

“Ten Keys to a Joyful Life”
#2: “Is Your God too Small?”
Exodus 20:4-6 and Jeremiah 10:1-10 (NIV)

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It was Sunday morning on a military base, and all the young enlistees were in chapel. The chaplain that day was especially concerned about the moral decay of young people, so he preached a powerful sermon on the Ten Commandments. As they filed out of chapel, one of the soldiers leaned over to his buddy and said . . . “Well, at least I haven’t made any graven images!”

Today we come to this, the second of the Ten Commandments: “Thou shalt not make or worship any graven images,” and, like that young soldier, we breathe a sigh of relief, thinking that, at least with THIS commandment, we are “off the hook.”

When we consider all the Ten Commandments, we tend not to take this one too seriously. After all, when was the last time you made and worshiped a graven image? No, we don’t take it seriously at all. But you know what? God does! Of all the commandments, God has chosen this second commandment to have one of the most severe penalties of them all if it is broken: “punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me . . .” If God takes it that seriously, we’d better try to understand WHY, don’t you think?

When we first hear this commandment, we assume it is a prohibition against making idols of pagan gods – like the golden calf of Baal or the Canaanite fertility goddess, Asherah. And, of course, it DOES condemn those kinds of graven images. But if THAT were all that it meant, then this second commandment would be redundant and unnecessary. The first commandment against worshiping other gods has already covered this topic quite adequately. If THIS were all that this commandment referred to, then we’d have to assume that the only reason God included it is for emphasis sake . . . He wants to make sure we “get it,” so he says it twice.

But there is more to this commandment than that. The Hebrew word here can either be translated “idol” or “image.” In other words, the commandment COULD mean that God’s people must not make idols of PAGAN gods to worship – OR – it could mean that God’s people must not make any graven image in an attempt to depict, NOT pagan gods, but the God of Israel!

Did you catch the distinction? This second commandment goes a step beyond the first. The first forbids the worship of any but the one true God. The second forbids the worship of any representation of the one true God. Or put another way, the first commandment is concerned with WHO we worship; the second is concerned with HOW or WHAT we worship.

Unlike those who worship other gods, we, the people of God, are commanded by God that we make no attempt to image or represent God – why? Lest we are tempted to turn that image into an object of our worship . . . in other words, to make an idol of it. That is what this commandment forbids.

The Jewish people understood this. All throughout their long history, they have been careful not to have images of God. And whenever they forgot and began to disregard this command, they slipped into sin, and destruction soon followed. Indeed, the prophecy of punishment on generation after generation is played out over and over again in the Old Testament.

But this wasn't just an issue for the Old Testament. In Jesus' day, they still struggled to be true to this command. That is the reason there were money-changer in the temple, that Jesus, in his anger, drove out. Before people could make their offering in the Temple, they had to exchange Roman coins (with the image of Caesar and the Roman eagle – graven images) for temple coins that were free from the images of humans or animals. Even to this day, when you travel to Israel, you will notice that no Israeli coin bears the image of a human or an animal . . . because God said, "Thou shalt not make or worship any graven image."

I think God was so emphatic about this because He knows human nature. He knows that it is human nature to want to produce an image of God.

A little boy was drawing intently with his crayons. When his mother asked him what he was drawing, he answered, "God." "But," his mother explained, "nobody knows what God looks like." The boy answered, "They will when I finish my picture!"

It's natural for us to try to picture what God is like. We have a need to have something to touch or see to help us connect with God and to focus our worship. We do this all the time in our churches and homes. We have images of God all around us . . . the cross on the altar . . . or the one around your neck, the altar itself, the candles, stained glass windows, statues and paintings of Jesus or angels or Mary, even the bread and wine of Holy Communion – all these are, in their own way, "images" of God, and they are all beneficial, even necessary, for our worship.

The altar and candles remind us of the presence of God in our midst; Bible scenes in many stained glass windows help us connect with the truth we find in God's Word; pictures and statues of Jesus help us remember how God was willing to take on our human flesh and condition; the cross reminds us of the sacrifice God was willing to make to win our eternal life; and the elements of the Lord's Supper help us experience the power of God's grace in our lives.

Yes, these are "images" of God, symbols that serve a very important function in helping us worship Him. So, images CAN be good.

But there are dangers in permitting images of God . . . THREE dangers I believe God had in mind when he gave us this second commandment:

First, there is the danger that the image or the symbol can replace God as the focus of our worship.

In Europe, there was a very old church that had served its village for dozens of generations. In recent years, a new parish priest was assigned, and he was baffled by what he observed. As people came to Mass, they all turned to the left wall of the entryway that was totally blank and, one by one, genuflected to it! He asked some of the old-timers why they did that, and they said that it had always been so, for as long as anyone could remember.

After some time, the congregation decided to restore the old church, and when they began to remove the old plaster on the walls of the entryway, they discovered that it had covered up a beautiful painting of Christ.

You see, if we are not careful, we can begin to revere the image of God, rather than God Himself. And when we do that, we have transformed a symbol that was meant to be an aid to worship into an idol to be worshipped.

If you've ever been to a Greek Orthodox Church, you no doubt noticed all the paintings and mosaics of Jesus and the saints of the church that adorn their buildings. Some people have criticized the Orthodox for seeming to worship the images in their churches. But those who accuse them of idolatry do not understand that there is a difference between icons and idols. Like the symbols in our Protestant sanctuaries, icons in Eastern churches are aids that function like transparent windows through which the worshipper can see God Himself. But an image becomes an idol when it blocks our view of God.

In the Book of Numbers in the Old Testament, there is an interesting story of how a useful symbol or icon can become an idol. In their wandering through the wilderness following their Exodus from Egypt, the Hebrew people were attacked and tormented by poisonous snakes. Moses, on the instruction of God, made a bronze serpent and set it up on a pole. Those who had been bitten looked at the bronze serpent to be reminded of God's power to bring healing to his people, and they were healed.

As obscure at this episode may be to us, Jesus referred to it as being a foreshadowing of His crucifixion and the healing that it would bring to the world: In John 3:13 – Jesus says, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life."

So, when Moses made this "graven image" it was clearly an icon that allowed people to see God. But that's not the last time in the Old Testament we hear of that bronze snake.

Centuries after Moses created it, we find King Hezekiah smashing the serpent into pieces – why? Because the people had been burning incense to it.

What had happened? A symbol and aid to worship had become the object of worship. It had changed from an icon to an idol, and therefore had to be destroyed.

Now, don't be too quick to assume that this still doesn't happen today. It happens all the time in the church and among good Christian folks. You and I can easily slip down that slippery slope into idolatry.

I have known so-called Christians who believe that, to wear a cross around their neck is good luck – that nothing bad will befall them if they never take off their cross. Maybe you know folks who say they are Bible-believing people, and to prove it they display a big family Bible on their coffee table. They worship it (as an idol), but they never read it.

Or perhaps you've heard of people who will travel thousands of miles to visit a religious shrine or to touch the pinky bone of a saint, or to kiss a piece of the "one true cross, or to view the Shroud of Turin, or to bring back a vial of Jordan water from the Holy Land to use for family baptisms.

Do you see what I'm saying? So long as an image or symbol points beyond itself to God, it is appropriate. But just as soon as any image or symbol becomes an object of veneration, it becomes an idol, and we have broken the second commandment.

A second danger inherent in images of God is that they have the effect of distorting God's character and diminishing His glory.

Someone has said that, to fill God's place with an image is like blotting the sun out of the heavens and substituting a 15 watt bulb in its place. No single image of God is sufficient to capture the essence of God. And likewise, no individual word we can use to describe God can reveal Him in all His majesty and glory.

Yes, we describe God using many images: King, Creator, Sustainer, Judge, the Ancient of Days, Redeemer, Lamb, Lion Mother Hen, Rear Guard, Defender, Fortress, Rock, Eternal in the Heavens, and on and on . . . We need all those words, because none of them alone can describe who God is. We use countless words, and still come up short.

What if our only "image" of God were a lamb? We'd forget that He is also the Loin of Judah. If the only view we have of God is that of a father, how would we know that God also has a maternal side? If all we saw were God's judgments, where would be His mercy?

You, see, the danger of picking out one image of God to worship above all the others is that it only allows us to see one facet of God's nature, and therefore the picture we get of God would be distorted. And when people have a distorted image of God, then it impacts how they view their world.

For instance, when Christians see God PRIMARILY as a god of conquest and victory, you get holy crusades where thousands die in God's name. When Christians see God PRIMARILY as a God of racial purity, you get racist groups claiming to be Christians and, in Christ's name, committing hate crimes against people of color or of other faiths. When Christians see God PRIMARILY as a God of liberation from the law, you get well-meaning folks insisting that our God will bless our personal choices even if those choices may run counter to scripture. When Christians see God PRIMARILY as a God of acceptance, and tolerance, you get soft-hearted Christians who, in the desire to reflect God's grace, ignore God's standards of morality and God's judgment against sin. When Christians see God PRIMARILY as a God of their own particular nation, you get Church people who confuse faith with patriotism and assume God automatically blesses whatever their country does, even when it contradicts the teachings of Jesus. When Christians see God PRIMARILY as a God of law and judgment, you get narrow-minded holier-than-thou people who are quick to accuse and pass judgment on others, but slow to extend God's forgiveness and mercy.

You see, it does matter what image we have of God. And that is why God is so insistent that we be on our guard – because the images we project upon God distort His character and diminish His glory.

So, we've seen that images of God can be dangerous: 1) if they begin to replace God as the object of worship; or 2) if they blind us to the many facets of His character.

But there is a third threat images pose. They can become a tool by which we try to manipulate God.

Do you remember the scene when God called to Moses from the burning bush? Moses had fled from Egypt and had established a new and comfortable life for himself in the land of Midian – but God had different plans for Moses. God told Moses that he was to go back to Egypt to free the Hebrew slaves. But Moses knew the Hebrews would never trust him. So, he asked God to tell him God's name so that he, in turn, could tell the people which of the gods had sent him.

And do you remember what God tells him? He gives him a name that really is no name at all. He said, "Tell them, 'I am who I am' has sent you." What a bizarre thing for God to say! What was going on here?

You see, in the ancient world, names were very important, and people believed that if you knew someone's name you could have power over him or her – you could use their name in spells or blessings or curses. That was the premise, you'll recall, of the children's fairy tale "Rumpelstiltskin." Rumpelstiltskin had stolen the queen's child, and the only way the queen could get her baby back was to guess Rumpelstiltskin's name. You see, there is power in the name! (By the way, that's the reason we end our prayers "in Jesus' name.")

Well, pagans were constantly calling on their gods, invoking their names, imploring them to do their bidding. You see, idols can be manipulated. But not our God. He refuses to be anyone's idol! When God is asked to reveal his name, He says, in effect, "I'm not going to play your little game!"

To elevate and worship an image of God rather than God Himself is our human attempt to shrink God down into something limited that our puny little brains can grasp. And when we have done that, the inevitable next step is to believe that we can manipulate God – that we have domesticated Him, putting God on a leash. And when we've shrunk God down far enough, we no longer have to take Him seriously. If our God is tiny and weak, then He has no claim on our life. And, just like the idol we have made of Him, we can take him off the shelf when we're feeling religious, and put him back up on the shelf when we don't want to be bothered. We have made God into our genie in Aladdin's lamp – our divine errand boy.

Therein is the reason for the second commandment. When we stoop to worship images of God, we, in essence, dismiss God as being irrelevant to our lives. And nothing makes God madder than to be dismissed!

The fact is that many people today fail to be awed by the majesty and glory of God. They prefer a small diminutive submissive God they can manipulate – a God that won't make any demands on their lives, - a God that they can take or leave at will, - a God that really is an idol of their own creation.

But that is NOT the God of the Bible. The God of the Bible is an eternal, all-powerful, omniscient and omnipresent God who will NOT be confined by our puny little minds. He is the immortal invisible only-wise God, the alpha and omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. He is a God who will NOT be dismissed nor manipulated, but who demands our total allegiance and obedience.

The God of the Bible is a God who is bigger and grander and more majestic and more glorious and more mysterious and more eternal than any image you or I could possibly conjure up.

You see, the God of the Bible is BIG BIG God – big enough to conquer any trials and troubles, BIG enough, even, to conquer sin and death. I don't know about you, but I'm glad my God is a BIG God. Because sometimes I've got BIG troubles, and I need a BIG God to help me overcome them!

What about you? Are you willing to let God be God in all His majesty and glory – or are you an "idol maker," fashioning a God after your own image? The question this second commandment confronts us with demands a truthful answer: "How BIG is your God?"