



# The Ten Commandments

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

### (5) Punishment and Steadfast Love

Exodus 20:4-6

Ezekiel 18:1-24

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This will be the last sermon on the second commandment. We have looked at the connection between worshipping images and the fact that we are made in the image of God, we have looked at why God forbids us from making images of himself as aids for worship, we have looked at the fact that the second commandment is about God telling us how he wants to be worshipped which is what we know as the regulative principle of worship and last week as looked at the fact that, in the warning section of the second commandment, God discourages the breaking of the second commandment by telling us that he is a jealous God. This morning we will look at the rest of the warning section and the words of encouragement that are attached to the second commandment.

In the second part of verse 5, God warns that if his people break his commands he will visit “the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate [him], but [he will show] steadfast love to thousands of those who love [him] and keep [his] commandments.” The warning and the encouragement mentioned here apply especially to the first and second commandment, but also to all of the commandments. They apply especially to the first and second commandment because they are mentioned in connection with the second commandment which is very closely related to the first. But they also apply to all the commandments because especially this last section is more general. God speaks about punishing those who hate him and

blessing those who love him and keep his commandments. So, while God's jealousy has a special reference to idolatry, as a whole these words of warning and encouragement apply to all of the commandments.

The first point I want to make from these words, is that they belong to the heart of God's self-revelation. It is very significant that they are repeated word for word in God's description of himself that we find in Exodus 34, which belongs to the story in which Moses asks to see God's glory. God reveals his glory to Moses, mostly by speaking, and this is what he says, Exodus 34:6-7, "...The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, <sup>7</sup>keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."

This is a key passage in Scripture. It is echoed many times in the OT. This is what God wants us to know about himself. He is saying to Moses and to all of us: this is my glory. And it includes these words that God "will by no means clear the guilty" and that he will visit, "the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation." There are many words that refer to God's readiness to save and forgive. He is merciful, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. He keeps steadfast love for thousands. He forgives iniquity and transgression and sin. These words describe a huge aspect of God's glory. If these words were not true of God, there would be no hope for any of us or anyone else. But there is a "but." And what is on the other side of that "but" also belongs to the glory of God. He "will by no means clear the guilty." And he will "visit the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and fourth generation."

The God of the Bible will not allow people to get away with breaking his law. He has given us his law. He has given us the Ten Commandments. He has given the rest of the Bible which elaborates on the Ten Commandments. We have the law of God. And God makes it clear here and in many other places that he will not allow law-breaking to go

unpunished. The God of the Bible is a God who punishes people for breaking his law.

He visits the iniquity on those who hate him. Breaking his commands is an expression of hatred for God. That is contrasted with loving him and keeping his commands. It might sound like extreme language to say that breaking God's commands is an expression of hating him. But it is not hard to see the truth of this with a little thought.

The law of a country like ours is an impersonal instrument. It is based on many things that have gone into its development over time. Ultimately it is or at least claims to be based on the principle of justice. But even if we break the law of the land we are showing disdain for the law and its authority. To break the law is to flaunt its authority. To break a law is to dishonor the system of which the law is a part. The law of God is not an impersonal instrument. There is nothing between God and his law. It is **God's** law. It reflects God's character. We can't say that the law is God because God is much more than his law, but God's law is closely associated with him. It reflects who God is – what he is like. And what we do with his law reflects what we think of God. If we keep God's law, it shows that we think highly of God. If we break God's law, it shows that we despise God. God says: the law reflects my goodness. And if we break God law we are saying: I don't like your goodness. I prefer to define goodness myself. That is why God speaks in personal terms about law-breaking and law-keeping: those who break my law hate me and those who keep my law love me.

And God does not allow those who break his law to go unpunished. He visits their iniquity on them. What exactly does he mean by that? What is it to visit someone's iniquity on them? Well "visiting iniquity" is the opposite of ignoring iniquity. If God is said to "visit iniquity" it means that he is not passing it by. It means that he will come to deal with it. It means that he will attend to the iniquity. So, it is the opposite of allowing it to happen without any response. It will be deal with. It will be dealt with properly.

This is a matter of justice. When we are talking about the law of God we are in the realm of jurisprudence. So, we are dealing with matters of justice and authority and right and wrong. When God says that he will

visit the iniquity upon those who hate him and do not keep his law, he is talking about punishment. He is talking about law-breakers getting what they deserve. They will not go unpunished. This belongs to the heart of the goodness of God. If God did not visit the iniquity of those who break his law, he would be like a human judge who just allowed a murderer to go free. He would be morally corrupt if he would do that. He would be saying that his law really does not matter which would be saying that he really does not matter.

God is the standard of right and wrong. That standard is reflected in his law. If he did not punish people for breaking his law, he would not be upholding the standard for right and wrong. And that would be a disaster. It would mean that there is no justice in the world and that evil would triumph, and that might would overpower weakness. If God did not punish sin there would be no hope that the wicked will get their due and the righteous will be vindicated. A land without justice is an awful place to be. A world without justice would be an awful place to be.

The fact that God punishes sin means that right and wrong matters and that, in the end, his law will be upheld. It means that the law of God will be enforced so that, in the end, the wicked will be punished and the righteous will be rewarded. If this were not so, we would have no hope. If God did not visit the iniquity of sinners upon them, that would mean the triumph of evil and the defeat of good. The only hope that we can have that, in the end, good will prevail over evil, is this truth that God takes lawbreaking very seriously and that he will visit the iniquity on those who commit it. He will punish sin. He will by no means clear the guilty. Sinners shall get their due and the righteous shall be vindicated.

2 Corinthians 5:10, <sup>10</sup>"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil."

If God does not punish sin, he is not a good God and there is no ultimate goodness anywhere in the universe. One of the reasons it is so glorious that the God of the Bible exists is that there is such a thing as ultimate justice. Everything will be made right in the end.

The fact that God has given us his law and will punish those who break it and reward those who keep it means that there is an ultimately just moral order. Think of those countries in the world where the laws are not upheld. Those are not good places to live. People get murdered and nothing happens. Or there is a feud. And injustice and fear reign. God's world is not like that because God has given his law and because he is committed to upholding it. God sometimes does allow people to get away with their crimes temporarily. But in the end, justice will be done. Everyone will get what they deserve. And the result of that will be a perfect world for the righteous and hell for the wicked.

Of course, we must include salvation in this picture. If there were no salvation, everyone would go to hell for we are all law-breakers and the ultimate penalty for that is eternal death. But Jesus has come. Jesus has paid the penalty for the sins of his people. Jesus has suffered what we deserve to suffer if we are trusting in him. And because of that those who belong to Christ can escape the punishment they deserve. In this way, God has shown mercy without compromising his justice. God's way of salvation does not just sweep sin under the rug. It is all dealt with. It is all punished. The justice of God is satisfied because Christ has paid the penalty for the sins of his people. This is why Christ had to die if anyone was going to be saved. Jesus had to die because of the fact that God must visit the iniquity of those who break his law. Paul makes this point in Romans 3:26 when he says that God is both just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. And later on, in the same chapter he says that God upholds the law in the salvation of sinners in Jesus Christ. That means that the law is not ignored. It means that no instance of law-breaking is overlooked. The penalty of for law-breaking is paid. And so, the law is respected and upheld in salvation through Jesus Christ.

If this were not so, God would not be worthy of our worship. He would not be perfect. He would not be glorious. He would not be good, because he would not be just. If he would let sinners get away with breaking his law without doing anything about it, he would be a joke. There would be no need to take him seriously. He would be weak and pathetic, like a government that does not enforce its own laws and allows its people to defy its authority. So, you see that this part of God's character is part of his perfection – part of his goodness – part of his

glory. It is part of the reason that we worship him. Because God punishes sin, we know that he will maintain the good and punish evil and we live in a world in which evil will not triumph over good. The fact that God upholds his law by punishing sin means he is to be worshipped as a king who maintains justice and who backs up a just moral order.

But he has a rather odd way of expressing this point in the verses we are looking at this morning. God tells us that he visits “the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me.” Why in the world would he say that? We would never think of saying what God says here. We would say: I will punish the one who has committed the crime.

The first thing we must understand about this is that God does say in other places that he will punish the one who has committed the crime. In Ezekiel 18, God deals with this issue and he says in verse 20, “The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.” God is saying here that he will not visit the iniquity of the fathers upon the children. God insists that he punishes people for their own sins and not for the sins of their parents.

So, we need to take a closer look at what God is actually saying in our text. “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....**” What God is saying here is that he visits the iniquity on those who hate him. He does not punish people for the sins of their fathers. He punishes people who hate him just as their fathers do.

God here is reflecting the fact that parents have a tremendous impact on the lives of their children. If the father hates God, he will train his children to hate God as well. And those children will train their children to hate God in their generation. God is alluding to the fact that hatred of God tends to run in families. This is an important part of the biblical teaching about families. Proverbs 22:6 says, “Train up child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.” We usually think about that proverb in a positive way. And no doubt that is the way it is intended to be interpreted. If you train a child up in

godliness, “even when he is old he will not depart from it.” We see the truth of that all around us in the many Christians who have been raised in Christian homes and by God’s grace have not departed from the way that we have been trained.

But that principle also works for training in ungodliness. Those who are trained in ungodliness are not likely to turn from it when they are old. Now thankfully, this is not an absolute principle. There are those who have been trained in ungodliness who have repented and turned to the Lord. And sadly, there are also those who have been trained in godliness who have turned away from the Lord. It is usually the case that people continue in godliness if they have been trained that way from their youth and it is usually the case that people who have been trained in ungodliness continue in the way they have been trained. But there are exceptions. Thankfully, in the case of those who turn to the Lord. Sadly, in the case of those who turn away from the Lord.

But in our text, God is referring to the fact that the second, third and fourth generations which follow a father who hates God, tend to be haters of God themselves. And that is why God visits the iniquity of their fathers on them. This is the way that the world works. Children are trained by their parents. Children tend follow in the footsteps of their parents especially where hating or loving God is concerned. On the one hand, that is a curse. On the other side, it is a blessing.

This highlights our responsibilities as parents. Because our influence on our children is so great, we carry a huge measure of responsibility not only for our children, but also for our grandchildren and great grandchildren. That is a sobering thing to consider. How we train our children has implications not only for them, but for the generations that follow them! God punishes ungodly children because of their own ungodliness, but the fact that they are ungodly is to a great extent the result of the sins of their fathers.

So, think of the godless people all around us in our world. They suffer because of their own sins. Many of them live miserable lives because of their sins. All of them are heading for eternal suffering if they do not repent. Some of them had ancestors who were Christians. And then one person in the line of their ancestors either turned away from the Lord all

together or was just very careless about living the Christian life. And the next generation was even more careless, and the next generation turned away from God altogether. The generation that started that sad decline bears some of the responsibility for all the godless generations that follow them.

It is a very serious matter to be a parent. It is wonderful and can bring great joy, but it is very serious because of the huge consequences of the way we live not only on our children themselves, but on the generations that follow. If we are careless in the discipleship of our children, we bear some of the responsibility if they turn away from the Lord. That is not to say that every child who turns away from the Lord does so because of careless parenting. There are painful examples of children who have received godly parenting who have gone the way of the world. There are always exceptions either way. But the Lord is saying to us that, generally speaking children, will continue to live as they have been trained by their parents. That makes parenting a serious business.

So, we have looked at the justice of God and we have looked at the idea that God visits the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate him. But look now at how God ends this section. He shows “steadfast love to thousands of those who love [him] and keep [his] commandments.” The “thousands’ here means, a thousand generations. In Deuteronomy 7:9 we read, “know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations.”

Now what is most important here is the contrast between God’s judgement and God’s steadfast love. God visits the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate him. That’s four generations. But he shows his steadfast love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands. It is the contrast between these two that is the point here. It gives us an insight into the heart of God. When he thinks of his punishment he thinks of four generations. When he thinks of his grace he thinks of a thousand generations. The point here is not mathematical precision. The point is that God’s punishment is necessary, and it will happen, but

God is extravagant with his grace. He is not enthusiastic about punishment, but he is about showing love. When he thinks about his love he looks with delight into the future and his steadfast love to a thousand generations.

We see this same principle in the description of himself that he gives when he shows Moses his glory in Exodus 34. "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, <sup>7</sup> keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." Where is the emphasis here? It is on his grace. God delights to show mercy. He does punish sin. He has very important reasons to do so. But he delights in mercy. In Ezekiel 33:11, we read, "As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live...."

Here is the biblical relationship between God's wrath and his love. The Bible presents us with a God who is holy and just and who punishes sin. We have seen the importance of that for the whole matter of justice in this world. The justice of God is an essential part of the glory of God. Without it God would not be good. And there would be no hope for a world of justice and righteousness. We must speak about the justice of God. We must worship God for his justice. But the way God compares his justice and his steadfast love in the verses we have looked at this morning show us where we must put the emphasis in our thoughts of God and in our speaking of God. God visits iniquity to the third and fourth generations, but he shows his steadfast love to a thousand generations. The point of this is not that we ask questions about exactly how this works itself out in history. The 5th and 6th generations of those who hate God are also visited for their iniquity. The point of this comparison has to do with God's enthusiasm for showing his steadfast love to those who love him and keep his commandments. He is being effusive in his language. He is being exuberant in his language. It is as if God opens his arms and says: I will show my steadfast love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commands.

Two things yet very quickly: This is covenantal language. Steadfast love is covenant faithfulness. It means that God delights to show steadfast love to the children of those who love him. What an encouragement as we seek to be faithful in discipling our children in the fear of the Lord. God is very enthusiastic about this process of parents bringing up their children in the fear of the Lord. God here looks way into the future and he sees himself showing love to his faithful people generation after generation after generation. It does not mean that there is never a break in any family line. But it does mean that “a faithful Church shall serve him/Till generations end. /His praise shall be recounted to nations yet to be...” (Psalter 50) God looks through time all the way to the end, and in every generation, he sees himself showing steadfast love to those who love him and keep his commands.

And second, this points to Christ, because without him there would be no steadfast love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands. God was able to dwell with his people because of the sacrifices that he instituted that pointed to Christ. Apart from Christ we come under the principle that God will by no means clear the guilty. When God looked into the future to the thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands, he also saw the foundation for any of that happening. Jesus Christ living and dying and rising again to free his people from the curse of sin. Apart from Christ, only punishment applies. But through faith in Jesus Christ we are among those upon whom God shows his steadfast love.