it's still an act of hatred. No innocent person suffers for the sins of another (Ez. 18:20), but spiritual inheritances are passed down to following generations. The impact of serving images extends to great grandchildren. The Lord is merciful to people who repent, but they often don't. His desire to bless is grandly given here: "showing *mercy* to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments" (v6). This is God's mercy and kindness; "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 Jn. 5:21).