



# The Ten Commandments

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

### (4) God’s Jealousy

Exodus 20:4-6

Deuteronomy 4:15-24

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This is the fourth sermon on the second commandment and today we will consider first part of the reason that God gives that we are not allowed to make carved images and worship them. Verses 5-6, “<sup>5</sup>You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God....” God tells us that he is a jealous God and that is why we are not to bow down and worship idols.

These words are connected to the second commandment, but they are clearly meant to encourage the keeping of commandments one and two. The jealousy of God is especially related to worshipping other gods and worshipping the true God according to his instructions.

God refers to himself as a jealous God. He asserts this without shame and embarrassment. This is not a flaw in his character. This is not something that is unfortunately the case, but something that he would rather that we did not know about. There is nothing like that about God. We all have things about ourselves that we would rather that others not know about. We all have a dark side that we try to keep hidden from others. God does not have that problem. He does not have a dark side. Everything about God is praise-worthy. 1 John 1:5 says, “... God is light and in him is no darkness at all.” Whenever God tells us something about himself, it is for us to admire. God tells us about himself so that we will worship him. That is true also about his jealousy. God declares this for all to hear. “I the LORD your God am a jealous God ....”

Sometimes Christians are ashamed of this part of God's character. They may not admit it, but they show it by not talking much about it. They talk about God's love, but not of his jealousy. They do not want to face the derision of the world. The world has no problem if we worship a god who is tolerant according to its understanding of what it means to be tolerant. But the world will revile us for worshiping and proclaiming a God who is very intolerant according to the world's standards. The jealous God of the Ten Commandments is not very affirming to those who show they hate him by defying his commandments. He visits their iniquity on them. But this is the God whom the Bible reveals and whom we are called to proclaim with enthusiasm. This is clearly not all to be said about God, but it is part of it and it belongs to the glory of the God whom we worship.

Now the idea of God's jealousy as it is mentioned here is an idea that takes its meaning from the covenant relationship between God and his people. God is addressing his people here and he says, "I the LORD your God am a jealous God." This is covenant language. When God refers to himself as the God of his people he is alluding to the fact that he has made a covenant with his people. I have not said much about that yet in these sermons on the Ten Commandments. So, I will say something about that now because God's jealousy here is related to the fact that he is in a covenant relationship with his people. In the Bible, God's jealousy mostly has to do with the covenant relationship that he has with his people.

I say mostly, because there is at least one passage in which God speaks of his jealousy when he is speaking to a pagan nation. In Nahum 1:2, God is speaking to Nineveh which was a pagan city. These were not the people of God. And he says to them, "The LORD is a jealous and avenging God." This has a different connotation because God was not in a covenant relationship with the people of Nineveh. God's jealousy against Nineveh was perhaps a jealousy for his honor or for his name, but it was different than his jealousy for Israel because Israel was in a covenant relationship with him and Nineveh was not.

So, a few words about the covenant relationship between God and his people. Biblical scholars have noticed that some of the international

treaties common in the ancient world were remarkably similar to the covenant relationship between God and his people as that is described in the Bible. There were these treaties between more powerful kings with the less powerful kings of the various city states. So, you would have a king who was like an emperor and you would have rulers over much smaller territories. The more powerful king would protect the less powerful kings and the less powerful kings would submit to the authority of the more powerful king. And they would have these treaties that defined their relationship. And those treaties had many similarities with the covenant that God made with his people and the same word was used to refer to them.

These treaties would have a historical prologue that stated what the big king had done for the little king, similar to the historical prologue of the Ten Commandments. The treaties or covenants would have laws imposed by the big king which the little king was to obey. There would be warnings such as we have before us in the second commandment as well as promises of blessings for obedience. And these treaties would be confirmed with oaths.

So, God used the language of these treaty forms to describe his relationship to his people. He used something from their culture that they understood, to describe the kind of relationship that he was forming with his people. It was a formal relationship that was rooted in God's deliverance of his people from Egypt. God was the powerful king. Israel was his vassal. God had requirements for his people and there were punishments for disobedience and rewards for obedience. And the whole was ratified with oaths.

So, we read in Deuteronomy 5:2, "The LORD our God made a covenant with us in Horeb." And Deuteronomy 7:9, "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." And we have this passage from our Scripture reading that shows the close connection between the idea of covenant and the idea of God's jealousy. Deuteronomy 4:23–24, "<sup>23</sup>Take care, lest you forget the covenant of the LORD your God, which he made with you, and make a carved image, the form of anything that the LORD your God

has forbidden you. <sup>24</sup>For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God."

Now the fact that this is a relationship in which God is jealous of his people if they worship other gods shows us that was a love relationship. It was a formal relationship between a King and his subjects, but because the King was God and his subjects were his people it was also a relationship of love. Deuteronomy 7:7 says, "It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples." This covenant relationship is an intensely personal relationship of love. God often speaks of his love for his people. In Exodus 19 he calls them his treasured possession. Likewise, the people are called to love God with all their heart, soul and might in Deuteronomy 6:5. So while it is a formal treaty-like relationship between a King and his subjects, it is also an intimate relationship of love between God and his people.

And this is why God refers to himself as the LORD their God who is a jealous God. This is a relationship of love and the first and second commandments make it clear that this was an exclusive relationship. The people were not to worship any other gods. That is the first commandment. God's jealousy is related to the fact that the first law of the covenant relationship was the requirement that Israel was to love God with all their hearts and to worship no other gods. So, what you have is an intimate covenant relationship, an important part of which was exclusivity. God loved Israel more than any of the other nations and Israel was to love God and worship him exclusively. God's jealousy is his zeal for the exclusive worship of his people. It is his zeal for the relationship.

You can see from this why the Scriptures would compare the covenant relationship between God and his people with a marriage relationship. There are many things about a marriage relationship which are like the covenant relationship between God and his people. So, Isaiah 54:5 says, "For your Maker is your husband...." This is the context in which we are to understand the Lord's jealousy when it comes to his people. The marriage relationship is the most intimate relationship between human beings. And that kind of love and intimacy requires exclusivity. In other

relationships, with less intimate love, it is OK and even good and necessary to be promiscuous with your love. By that I am emphatically not talking about sexual promiscuity. By that I mean the non-sexual love towards other human beings that we may and should be spread all over the place. You can love a whole bunch of children. You can love a whole congregation of fellow believers. You can and should love your neighbor as yourself. That kind of love is not reserved for one person. The more the merrier. The more people you love the better.

But the intimate love of marriage must be reserved for one person. And requiring that exclusive love from your husband and wife is jealousy. Jealousy is an expression of love. Your love for your husband or wife would be seriously flawed if it were not a jealous love. So, when God says that he is a jealous God, he is saying something about the intimacy of the love that he has for his people and the intimacy of the love that he expects from them. The love between God and his people is compared to the most intimate love between human beings.

That is how much God loves you, if you are in this covenant relationship with God. Your baptism, which is a sign of the covenant, is like a wedding ring. This is serious love. This is intense. It is so intense that it is possessive. God says: you belong to me – you are mine. This is a wonderful truth to contemplate. To be loved is something that we really need as human beings. The kid who says “nobody loves me” may not be reflecting reality, but he is expressing something of the pain of being unloved. It is painful to feel that we are unloved. And what a joy it is to know that you are loved! Well here we are reminded that we are loved by the most important persons in the universe, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. We are precious to God. We are cherished by God. We are loved by God with a very powerful intimate love. That is the most important thing ever. And that is a huge part of what God’s jealousy means.

But the flip side of this is the devastation that comes when this kind of love is violated by the wrong kind of promiscuity. And that is what happens when we have other gods besides the God who loves us with the love of the covenant. That is why the Bible refers to idolatry using the language of adultery. Listen to what God says to his people in

Ezekiel 16:32-33, "<sup>32</sup>Adulterous wife, who receives strangers instead of her husband! <sup>33</sup>Men give gifts to all prostitutes, but you gave your gifts to all your lovers, bribing them to come to you from every side with your whorings." That is the language of jealousy. This is what God means when he says in our text, "I the LORD your God am a jealous God." He is saying: I love you this much. He is saying: If you worship other gods, you are committing adultery against me. He is saying: If you worship other gods, you are violating our intimate covenant relationship.

And so, we should think of our own idolatries in this light. We have seen that idolatry is loving anyone or anything more than God. The things in our lives that are more important to us than God are our idols. So, think about your life. What do you seek first in your life? What are you most concerned about? What do you mostly think about? Wherever God is not the answer to those questions, you have your idols. Those are your other gods. Those are your other lovers. Those are all adulterous relationships. These are the things that provoke God's jealousy. You are making love to a stranger every time you love something more than God. You are being promiscuous with the love that should be reserved for God.

Now thankfully, God has provided a way to save the relationship. We have violated it. We have committed spiritual adultery. But God has provided a way of reconciliation. He has planned that all the way along. God knew all the way along that we would spurn his love. But in spite of that he set his love on us and planned a way of reconciliation. In the chapters that follow the Ten Commandments, God gives instruction for the tabernacle and for sacrifices for sin. God provides a way for forgiveness for his people because he knows that they will not be faithful to him. And the fulfillment of all that is Jesus Christ and his sacrifice for us that affected reconciliation.

Ephesians 5:22-33, compares the relationship between Christ and his church to a marriage relationship. Actually, it is the other way around. One of the reasons that marriage exists is to reflect the relationship between Christ and his church. Ephesians 5:25-26 say that, "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her,

having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word....” Our spiritual adultery is defiling. It makes us unclean and unfit for a relationship with God. But God, through Christ, has provided a way for the relationship to continue – for there to be reconciliation. Jesus gave himself that we might be cleansed through faith in his name. This is what makes the ongoing covenant with God possible in spite of our spiritual adultery. Christ came to cleanse us so that we might be his bride. He continues to work in us by his Spirit so that one day we will be without blemish.

That is wonderful. It means that our spiritual adultery does not make it impossible for us to be in this intimate covenant relationship with God. It means that if we are in Christ, we are forgiven and reconciled to God. It means that even though we are not completely faithful to Christ, he still loves us, and we are still the bride of Christ.

But we must still think of God’s jealousy and what it means for our ongoing relationship with him. The relationship that we have with Christ is a real relationship and that means that it is affected when we stray from faithfulness to him. Even though believers are forgiven for their spiritual adulteries, and reconciled to Christ, those spiritual adulteries are still vile and detestable.

And so, I would like to think with you about the implications of God’s jealousy for believers. We will spend a little time now thinking about how God’s jealousy should help us to fight idolatry in our lives. The fact that God is a jealous God can and should be a great help for us in repenting of our idolatries and seeking to grow in faithful devotion to Christ.

Now if we look at how God intends for his jealousy to encourage us not to worship other gods in our text, we see that he connects it to punishment. God’s jealousy means punishment for his covenant people who worship other gods. Exodus 20:5, “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....” We will look at that in more detail next week, but for now notice that because of his jealousy he will punish his

covenant people who worship other gods. That is a warning. And a warning is designed to encourage us to obey.

If we are believers, we are in Christ, so we will not have to bear that punishment. But that does not mean that we can take that punishment lightly. It still had to be borne. Christ bore it in our place. Christ bore the jealous wrath of God for our sins.

Now God's jealous wrath is not like the jealous wrath of a husband or a wife that has been cheated against. Human jealousy is always mixed with sin. God's jealousy is not. It is perfectly just. It is not vindictive rage. But still, it is a wrath that comes from the violation of intimate love. God himself is making this connection here. The visiting of iniquity is an expression of his jealousy. That means that God's wrath against the sins of his covenant people is the wrath of a God whose tender love has been rejected for other lovers. It is completely just. But it is also passionate and personal. It is a wrath of jealousy.

And that is what Jesus had to bear on our behalf. We should think about that as we consider how easily we love other things more than God. We should think about this when we are miserly with the time and thought that we give to God and generous with the time and thought that we give to our hobbies or our entertainment or whatever our idols happen to be. If we are truly in Christ, we do not have to bear God's jealous wrath against our sin, but Jesus did, and we should not take that lightly. And that should motivate us to be very serious about strangling our idolatries and nurturing our love for and worship of God. When God warns us about his jealous wrath against the sin of covenant adultery, that should make us horrified to indulge in our idolatries knowing that Jesus bore the jealous wrath for sins adulteries that we have committed.

And God's connection between his jealousy for worshipping other gods and punishment should also encourage us to make our calling and election sure by being seriously engaged in the fight against idolatry in our lives. Jesus died for the idol worship of his people, but one of the inevitable results of being saved by Christ through his Spirit is that we will be serious about repenting of our idols. When Paul describes the conversion of the Thessalonians in 1 Thessalonians 1:9 he says that they



“turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God....” That does not mean that they were suddenly completely free from idolatries in their lives, but it does mean that they were not longer going with the flow of their idol worship. If we have turned to God from idols through the powerful transforming power of Christ, we will not be perfect, but we will be serious about repenting of our idolatry and giving our hearts more and more fully to God.

God told his people that he was a jealous God so that they would be extra motivated to resist idol worship. And what that means is that those who are truly people of God will take those warnings seriously and not be going with the flow of their tendency to love other things more than God. If we are truly followers of Jesus, we will be serious about fighting the fight of faith and that means we will be serious about growing in the love of God and fighting against the idolatry that remains in our lives. The fact that Jesus cleanses his people from all their idolatries is wonderful news and reason for joy and peace and hope. But it does not take away the seriousness of the Christian life and the seriousness of the fight against sin. If we are not serious about fighting against sin, we have no reason to believe that we are truly in Christ. The fact that God speaks of his jealousy in the second commandment and connects his jealousy to punishment for those who continue in idolatry is a very powerful incentive for all of us to be serious about killing the idolatry that remains in our lives.

Another way that the jealousy of God can help us in the fight against idolatry in our lives is that it gives us insight into the vile nature of this sin. As we have seen God’s jealousy takes its meaning from the intimacy of the covenant relationship that he has made with us. Loving something else more than God has the same meaning as cheating on your husband or your wife. God himself uses the imagery of adultery and prostitution to describe what it means to worship another god - which is what we do when we prefer intimacy with our idols rather than intimacy with God. The fact that God is a jealous God teaches us that we are to love him more than anyone or anything else and that failure to do so is the spiritual equivalent of having sex with a prostitute.

That truth should make us recoil from loving anything else more than God. It helps us to see how despicable the sin of spiritual adultery is. God's jealous love for us is so intimate, tender, and pure, and turning away from that to fornicate with other loves is so vile and unclean, that the fact that we do so should horrify us. God wants us to see how ugly and revolting it is for us to worship idols. That is why he tells us that he is a jealous God and why he tells us that worshipping idols is like having sex with a stranger.

But the greatest reason that God's jealousy can help us in the fight against loving other people or things more than God is that it is an expression of his love. It teaches us that God's covenant love for us is like the love between a husband and a wife. Jesus loves us as his bride. Such love is tender. It is intimate. It is deep. And it is sacrificial. God gave his Son for us. Jesus gave his life for us.

God's love for us is what nurtures and strengthens our love for God. It is, of course, a miracle if we love God because by nature our hearts are not inclined to do so. When we turn to Christ we not only receive forgiveness, but we also receive new hearts that love God. He gives his Spirit to change the hearts of those who are in Christ. But that does not happen in a way that completely by-passes the way that love works and the way that relationships work. The Bible tells us that God's love to us produces a response of love in us. 1 John 4:19 says, "We love because he first loved us." That is true in a number of ways. One of them is experientially. It is God's love for us that stirs up our love for God.

So, as we think of God's jealousy we are given insight into the warmth and intimacy and passion of his love for us. It is the same thing for Christ's love for his bride. Dwelling on that is a very powerful way to nurture our love for God. Remembering that God loves us with a jealous love is what draws out our love for him. And the greatest way to decrease our love for idols is to nurture our love for God. And we do that by dwelling on God's love for us. And we do that by dwelling on God's Word and by spending time with him in prayer and meditation. What a wonderful thing it is that God is a jealous God! It means that he loves us.