



The Ten Commandments

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

(3) The Regulative Principle

Exodus 20:4-6

Deuteronomy 12:29-32

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This is the third sermon on the second commandment. In the first we considered the prohibition of worshipping images in the light of the fact that human beings are made in the image of God. We saw that we come to resemble what we worship and so, if we worship idols, we will image them instead of God. In the second sermon we considered why God forbids us to make images of him and we saw that nothing in the world can compare with God and so God has revealed himself to us in his word as well as his actions in history. Images, which are dead objects, can never represent a God who is alive and who speaks and acts. While nothing can reveal the fullness of the infinite God, words and actions do a much better job of revealing something of the glory of God and God requires that our worship be a response to his self-revelation in his word.

Today we are going to consider something that is known as the regulative principle of worship. When God says in the second commandment, “You shall not make for yourself a carved image,” he is talking about how he wants to be worshipped. He does not want his people to make carved images of him and use them in worship. The principle behind this command is that God does not allow us to worship him any way we please. The principle behind this command is that God tells us in his word what we are to do when we worship him. By forbidding the use of carved images in worship, God is telling us that he does not allow us to decide for ourselves how we will worship him. The

implication of that is that we must stick to those activities that God has instructed us to do when we worship him. This is known as the regulative principle. God regulates our worship.

The prohibition of making and using carved images to worship God alerts us to the fact that just because we might think that this or that activity might be a nice way to worship God, God does not want us to decide on our worship activities on this manner. The people living in the ancient world in which the commandments were first given, thought that making carved images was a wonderful way of worshipping their gods. They all did it. But God told his people: Even though you might feel that using carved images to worship me is a great idea, you are not allowed to do it. And in the chapters and books that follow in the Bible, God tells his people in quite a bit of detail exactly how he wants to be worshipped. He tells them to build the tabernacle. He tells them exactly how he wants the tabernacle to be built. He tells then exactly how he wants the worship in the tabernacle to go. He describes how the priests are to be dressed. He describes how the offerings are to be made. And one of the things that we read a number of times is God telling his people not to add anything to what he has said and not to take away from what he has told them to do. In Deuteronomy 12:29-32, God is reiterating the commandment prohibiting the worship of idols and in connection with that he says “Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it or take away from it.”

Now it is true that New Testament worship is very different from the worship in the Old Testament. The temple and all its worship has been fulfilled in Christ and so it comes to an end. The New Testament teaches that. But the second commandment is still binding upon us and the one of the principles behind the second commandment is that God requires that his people do what he wants them to do in worshipping him. The principle of the second commandment is that God does not want us to dream up ways to worship him that we think might please him. The principle of the second command is that God requires that we worship him following the instruction that he has given us in his word.

This highlights something about the worship of God that is very important. Worship is about pleasing God. It is not about pleasing us.

There is no doubt that the worship of God is beneficial for us and if the Holy Spirit enables us to see something of the glory of God as we worship, it is a very enjoyable experience. But worship is not about pleasing us or entertaining us. It is about pleasing God. And what pleases God is that we do what he tells us to do – also in worship.

So often, when people think of worship or design worship, they think about what the participants might enjoy. But that is the wrong question. At least it is the wrong first question. The great question to ask about designing a worship service is: what has God told us to do? What does God require of us when we gather together as his people? What can we do in worship that will be pleasing to God. After we have asked and answered that question we can go on and consider how, within God's parameters, worship may be enjoyable. For instance, it's better to have nice tunes rather than awful tunes for our songs. But even here we must keep in mind that the purpose of worshipping God is worshipping God and if we are really worshipping, our enjoyment will be seeing and savoring the glory of God. Worshipping God is only about our enjoyment secondarily. It is primarily about pleasing God. And it is about enjoying God himself in our worship.

So, the second commandment has to do with how God requires that we worship him. The great principle is that God requires that we worship him following the instructions and principles and examples that he has given in his word. This is known as the regulative principle.

This matter is so important that it is part of our confessional tradition. Westminster Confession of Faith 21:1, ...[T]he acceptable way of worshipping the true God has been instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped according to the imaginations or devisings of men, or the suggestions of Satan, or under any visible representation, or any other way not commanded in Holy Scripture." And here is the exposition of the second commandment in the WSC Q/A 50-51. "The second commandment requires us to receive, respectfully perform, and preserve completely and purely all the regulations for religion and worship that God has established in His word.... "The second commandment forbids our worshipping God with images or any other way not established in His word."

Now one of the challenges to keeping this commandment is knowing exactly what it is that God has taught us to do in worship as New Testament believers. For the Old Testament believers it was spelled out in great detail. There are pages and pages in the OT of detailed instructions for the worship that took place in the Old Testament tabernacle and later the temple. We find nothing quite like that in the New Testament. There are no detailed instructions about New Testament worship services. There are no lists of activities that God wants included in worship. There are no sample orders of worship for us to follow. There are no chapters that begin by saying, this is what a New Testament worship service ought to look like. But since we are still bound by the second commandment as New Testament Christians, we know that we must examine all that God has given us in the New Testament to seek to discern God's will for our worship.

It is important here to remember that God has chosen to give his revelation to us in a fairly unsystematic way. That is, the Bible as a whole is not in the form of a systematic textbook. In our ARP standards we have a Directory of Worship, but there is nothing like that in the Bible. Instead we have a lot of stories that make up one grand and glorious story and we have letters and documents that were written to fulfill a specific need at the time they were written. So, the New Testament is made up of the four gospels and the book of Acts which give us the story of Jesus and the early church and besides that we have mostly letters which are addressed to specific churches to address specific needs. This is how God has chosen to give us his revelation of Jesus and his significance. And so that means that we are called to examine them all and draw together whatever they have to give us on any given topic.

So, when it comes to finding out how God wants us to worship him we look at the whole New Testament in the light of the Old Testament for any principle and instruction and example that sheds light on God's will for us in this area. And when we do that we find, as always, that God has given us what we need to know so that we can be confident that we are doing God's will in our worship practices.

We will now consider what the New Testament shows us in this area. And when we do that we find that the ornate and complex worship of the Old Testament has been replaced with worship that is simple and unadorned. The worship in the temple was full of symbolism and ritual. The priests had special clothing. The temple was elaborately decorated with all kinds of symbols. There were altars and other specialized furniture and all kinds of rituals that had to be followed in presenting the sacrifices. All of that pointed to Christ and it is all meaningful for our contemplation, but since Christ has fulfilled it all, it is no longer the format that God requires for the followers of Jesus Christ. Instead we find a very simple worship that has two rituals, baptism and the Lord's Supper, but besides that consists of gathering together on the Lord's Day, hearing the word of God, read and preached, singing, praying and giving.

The act of gathering together is very important. It may seem obvious to us and it is obvious, but it is also very significant and meaningful. One of the things that we see throughout the whole Bible is that God's people are a people who are called to meet together to meet with God. There is an important sense that all of life is worship for God's people, but it is also true that God calls his people to assemble before him regularly in corporate worship. The most explicit passage that teaches this is Hebrews 10:19-25. Verse 25 says that we are not to neglect "to meet together." And the earlier verses of that section describe New Testament corporate worship using the imagery of the Old Testament temple as it is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Verse 19, "[W]e have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus." Verse 22, "[L]et us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith." These verses speak about "we" and "us" coming together into the presence of God by the blood of Jesus – that is, cleansed from our sins through the atonement that Jesus made for us on the cross.

The church is a group of redeemed people who gather together before God. The Greek word that is translated "church" is rooted in the idea of an "assembly." This is an important part of what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ. We are the church when we are scattered, but it belongs to the essence of the church that we regularly assemble together to meet with God in worship. In Hebrews 12:23, the author

refers to the church as “the assembly of the firstborn.” And the imagery behind this idea of assembly is the imagery of Israel meeting with God at the foot of Mount Sinai. This is the essence of corporate worship in the Bible. God calls his people together to meet with him. The incident of Israel assembled before God at his initiative at the foot of Mount Sinai is the paradigm for our New Testament worship services.

And from the New Testament we learn that this assembly typically took place on the first day of the week, the day that Jesus rose from the dead. Acts 20:7 says, “On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them....” The New Testament makes a point of the fact that Jesus rose the first day of the week and that the New Testament believers gathered together for worship on the first day of the week. 1 Corinthians 16:2 says “On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come.”

So, we have biblical instruction concerning the practice of coming together on the first day of the week for worship, the meaning of which is the people of God gathered to meet with God. We know from the Bible that that is what God calls us to do. And so, coming together for worship is part of keeping the second commandment. This is not our idea. This is not something that some church leader thought would be a nice thing to do. This is part of God’s instruction for us for corporate worship.

The next thing that we find in the biblical instruction concerning corporate worship is that a huge part of it has to do with the gathered congregation listening to God speaking to them. This too is rooted in the paradigm of Israel gathered before the Lord at Mount Sinai. We saw last week how significant it was that God spoke to his people at that foundational assembly of the people of God. Remember what Moses said to Israel about it in Deuteronomy 4:11-12, ¹¹“And you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, while the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven, wrapped in darkness, cloud, and gloom. ¹²Then the Lord spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice.”

A huge part of the corporate worship that is instituted by God is the gathered assembly listening to God speak. We see this worked out in the New Testament in that the first thing that we read about the New Testament church that was birthed on the day of Pentecost with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is that “they devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching” (Acts 2:42). We see this same principle expressed in the emphasis that the apostle Paul gives in his instruction to Timothy. According to 1 Timothy 3:15, Paul wrote his letters to Timothy that he might “know how one ought to behave in the household of God.” And one of the things that he told Timothy to do was to give himself to the public reading and preaching of the word of God. In 1 Timothy 4:13 “Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.” And in 2 Timothy 4:2 he writes, “[P]reach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.”

Listening to the word of God is central to the public worship of God. As we saw last week, God reveals himself largely through speaking and worship is a response to God’s revelation of himself and his will and his plan of salvation. And so, it is no surprise that the reading and preaching of the word of God is central to corporate worship as described in the New Testament.

This crucial truth is obscured in much evangelical worship where the services are divided up between worship and preaching. The services tend to begin with four or five songs led by a worship leader and a worship team which is followed by the sermon given by the pastor. When the service is divided in this way, between worship and the sermon, the centrality of the reading and preaching of the word of God for worship is obscured. The real nature of worship is obscured because worship involves listening to God as well as singing God’s praises. Biblical worship is a meeting between God and his people and during that worship God speaks and the people listen, and the people speak or sing, and God listens.

It is important to realize this about the kind of worship that the Bible enjoins for his people. A big part of the worship that is pleasing to God involves listening with reverence and attention as God speaks to us by

means of his word. How we listen is a hugely important part of our worship! An important part of our worship is what is going on in our minds and hearts as we listen to God speaking to us through the reading and preaching of God's word. When we listen with reverent attention and the awareness that God is speaking to us – that honors God – just as half-listening with distracted minds is dishonoring to God. Just listen to how God addresses this matter in Isaiah 66:1-2, "1Thus says the Lord: "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest? 2All these things my hand has made, and so all these things came to be, declares the Lord. But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word." This is central to the worship that God requires of his people: listening to his word with reverence and attention.

I must move on. The rest will be a quick summary. It is more straight forward. The worship that God requires of us includes singing God's praises, prayer, offerings and celebrating the sacraments. Singing. The Old Testament has lots of singing in it – songs worshipping God. Psalm 100:1-2, "1Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth! 2Serve the Lord with gladness! Come into his presence with singing!" The New Testament echoes this. Colossians 3:16, "16Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God."

Prayer. Acts 2:42, "42And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." 1 Timothy 2:1, "1First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people," Offerings: 1 Corinthians 16:1, "1Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do." Philippians 4:18, "18I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God."

Sacraments: Baptism: Matthew 28:19, "19Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of

the Son and of the Holy Spirit," Lord Supper: 1 Corinthians 11:23–26, "23For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, 24and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." 25In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." 26For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

Our Westminster Confession of Faith 21:5 also says, "Also, on special occasions and at appropriate times, there are other elements of worship, namely, religious oaths, vows, solemn fasts, and thanksgivings. These are to be used in a holy and devout manner." There are Scripture passages for all of these. I don't have time to get into all of that now.

The point is that the second commandment requires that we worship God according to his instructions and that we don't include in worship all kinds of things that we think might be nice to do, but do not have the warrant of Scripture. That results in simple worship: a worship that consists of listening to God speaking to us and responding to God with prayer, song and giving. It is a worship that is focused mostly on words and a few actions. It is a worship that is focused mostly on hearing and speaking or singing with only a few things that are focused on seeing and tasting and touch.

The worship of some traditions has a lot that uses the other senses besides hearing. There are statues and vestments and incense and candles and banners. This is sometimes referred to as liturgical worship. It is colourful and there is much to engage the senses. There is an emphasis on the atmosphere. All of the symbols and colors and scents create a mood and a worshipful feeling.

But if we understand the second commandment as prohibiting us from adding elements in worship that God has not authorized in his word, we are left with a very different experience. There is no emphasis on setting the mood. There is no emphasis on creating an atmosphere with colour and light. The only part of biblically authorized worship that is

addressed to the other senses besides hearing is the water of baptism and the bread and the wine in the Lord's Supper.

This is exactly the point of the second commandment's prohibition of images. Other than what we see in the sacraments, God focuses our attention on his word and on our words in response to his word. God wants our feelings in worship to come not from beautiful sights and smells, but from what he says to us and he does not want us to be distracted from our conversation with him by a beauty that we take in with our eyes except for the sacraments which are very closely attached to the word of God.

This is why worship that is authorized by the Bible is so simple and unadorned. God wants us to focus on what he is saying to us and on what we say back to him. He wants our attention to be focused like a laser on him, and anything that detracts from that is counter-productive as far as what God is looking for in our worship is concerned. God is not interested in us feeling worshipful because of a worshipful atmosphere. God wants us to love and rejoice and adore and tremble and fear and exult because our attention is riveted on what he is saying to us. Because you see, he is attached to his word. The word of God is God speaking to us. He is here present with us by his word and Spirit and he wants us to hear his voice and he wants to hear our voices and he wants nothing to get in the way of that conversation.

We are going to celebrate the Lord's Supper now. And in the table meditation I will say a little about the use of our other senses in the Lord's Supper and relate our worship to the salvation in Jesus without which any worship would be impossible.

Table Meditation

The Lord's Supper addresses our sense of sight well as our hearing. Here is one of two authorized acts of worship that give a prominent role to the sense of sight. We see the bread and we see the wine/juice. And seeing those elements is an important part of the point of the Lord's Supper. Seeing the bread and the wine and the symbolic actions of

offering and receiving them are important for the purpose of the Lord's Supper. Here the things that we see are intended to make an impression on us. The visible nature of the experience is intended to strengthen our faith and reassure our hearts. The Lord is saying to us, as certainly as you see the bread and the wine, so certainly I give what they symbolize to you through faith.

But even here, the word is an essential part of the picture. The Lord's Supper has physical symbols and actions, but it has no meaning apart from the words that interpret those symbol and actions. Even when God addresses our other senses in the Lord's Supper, he is also at the same time addressing our hearing through the words that belong to the Lord's Supper.

And the purpose of both is to direct our attention to Jesus and his death and the meaning of Jesus and his death. There is no worship at all without a sacrifice. In the Old Testament it was the sacrifices pointing to Christ. In the New Testament it is the sacrifice of Christ. Apart from Jesus Christ and his life, death and resurrection, there is no drawing near to God. There is only fleeing in terror from his presence.

We have been thinking about worship this morning. Worship that is warranted by God in the Bible. Worship that is pleasing to God. The Lord's Supper reminds us that Jesus Christ and his saving work on our behalf are the most fundamental requirement for any worship. Apart from Christ, we face a God of wrath. Apart from Christ we are God's enemies and want nothing to do with God. Christ reconciles God to us and us to God. Christ makes it possible for us to come into the presence of God and be accepted and embraced there rather than driven away.

We remember Christ's death until he comes. We remember it because by it we are forgiven and reconciled to God. We remember it because Jesus told us to. We remember it because it is the basis of our hope. And we remember it because doing so strengthens our faith.