

WEEK 3: NO IMAGES

SECOND COMMANDMENT

Exodus 20:4–6; Deuteronomy 5:8–10



The Place of the Passage

This and the previous commandment form a special pair at the beginning of the Decalogue. God speaks in the first person only in these two commandments: “I am the LORD your God. . . . You shall have no other gods before *me*”; and, “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, . . . for *I* the LORD your God am a jealous God, . . . showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love *me*.” The other eight commandments refer to God in the third person. The use of first-person pronouns correlates with the topic of these two commandments. They are both commands about worship, guarding the intimate relationship God desires with his people. The first commandment, our focus last week, preserves that relationship’s exclusivity. We are to have no other gods. The second, our focus this week, preserves the relationship’s integrity. The second commandment exhorts us to know God as he has revealed himself and not to get caught up in our own imaginations or the imaginations of others about what he is like.

The Big Picture

God wants us to know him as he really is, not as we or others imagine him to be.

Reflection and Discussion

Read the second commandment from either Exodus or Deuteronomy. Also read Deuteronomy 4:9–31. Use the following questions to help you consider the commandment’s meaning and implications. (See *ESV Study Bible* notes on pages 176, 340; online at www.esv.org.)

Make No Idols (Ex. 20:4; Deut. 5:8)

The Hebrew word translated “carved image” refers to the image of a deity. This command does not prohibit images of animals and birds for other purposes—animal images had proper uses even within the temple (1 Kings 7:23–26). But images were not to be made to represent God. How, then, is God’s likeness to be made known?

An idol is a visual representation of what a deity is like, designed to evoke an awareness of the deity’s character. But our God reveals his character in words rather than in images—in stories of his deeds and in the poetry, lessons, songs, and promises contained in Scripture. How does God’s chosen medium for his self-revelation (words) compare to the typical media of other religions (visual idols)?

The commandment’s prohibition against images traces the full scope of creation, from heaven to earth to the lowest waters. What does it tell us about the glory of God, if nothing in all creation is suitable as an image of him?

You may not be tempted to carve or sculpt literal idols. But what are some other ways in which we today might be in danger of creating and spreading our own imaginations of what God is like?

Do Not Bow to Idols (Ex. 20:5; Deut. 5:9)

The first “you shall not” in this command prohibits making images of God. The second prohibits bowing before or serving such images, whether made by yourself or crafted by someone else. What mistaken imaginations about what God is like are common today?

To “bow” indicates devotion. It is an act of worship. To “serve” is to bring a portion from the fruits of one’s labor to the Lord, thereby declaring that all of one’s

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labors are performed as a servant of God. How does what you know about God inspire your worship and service of him?

God’s Jealousy (Ex. 20:5–6; Deut. 5:9–10)

The reason attached to the second commandment is God’s jealousy. Like a spouse who is rightly jealous when a partner turns his or her affections to another, God is jealous for his people to love him as he loves them. In addition to worship services, what are other ways in which you can grow to know and love God more fully?

God disciplines “to the third and fourth generation” those who spurn him. This phrase refers to a household, since neglect typically occurs by households. Hebrew households included elderly adults, their adult children, and their grand- and even great-grandchildren. What does this warning teach about the importance of nurturing faith as households?

In contrast to the household punished for rejecting him, God pours out his love on “thousands of those who love me.” What does the vast scope of

God’s love contrasted with the focused scope of his punishment reveal about his heart?

The words “those who love me and keep my commandments” remind us that obedience is empty without love, which is empty without actions (John 14:15). What does this exhortation indicate regarding the nature and purpose of the Ten Commandments?

Read through the following three sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to consider the *Personal Implications* these sections have for you.

Gospel Glimpses

A JEALOUS LOVE. In English the word “jealousy” generally has a negative connotation. The word’s use in English often implies suspicion and vengefulness. But the connotation of the word in the second commandment is positive and has no hint of suspicion or bitterness. It means that God is zealous in his desire to be in relationship with his people. It means that he is earnest about his desire to be known by them—and to be known as he truly is. It means he will not share their love with anyone else. His jealousy is thus a fervent manifestation of his love. When we hear the declaration “I the LORD your God am a jealous God,” we should feel deeply loved.

KEEP MY COMMANDMENTS. In this command God promises his love to all “who love me and keep my commandments.” This exhortation is often misinterpreted as a call to earn salvation¹ (so-called works righteousness or legalism²).

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The Ten Commandments teach not works righteousness, however, but the need for God's grace³ to deliver us from bondage. (Note how the Decalogue begins in Deut. 5:6.) To "keep God's commands" means to follow his words, even if imperfectly, as an outworking of love. It was by keeping the commandments that saints in the Old Testament learned how to repent, offer sacrifices, and receive forgiveness. Legalism is a misappropriation of God's law, but the law itself was given as a shadow of Christ to teach ancient Israel the gospel (Rom. 3:21–22).

JESUS KEPT THE SECOND COMMANDMENT. Throughout his earthly ministry, from childhood through adulthood, Jesus made a personal priority of public and private worship (Luke 2:49, 52; 4:16; 6:12). Jesus knew the Father and loved the Father perfectly. He was able to express to God the Father that, "Even though the world does not know you, I know you" (John 17:25). Jesus kept the law perfectly, including his fulfillment of the second commandment, making him the suitable substitute to achieve our atonement.

Whole-Bible Connections

IMAGES. Idolatry is a theme found all through the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. Idols were typically formed after the likeness of animals that represented traits of the deity whose favor was sought. For example, the bull symbolized virility and strength. An idol in that shape would be used while praying for heaven's blessings for a fruitful harvest, growing families, and strength to do one's labors. God's people were to seek these blessings directly from him, not through idols. Today we face the same temptation when we look to money, powerful people, or other idols to mediate our expectation of the blessings that come only from God.

HOUSEHOLDS. This commandment reveals the importance of the household for spiritual formation. The typical Hebrew household comprised three or four generations, numbering between twelve and thirty persons living together on a shared compound with one or several small buildings. Sometimes individuals would leave the household faith, either rejecting household idolatry to turn back to God or rejecting the household's faith in God to pursue idolatry. This commandment does not commit all members of the household to the decisions, and resulting rewards or judgments, of the family head (Deut. 24:16; Ezek. 18:1–32). But it captures the norm, illustrated and taught further throughout Scripture, that the household is important to the nurture or loss of faith.

Theological Soundings

THE HEART OF WORSHIP. The paired terms "bow" and "serve" capture two vital elements of worship. On the one hand, worship is an appearance before God to

renew one's devotion to him. To bow represents an experience of humility when confronted with the majesty and glory of God, leading to renewed praise and surrender to him. To serve refers to the presentation of one's labors by bringing offerings and petitions⁴ as work done for the Lord. He is our king, and we are his servants. This commandment highlights these two important dynamics at the heart of worship.

DIVINE IMMANENCE. This second commandment shows us that Yahweh is a God who makes himself near to his people and known to them. He is not distant or inaccessible to us. He is a God who can be known and who earnestly desires to be known. And he has provided the means whereby we can accurately know him: through his Word.

MAN IN HIS IMAGE. While we are never ourselves to make images of God, he has made many images of himself and placed them in his world. God created humans to be his image-bearers (Gen. 1:26–27). Only Jesus is the perfect image of God, and he alone is deserving of worship (Heb. 1:3). But, just as idol-worshippers show devotion to their gods by bringing food offerings to their idols and adorning them, so Christians are to show our love for our God by the care we bestow upon his *image-bearers* all around us (James 1:27; 1 John 4:12).

Personal Implications

Considering what you have learned in this study, reflect on the Decalogue's second commandment as it informs your faith and instructs your faithfulness today. Make notes below on personal implications of (1) the *Gospel Glimpses*, (2) the *Whole-Bible Connections*, (3) the *Theological Soundings*, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses

2. Whole-Bible Connections

3. Theological Soundings

4. Exodus 20:4–6; Deuteronomy 5:8–10

As You Finish This Unit . . .

If you are memorizing the Decalogue during this study, practice reciting the preface and the first and second commandments. Pray to thank God for establishing his covenant with you, to redeem you and to make you holy.

Definitions

¹ **Salvation** – Deliverance from the eternal consequences of sin. Jesus’ death and resurrection purchased eternal salvation for believers (Rom. 1:16).

² **Legalism** – Requirements that go beyond the commands of Scripture; or, the unbiblical belief that works are the means of becoming right with God.

³ **Grace** – Unmerited favor, especially the free gift of salvation that God gives to believers through faith in Jesus Christ.

⁴ **Petition** – A request made to someone in authority, such as a citizen to a judge or a person to God in prayer.