



The Ten Commandments (7)

“You shall not make for yourself a carved image....” (1)

Exodus 20:1-6

Psalm 115:1-8

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This evening we begin our study of the second commandment, “You shall not make for yourself a carved image....” Actually, it is more accurate to say that in this sermon we will be straddling the first and second commandment. The first two commandments are so closely related that that it is not always possible to keep them completely separate from each other. And that is the case with the themes that we will be looking at this evening.

I want to begin with a footnote. I know that is a contradiction in terms but “Oh well.” You will see, I hope, that the sermon is based on the biblical text. But I am unusually dependent on two books in this sermon, so that thought that I would just mention them at the beginning to give credit where credit is due. The first is a book by Richard Lints called *Identity and Idolatry* and the other is a book by Gregory Beale called *A New Testament Biblical Theology*. The authors of these two books might not agree with everything that I end up saying, but they would certainly recognize their ideas in what I am about to say this evening.

So, the first part of the second commandment says, “You shall not make for yourself a carved image.” This refers to the pagan practice of making carved images that represented false gods. The worship practices of the pagan nations involved worshipping these carved images. The Bible refers to this practice as idolatry, the worship of idols. Israel was not to be influenced by the worship of her neighbors and join in the worship of their gods. But more than that Israel was not to make images of the true

God either. Some of the examples of idol worship in the history of Israel involved the use of images as aids in the worship of Yahweh, the God of Israel. The true God could be worshipped in an unauthorized way. Yahweh, the only true God was and is very particular about how he is worshipped and that is really what this second commandment is about.

Now in this first sermon on the second commandment, I want to proclaim the word of God to you about the underlying reason for this prohibition of carved images. And the basic reason is we, human beings are images of God. The prohibition of the use of carved images in worship has to do with the fact that God made us in his image. So, we will begin by thinking about what it means that God made us in his image and then we will consider what that has to do with the prohibition of using carved images in worship and finally, as we always do, we will see how these themes are fulfilled in Jesus Christ and in the salvation that is rooted in his person and work.

Genesis 1 describes God creating the universe including the creation of the human race. In this context we learn that God made human beings in his image. Genesis 1:26-28, "²⁶Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.' "²⁷So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. "²⁸And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.' "

So, God creates man in his image. Male and female are created in the image of God. And God tells this couple that he had created in his image to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. So, God wanted mankind to fill the earth with images of himself. This lies at the core of God's task for human beings, to fill the earth with images of himself.

So, being an image of God is the meaning of being a human being. This is what we are as human beings. We are images of God. This is our identity. This is not just the most important thing about us, this defines

us as human beings. We are images of God. This means that it belongs to our essence as human beings that we are related to God as images of the original which is God. Whenever you have an image, it is an image of some original and the entire significance of the image is that it reflects the original. That is what images are. That is what images do.

That is what we are – we are reflectors of God. And that is what we are for – we exist to reflect God in our being and in our lives. Another way of saying this is that we exist to reflect the glory of God. God's plan was to fill the whole earth with his glory and a huge part of this was his intention that the earth be filled with images of God, all reflecting his glory. Now the whole creation does this. The whole creation reflects God. Everything in the creation bears the imprint of its Creator. That is what the psalmist of Psalm 8 is saying "O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens." God is majestic. God is glorious. We see that reflected in the creation that God has made.

But the creation is not the image of God. Only mankind is. That means that we are much more like God than the creation is. The creation reflects God to some extent. We reflect God a lot more.

Now, it is interesting that the passage in Genesis does not say anything about how human beings reflect God. The focus is completely on the fact that this is who we are and why we are. We are images of God and our purpose is to fill the earth with images of God. God wants the earth to be full of people who reflect his glory. God wants the earth to be full of people who are like him. As the Scriptures unfold we begin to understand more and more what God is like and how we are to reflect his glory. For instance, in Leviticus 11:45, God tells the people of Israel to be holy because he is holy.

So, we are trying to understand better why God prohibited Israel from worshipping carved images and I am making the connection between that prohibition and the fact that we are made in the image of God. So far, we have seen a little of what it means that we are made in the image of God. We are made to reflect God and to fill the earth with people who reflect God. Now we will take another step towards our goal.

There is something else that the early chapters tell us about the significance of the fact that humans are made in the image of God. To be like God is life. To be like God is life. In Scripture life is more than just being physically alive. Life in Scripture has to do with being alive spiritually. And in connection with the image of God, there is a connection between life and the image of God. Being like God is what it means to be alive. Let me demonstrate this from the story of the fall.

In Genesis 2, we are told that God gave man one command. He was not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And he was told, “[I]n the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” If Adam would eat of the tree he would deface the image of God. If he was disobedient he would no longer be reflecting God. Of course, God is not obedient – that is no one higher than him for him to be obedient to. But God always acts in a way that is consistent with his will. So, we are like God when we act in ways that are consistent with God’s will. When Adam and Eve sinned they no longer reflected God perfectly. They defaced the image of God. They disfigured the image of God. And so, they received the penalty of death. They were banished from the presence of God which is the essence of death.

So being like God is associated with life and being unlike God is associated with death. The more we are like God, the more we participate in life as it was meant to be lived and the more we are unlike God the more that we participate in death which begins with spiritual death. That is what we see in the sad story of the fall of mankind into sin. By disobeying God, Adam and Eve defaced the image of God and the result of that was death – separation from God.

One more thought before we leave Genesis. The serpent in the story of the fall was the first idol. He was the first false god. He was not a carved image, but he was a false god. And Adam and Eve worshipped him by obeying his suggestions rather than God’s command. They believed what the serpent said to them rather than believing what God said to them. They became followers of Satan rather than followers of God. And as a result of that they became images of Satan rather than images of God. It is true that they did not lose the image of God completely as we learn from other passages in Scripture, but they defaced the image

of God and began to resemble Satan. Like Satan they became rebels against God. Like Satan they took the path of disobedience and disbelief in the Word of God. Like Satan they became enemies of God.

It is in the light of this background about humanity as the image of God that we have to understand the second commandment. We were created as God's image bearers. We were made as reflectors of God. We were made to radiate God-likeness all around us. This is our essence. This is our purpose. But when we worship idols we reflect them instead of God. When we worship idols, we become images of God's rivals rather than images of God.

You see, God has made us reflectors. We do not have independent existence. We are images. We are not originals. We are images of some original. That is our essence. And that is all that we can be. We are God/god reflectors. We are images of some God/god. It is not possible for us not to be an image of some God/god. Either we reflect the true God, or we reflect some false god. Just like a mirror is always going to reflect something so we are always going to reflect some God/god. When God said that he made us in his image he said that he made us as mirrors to reflect him. But by refusing to reflect him, we inevitably reflect some idol. And so, we become the mirror-opposite of what we were created to be. We were created as images of God. When we worship idols we become images of idols. We become images of some false God.

Now this does not mean that we lose the image of God altogether. After the fall, God still calls us his image. Even in sin we still resemble God in some ways. But that resemblance is so distorted that it becomes a dishonoring distortion of what God is like. We no longer reflect God accurately and beautifully. Instead we reflect anti-god characteristics.

Let's see how this works in Scripture. I will give two examples. The first example is from the story of the golden calf. Even as Moses was on the mountain with God, Israel make an image of a calf and worshipped this image as the one who had brought them up out of Egypt. After this incident, God often referred to his people in language that is also used to describe unruly calves or cows. He calls them a stiff-necked people. The imagery captured by the term "stiff-necked" is that of a farm animal

that resisted the yoke. The entry for “stiff-necked” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised*, says, “Farm animals wore yokes on their necks (Hos. 10:11), and animals that stiffened their necks were stubbornly refusing to accept the yoke.” So, by calling Israel “stiff-necked,” God was comparing Israel to a stubborn cow that refused to accept the yoke of his law. And the point for our discussion is that by worshipping the golden calf, the people had become like the idol they were worshipping. Later on, in Hosea 4:16, in the context of condemning the people for idolatry, God compares Israel to a “stubborn heifer.”

There is how Gregory Beale sums up this point: “The first generation of Israelites did not literally become petrified golden calves like the one that they worshiped, but they are depicted as acting like out-of-control and headstrong calves, apparently because they were being mocked as having become like the image that represented a spiritually rebellious and ornery calf that they had worshiped. What they had revered, they had come to resemble, and that resemblance was destroying them.”

The second example of the idea that the worshippers of idols become like the idols they worship comes from Psalm 115:4-8, “⁴Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. ⁵They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. ⁶They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. ⁷They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat. ⁸Those who make them become like them; so, do all who trust in them.”

The key verse for the point that I am making is verse 8, “Those who make them become like them; so, do all who trust in them.” The way that idolaters become like their idols is that they become lifeless, like the idols they are worshipping. They become spiritually dead. They have eyes, but they do not see. They have ears, but they do not hear. This is the way that God often describes his people in their sinfulness. Think of those well-known words of Isaiah 6 where God tells Isaiah that his preaching will have the affect of confirming the people in their hardness of heart. God says to Isaiah in Isaiah 6:9 “Go and say to his people, Keep, on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.” The people had become spiritually dead and lifeless like the

idols they worshipped. And God's judgment upon them was that they would be hardened in that deadness by the preaching of the Word of God.

So, let's recap. We are seeking to understand the second command which forbids the worship of carved images. There is a biblical connection between the fact that human beings are made in the image of God and the prohibition of the worship of images. Human beings are made to reflect God in the world – to fill the world with the glory of God by filling the world with images that reflect the glory of God. But by worshipping the idols, people created in the image of God come to reflect those idols instead of the true God they were created to reflect. Worshippers of idols become like their idols. And so, they become images of false gods rather than the true God. They fill the world with the spiritual deadness of the idols that they worship.

Ok. On to the New Testament and the gospel. There is more bad news before we get to the good news. We see this principle of the worshippers of idols becoming like the idols they worship in the second half of Romans 1 which we looked at last week. This week we will notice how this passage also makes the connection between worshipping idols and becoming like them.

So, Romans 1:23 says that humanity in sin, “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.” And verse 25 says that, “they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.” Idolatry is the worship of the something in the creation rather than the Creator.

Now the creation is a fallen creation. The whole creation is under the curse of God. And so, the whole creation is corrupt and disordered. Remember that Paul, in Romans 8:21, says that the creation as it is now is in “bondage to corruption.” The creation is still a wonderful place, but we learn from the Genesis story of the aftermath of the fall that it is under God's curse. That is why there are thorns and thistles. That is why there are horrible diseases that destroy human bodies and minds. The creation is under the curse and so it is broken and disordered.

And when human beings worship the creature rather than the Creator they become like the disordered and corrupt creation that they worship. We are part of the disordered creation, but that corruption is intensified by the worship of a corrupt creation. And so, we read in Romans 1:24 “Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves.” And verse 26, “For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions.” This is both the judgment of God on idolatry and the nature of things as God has created and cursed the creation. We come to resemble what we worship.

When Israel worshipped the golden calf, she became more and more stiff-necked. When Israel worshipped dead hunks of wood as their gods, they became like them, having eyes but not seeing and having ears but not hearing. When humanity as a whole worships a cursed and corrupt creation it becomes more and more broken and corrupt and disordered. And so, you end up with dishonorable passions and debased minds and hearts lusting after impurity.

So, when we worship money we become like money. Now there is nothing wrong with money, but when money becomes a god, the people who worship it become like the money-god and the money-god is greedy and selfish and materialist. When people worship pleasure, they become like pleasure. Now there is nothing wrong with pleasure, but the pleasure god is lustful and unrestrained and disordered. When people worship sex, they become like sex. There is nothing wrong with sex in its proper sphere, but when sex becomes a god, the sex-god is immoral and impure and perverse. You get the point. When we worship something in the creation we worship a false god and whenever something in the creation becomes a god it becomes corrupt and perverse and we reflect that perversity when we worship that god.

So, you see why God forbids the worship of carved images. It is because we are images of God and our purpose is to reflect God. But Scripture shows us that when we worship idols we become like those idols. Those who make idols become like them, says Psalm 115:8. When we worship idols we reflect those false gods and false gods are anti-gods. We reflect them instead of reflecting the true God as we were created to do.

Now we come to the good news. Salvation in Jesus Christ means forgiveness for our idol worship, but also the gradual removal of the ill effects of idol worship. Listen to how Paul speaks of the salvation of the Thessalonians. In 1 Thessalonians 1:9 he says that by the power of the gospel that he had preached to them, they had “turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.” And here we see the principle that we become like what we worship in a positive way. When we turn from idols to God the image of God is restored in us. The distortions are gradually removed, and we are renewed in the image of God.

This transformation is rooted in Jesus. The New Testament tells us that he is the perfect image of God. Hebrews 1:3 says of Jesus, “He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature....” Jesus Christ is the perfect human being. He radiates the glory of God. He fulfills the purpose of the human race as the image of God. In his human nature he is the untarnished image of God. He is all that human beings were created to be. He is the fulfilment of the human race. He is the perfect human being.

But through his work of renewing those who follow him, he conforms them to his image which is the image of God. Romans 8:29 tells us that the followers of Jesus have been “predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son....” If we are trusting in Christ, God is at work in us through the Holy Spirit conforming us to the image of Jesus which is the image of God. Ephesians 4:24 tells us that Christians are being “created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” And Colossians 3:10 says that we are “being renewed in knowledge after the image of [our] creator.”

So, salvation in Jesus Christ enables us to begin to fulfill the purpose of our creation as image bearers of God who reflect the glorious character of God in the world. And once that work of renewal is begun in us, we are enabled to begin to fulfill our purpose of being fruitful and multiplying in order to fill the earth with images of God. We do that in two ways. If we are parents, we do it by leading our children to Christ and discipling them so that they will be renewed in the image of Christ. And as the church together we do it by making disciples of people from all the nations. God’s purpose from the very beginning was to have the

earth full of images of himself radiating his glory and in Jesus Christ and through his people that purpose is gradually being fulfilled.

So how can we grow in God-likeness? How can we become more like Jesus? How can we remove the distortions and disfigurements that come from worshiping idols and present more and more an untarnished image of God to the world around us? The answer is embedded in the principle on which we have been reflecting. We become to resemble what we worship. It is through the worship of God that we become more like God. The more that our hearts and minds are enthralled with the glory of God, the more that we will be changed to reflect that glory.

Paul expresses this thought in a wonderful way in 2 Corinthians 3:18, ¹⁸"And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." We come to resemble what we worship.

We are God/god reflectors. This is our essence. We are essentially mirrors. And we reflect whatever God/god we worship. So, we need to worship the true God more and more and more. We need to behold the glory of the Lord, more and more and more. And we behold him in the place where he has revealed himself – the Word of God especially, but also in the creation. This is how we come to reflect idols less and Jesus more. By beholding the glory of the Lord and so being transformed into the same image.

And one of the things that we notice when we behold the glory of the Lord is that reflecting him is life while reflecting idols is death. Reflecting God is true and abundant life. Reflecting idols is anti-life. Anti-gods are anti-life. Those who worship them are the living dead – which is the perversion of life and the destruction of life.

We resemble what we worship because we are God/god reflectors. Through Christ we are renewed to worship the true God and are more and more conformed to his image which is life.