

“No Idols”
For Our Good Always
Downtown
September 19, 2021

Good Morning! I'm Jake. We've got a lot of ground to cover this morning. So, we're just going to jump right in.

Today, we're going to talk about the 2nd of the 10 commandments. One that can, at times, sound a little disconnected from our modern ears, but I think by the end, we'll see it is very much a part of our contemporary experience.

Go to **Deuteronomy 5:8-10**

To recap from last week, God gives commandment number one: “you will have no other gods before me. Don't worship anything or anyone that will draw away your devotion from me. You worship me alone.” Then we get to commandment number two:

Deuteronomy 5:8-10

You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

Now, commandment number two is pretty similar to commandment one. The way we've said it before, commandment 1 is about worshipping the wrong god. Commandment number 2 is about worshipping the right god - YHWH - but in the wrong way.

So back then, the common practice of Ancient Near East religions was to make statues for the gods - called icons or “images” that they worshipped. Now these images were not gods in and of themselves. They were pieces of rock or wood. But the thought was these images and their altars sort of acted as **“gateways” between the human and divine** - and if I worship and practice the right rituals in front of this little gateway, then divine blessing will come my way.

Now here's what's wild. Of all the Ten Commandments - don't murder, don't lie, don't steal, etc - this is the very first commandment they break. And this happens **just days** after they were rescued out of Egypt.

The story can be found in **Exodus 32**. God just rescued them out of Egypt supernaturally, Moses goes up Mt Sinai where it's covered in clouds and there's lightning and thunder at the top straight of some natural disaster movie to go talk to God. Again, this is supernatural stuff happening right before the Israelites eyes. He's up there for 40 days. And while Moses is coming down the mountain of God, Ten Commandments in hand, when this happens:

Exodus 32:1-6

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, “Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for

this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.”

You can sort of pick up on the tone? They’re bullying Aaron around and you can sense how they’re mocking Moses. “Hey, where’s your brother? He got us out of Egypt and it seems like he bailed on us, so you gotta do something about it.”

2 So Aaron said to them, “Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” 3 So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. 4 And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” 5 When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a feast to the Lord.”

Notice who the feast is for: “the Lord.” Aaron used the name YHWH, saying that this is the image of the God that had saved them.

Ok, so why a calf? Two reasons:

1 - Because the surrounding pagan nations had images of their gods that looked just like this. And the surrounding nations would do exactly what the Israelites did. But God’s people were supposed to be set apart. To look differently, to behave differently. Instead, **Israel wanted God to be like everyone else**. They were trying to take the mystery and the bigness of God and put Him into more manageable terms that best suited them.

And reason number two:

2 - The bull in the ANE was a symbol of strength and power.

And if you’re the Israelites and you don’t have a country or kingdom to call your own, you would probably be feeling weak and powerless. So what type of god would you worship? What would it look like? A bull. So the Israelites out of this craving **desire for power and control, created this false projection of who God** was to give them a sense of security. They were feeling insecure, they felt like God had bailed on them and that God wasn’t working according to their own timelines, so they had to take matters into their own hands because God wasn’t matching up to their expectations.

they projected onto God all their hopes and desires to the detriment of ignoring who He really is - and this is what’s at the heart of commandment number two: **projecting a false image** onto who God is.

They want a god who thinks like they do. A god who wants what they want. A god who *does* what they want. A god who will make them like the rest of the world around them. A god who will fulfill what they think they need and desire.

Pastor and author Tim Keller calls this breaking of the second command, essentially creating a “stepford God” which is based on the movie *The Stepford Wives*. If you have never seen the movie, it’s about this small quiet town, where all the women in the town weirdly look and act the same, all catering to the needs of their husbands, devoid of any and all personality whatsoever. They seem to exist simply to serve their needs. The twist is, it turns out all the husbands in the town allowed their wives to get abducted, and in exchange, they swapped them out for robots that look and sound like their wives - and the husbands are all perfectly content with that. The husbands essentially create an image of their wives that is not the real thing.

Now obviously that's incredibly messed up and that's kinda the point. The movie acted as social commentary at the time - critiquing some problematic stuff going on in the culture, particularly sexism - where men were dehumanizing women. Viewing them as simply existing to cater and serve to their needs.

And Keller, and the second commandment would argue, this is what's going on when we make God in our own image. We dehumanize Him. We're swapping out the truth of God, in all His power and might and personhood - for a tameable, domesticated image, devoid of any personality, who simply caters to serve my needs and nothing more.

And this image of God is not gonna look like creating a golden calf or a Stepford wife - but we turn God into a false image when we believe that He simply caters to serve my needs, my wants, and my agenda or when we elevate certain attributes of God to the detriment of others so that He can serve me.

Think about it like this: you ever notice how people talk about God lines up with the personality type?

- Like, people who are perhaps very rigid and uptight tend to talk about God in the same way? God apparently is also very uptight and judgmental and condescending just like them. Not very gracious or compassionate tho...
- Or on the reverse side, have you ever noticed how free-spirited people tend to talk about God like He's basically just a bigger version of them? They're very loving and caring and free and supportive and so God is the same way. God is projected as being care-free, go-with-the-flow, supportive, someone who helps you achieve all your dreams and doesn't really sweat the specifics so long as you're kind to people

You know what's going on here right? They're making God into an image but not just any old image, they've made an image out of God. But God is not your Myers-Briggs or Enneagram number. Mine neither.

And the reality of the second commandment is that we're all susceptible to this too. Maybe it doesn't look like creating a literal piece of rock or gold statue or creating an altar. But we often project ourselves onto God so for example:

- **We like to see ourselves as good people.** So, we will craft a god who affirms that in us. A God who hates what we hate... and even hates *who* we hate. Who gets really angry at the sin struggles of others, while overlooking our own. Or perhaps, a god who doesn't care about sin at all because if he doesn't care then I don't have to care either. It's a counterfeit. It's an image of God that is false.
- **Or we want the approval of the world around us,** so we'll shift God into a more gentle creature. One who doesn't tell you that what you're doing is wrong or that anything needs to change about you and into a being who only exists to affirm you and make you feel good about yourself and where you're going. We'll tone down his righteousness and his holiness and emphasize his love, so that we don't ruffle any feathers...It's a counterfeit. It's a fake. It's a stepford God
- **Or we want success and superiority of our nation,** so we fashion an idea of a God who likes America most and best, holds our nation near to his heart while being somewhat skeptical of other countries, and passionately agrees with the tenets of capitalism.
- **Or we want approval from our church** so we fashion God into something like a school teacher, who gives us a grade each day on how well we do so we feel really puffed up and better than

everyone else and who has little grace or compassion for those outside your own little bubble and little tolerance for the people who don't live up to your expectations

- **Or we want God to be all justice and no grace**, so we're big on saying what's right and what's wrong but have no category whatsoever for forgiveness. So we shut people out of our lives, or stew over a conversation or build a case against someone. Or we cancel people from culture offering no hope for redemption and restoration

But, these are counterfeits. Stepford Gods. They might look like God, in some ways, from a distance, but they aren't the real thing. They are idols built by our imagination and we may not even realize we're doing it.

Which to be clear - I do this too. I can treat God as a transactional relationship. If I just teach enough, and teach the right things and do enough things for God then God will give me less stress in my life, less conflict, more comfort, etc etc

And when you think about it in terms of this - then it starts to become clear that making a false image of God is not a foreign, outdated concept at all but something within the human condition we all do

And here's why this is a big deal to God. Keep reading with me in Deuteronomy 5:9 -

You shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the LORD your God am a *jealous* God,

So to clarify. Why does God put this command - don't make an image of God - into His top 10? Answer: Because He's jealous. When I first came across that I thought, "Wait - jealousy is bad right? What's God doing being jealous?"

But here's the thing. When we think of jealousy, we tend to think of not being satisfied with what we have. A posture of discontentment. Wanting for the wrong or for selfish reasons - whether that be jealousy for someone's season of life or what someone has (which gets to commandment number 10, more on that in a few weeks). Underneath it, jealousy says, "I want more than what I have!"

But God's jealousy is altogether different because God's jealousy is fueled by **His love** for you. **And where there is love, there is jealousy.**

This is silly but it's kinda like this. If I go home today and I see another guy in our house and my wife says, "Hey I want to introduce you to my new boyfriend," I would not be cool with that. I would be jealous and completely in the right to feel that way. Because that jealousy is fueled by my love toward my spouse.

God's love is selfless and committed and exclusive to His people. And God knows the best possible thing for our souls is for us to be forever satisfied in all that He is and all that He is done forever - to be swept up in His never-ending, overflowing, abundant love for us. And until we realize that, we will create a fake image of God to satisfy us and God's righteous jealousy is a holy discontentment that says, "I want more for you than this! And I will not be satisfied until you get what your soul really needs because I know what's best for you!"

And when we create God in a false image, we're essentially turning to a different partner, we're running to the arms of a different lover. We're saying, "God I don't want you for who You are, so I'm gonna modify you just a bit, or I'm gonna swap you out for something a little different, more palatable - a god who caters to my terms, not yours, because I think I know what's best for me."

And God in his righteous jealousy and holy discontentment says when we turn Him into an image, "Anything less than who I am will destroy you from the inside out because your idol is not big enough to handle what your soul ultimately wants and needs, which is Me."

Here's how the New Testament writer Paul puts it in **Romans 1:21-25**

21 For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. **22** Claiming to be wise, they became fools, **23** and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things

24 Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, **25** because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever!

Now there's a lot that can be said of this verse but for the sake of time I just want to highlight one thing. Notice the trajectory here. Verse 23 and Verse 25 talk about an exchange that goes on in the human heart, when we fashion God into an image of our own. Something happens as a result. **We inevitably become what we worship.**

So in the positive sense, when we worship God rightly, truly for who He is - we become more like God, because that's what you and I were made for. You were made to be with God. This process is what theologians call "sanctification." When we allow God to call the shots in our lives, we in turn slowly become a little more and more like Jesus - exuding with peace, joy, love, contentment, etc - and in the process more and more human because God is put in the proper place - above me, not underneath me. We were made to look up and worship.

But when we worship an idol, an image of God, according to Romans 1, the reverse happens. We turn away from God, the source of life. Our minds and our hearts devolve, slowly. Less and less light, more and more darkness. More allowing myself to call the shots. Slowly becoming less and less human - because I am worshipping something less than what I actually need and long for. I put God in the wrong place - underneath me. And in the end, I'm really worshipping myself.

The illustration said in the book is that we slowly become like Gollum from Lord of the Rings. He's a regular person but falls in love with this ring of power and he slowly devolves into something of a goblin. Living in the dark, living alone, losing all grip on reality. And when we worship any god - whether it's a false god or a false image of who God is - this is what's happening

The effects are similar to breaking the first commandment. When you worship a false god, it will inevitably destroy you from the inside out. The same is true for worshipping a false version of who God is.

- So if my image of God is all about my comfort and freedom, then I will build my life around thinking it's all about me. All relationships exist to serve and gratify me and if any relationships confront me or disrupt my way of life - then I need to get rid of them, cut the toxic people out, practice more self-care. And in the process, slowly, my mind and my heart become darkened and disconnected from reality void of any real love and full of loneliness and pride
- And if my image of God is someone who approves of my lifestyle choices and who never calls me out - or anyone out - in their sin, then I'm worshipping a fantasy version of God, disconnected from Scriptures and ultimately serves the whims and desires of my culture or my flesh and will slowly destroy my ability to live in any semblance of reality
- And if my image of God is all justice and no forgiveness then I slowly destroy my ability to have relationships with anyone because at some point in our relationship they will sin against me
- And if my image of God demands I perform and perfect myself, then I will delude my mind and my heart to ignore the grace of God as I slowly crush myself underneath the weight of my own impossible expectations

Worshipping a false image of God slowly distorts and destroys us from the inside out and there's more:

Deut 5:9

You shall not bow down to them or 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 generation of those who hate me,

Again - another head-scratcher for us. Because it sounds like to me, God's going to punish innocent kids for something their parents did. When in reality this is alluding to the generational effect sin can have on us.

But, the point that Deuteronomy is making is that these consequences of idolatry don't just terminate on us. But, they have far-reaching reverberations on those around and after us. There is a generational and societal effect to idolatry.

I'll give you some examples... perhaps some that hit close to home.

- You think about the mother who **idolizes image**. Who creates a god who only cares about external appearances. A god who tells you that your value is wrapped in how others see you... if you're respectable or desirable. So, she becomes a mother who aggressively manages her family's appearance - from the clothes they wear to the places they go to the people they are seen with. She consistently comments on her child's appearance - she becomes the mom who consistently makes side comments about her children's physical appearance and weight. Because her stepford God cares about these things...

- What happens to that child? Well, he or she likely grows up with image issues of their own. Perhaps leading to insecurity and depression over their looks. Eating disorders, or extreme self-criticism.

- You think about the parent whose stepford God cares only for **sexual fulfillment**. So, faithfulness and promiscuity do not matter in their household. And the children witness the on-going parade of partners coming through their mother or father's bedroom door.

- What happens to that child? Well, they likely grow up with the same view of sex and relationships. And they likely carry on the same idolatry after them.

- And think about what happens when and if an entire group of people, a community or a society worships a false view of God. That destruction gets multiplied.
 - What happens when a culture turns God into a god who doesn't care about sin, but only exists to affirm us? I'd imagine it becomes a society where sin is taught to be celebrated, and true righteousness condemned.
 - What happens when a culture turns God into a being of supreme justice, but not supreme grace? I imagine it becomes a society where ideological opponents must at the very least be cancelled, but more likely must be driven-out and destroyed.

Commandment 2, when broken impacts not just us but erodes families, cultures, and generations that come after us.

Conclusion:

BUT, here's the beautiful news coming right on the heels of that verse. The sins of the parents come back to visit their children and children but look at this:

but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

We're meant to pick up on the juxtaposition of iniquity to the 3rd and 4th generation BUT His loyal love He extends to the thousands.

- Loyal love - hesed - loyalty, faithfulness, resolved commitment
- For those that pursue Him for who He really is- who don't settle for a false version of Him, He extends His hesed to you and He will not, and can not, turn His back from you - because He is jealous for you and so committed to you. And where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more. Which means his love for you is bigger and greater than your sin. And his love is also what rescues us from that idolatry. His love extends to the **thousands**.

The point being, His love is big enough to swallow up all of our idolatry - it's presence and its consequences.

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You see, what is ultimately true about God is that he is not a Stepford God. He is not a spouse simply created for our own purposes, who is indifferent to our spiritual adultery... Rather, He is the God who is **aggressively faithful despite our aggressive unfaithfulness.**

Perhaps my favorite example of this is found in the life of the prophet Hosea. God uses Hosea's life as a giant object lesson for his love and mercy over His people. It's meant to be a beautiful metaphor for how God responds to the idolatry of his people...

Essentially, Hosea marries a prostitute who doesn't give up her prostitution. Every thinking person in the room would think, welp... Hosea should go ahead and get his lawyer dialed up and start these divorce proceedings. But, God tells him to go back and keep choosing to love her despite her adultery. And he doesn't tell him to do this once, but multiple times. To any sensible person, this sounds crazy. Borderline scandalous... and that's the point. God tells Hosea... and his people through Hosea... that this is exactly how He will be to us.

Despite our whoredom, God chases us down. You see, while we - in innumerable ways - attempt to recreate God into an image of our liking... **God already has an image... and that image is Jesus.**

In the literal words of **Colossians 1:15** He is the image of the invisible God

And what the life of Jesus tells us, is that God's jealous love will stop at nothing to redeem his bride. Despite her unfaithfulness, despite her desire for Him to be something other than He is... He comes to rescue.

He comes to pay the price that our idolatry deserves - He takes all of that righteous indignation at our unfaithfulness and pours every last drop of it onto himself - and He does so willingly because He loves you.

Despite our near-constant running to the arms of a false God ... God out of his righteous jealousy keeps choosing to love - a gentle and humble love that seeks after you, that pursues you no matter what. A God who keeps bringing us back home time and time again. His mercy doesn't stop. His love doesn't end. And He continues to woo us back to faithfulness. All because God is a jealous God ... He loves you too much to share.

But the only way you can see that and be satisfied in that is when you see God's image of Himself through His Son Jesus. To look up and to see your God who's jealous love is so great that He climbed the mount of crucifixion for you.

- If you want to know God's infinite power, look to Jesus who conquered sin and death to rescue you from your idolatry
- If you want to know God's infinite wisdom, look to the words of Jesus who offers you the rest you're really longing for, even when you were making your own idols
- If you want to know the infinite love of God, look to Jesus who took the penalty of sin, who saw all your failings, and all your misgivings, who pursues you no matter what, without any hesitation - even at great cost to Himself - so that you might know the infinite, loyal hesed of God.