

The Ten Words – No Idols Exodus 20:4-6

INTRODUCTION

Please turn in your Bible to **Exodus 20:2, 4-6**. Though most of the commandments are given in the form of a negative (“*You shall not . . .*”), each commandment should be understood to have both a negative and a positive dimension: **something it forbids and something it requires**.

“**You shall have no other gods before me**” implies
“Worship Yahweh alone.”

“**You shall not make a graven image**” implies
“Worship Yahweh in the way that he requires.”

“**You shall not take Yahweh’s name in vain**” implies
“You shall honor the name of Yahweh in your words and conduct.”

“**Remember the Sabbath**” implies *“You shall not labor or make others labor.”*

“**Honor your father and mother**” implies *“Don’t disobey or disrespect authorities.”*

“**You shall not murder**” implies *“Respect and protect human life.”*

“**You shall not commit adultery**” implies *“Respect and protect marriage and sexuality.”*

“**You shall not steal**” implies *“Respect and protect other people’s property.”*

“**You shall not bear false witness**” implies *“Respect and protect the truth and the integrity of society.”*

“**You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, house, etc.**” implies *“Be content with what God gives to you.”*

Recognizing the negative and positive dimensions of the commandments allows us to see that they are not narrow commands about particular actions. Instead, they are comprehensive in both breadth and depth. In breadth, they address the major aspects of human life in its totality — worship, representation, labor, life, marriage, property, societal integrity, and the satisfaction of the human heart. In depth, it’s clear that they don’t aim merely at external obedience. Rather, they aim at our minds, our hearts, and our actions.

The first two commandments are closely related. “*You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol ... You shall not bow down to them or worship them.*”

(Exodus 20:3-5) They are similar, but there is an important difference. Puritan preacher and writer **Thomas Watson** puts it this way, “*In the first commandment worshipping a false God is forbidden; in this commandment, worshipping the true God in a false manner is forbidden.* (Watson, *The 10 Commandments*)

The **first commandment** has to do with whom you will worship. **The second commandment** has to do with how you worship. The **first commandment** already prohibited worshipping the false gods and idols of other nations. The **second commandment** prohibits the use of idols in worshipping the one true God.

The **second commandment** does not intend to outlaw art or painting or aesthetic considerations. The tabernacle displayed angels and palm trees, the ark will have cherubim, and God himself gave the Spirit to Bezalel and Oholiab that they might be skilled artists and craftsmen. God is not against beauty. **What He prohibits is infusing any object with spiritual worth, as if man-made artifacts can bring us closer to God, represent God, or establish communion with God.**

The second commandment is one of the longest. For our study purposes, let's break it down to four parts...

I. The _____: no idols (20:4-5a)

There are **two things** specifically prohibited in the commandment.

A. You shall not _____ idols (32:4)

The rule is very simple: *“Don't make any idols”* (v. 4a), or as the King James Version refers to them, *“graven images”* (see also Lev. 26:1). This translation comes close to the original meaning. **An idol was something crafted by a tool. Whether it was carved out of wood, chiseled out of stone, or engraved in metal, it was cut and shaped by human hands.** It was a man-made representation of some divine being.

First of all, you shall not make for yourself an idol *“in the form of anything in heaven above.”* The word *“heaven”* has several layers of meaning in the Scriptures. Sometimes it refers to the heavenly or spiritual realm. This would preclude making images of angels or demons or imaginary gods for the purpose of worship. The apostle John writes in **Revelation 22**: *“I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who had been showing [these things] to me. But he said to me, ‘Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers the prophets and of all who keep the words of this book. Worship God!’”* (Revelation 22:8-9)

“Heaven above” can also refer to the heavenly bodies, and so would prohibit someone from making an idol in the form of the sun or the moon or the stars. It could also refer to the sky, which would prohibit making an idol in the form of any of the creatures of the air, such as birds or flying insects. *“On the earth beneath”* would prohibit making idols in the form of land animals, such as cows or elephants or even man. And *“in the waters below”* would prohibit making idols in the form of animals that live in the water, such as fish, or crocodiles or sea animals. **In other words, you shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything, anything at all in either the material or spiritual realms.**

B. You shall not _____ idols (32:5a)

So, the rule: no idols. Next, please note...

II. The _____ (20:5b)

God forbids idolatry because of his **jealousy**. To use a more positive and also a more accurate word, it is because of his zeal—the burning passion of his love. **Jealousy doesn't get much positive publicity these days.** When people talk about it they generally mean something more like envy, the desire to get something that does not belong to you. However, when something really does belong to you, there are times when it needs to be protected. **A holy jealousy is one that guards someone's rightful possession.** The most obvious example is the love between a husband and wife. No husband who truly loves his wife could possibly endure seeing her in the arms of another man. It would make him intensely jealous, and rightly so!

God feels the same way about His people. His commitment to us is total. His love is exclusive, passionate, intense—in a word, jealous. As one commentator **explains**, *“Godly jealousy is not the insecure, insane, and possessive human jealousy that we often interpret this word to mean. Rather, it is an intensely caring devotion to the objects of His love, like a mother's jealous protection of her children, a father's jealous guarding of his home.”* (Schenck, *The Ten Words That Will Change a Nation: The Ten Commandments*, p. 32.)

So, the rule: no idols. The reason: God is a jealous God. Next, please note...

III. The _____ (20:5c)

What are we to make of the threat in verse 5 to visit the iniquity of the fathers on their children? This warning is repeated elsewhere in the Old Testament (**Ex. 34:6–7; Num. 14:18; Jer. 32:18**). **But what does it mean?** It's not a reference to generational curses, hexes, or demonic oppression. Nor does it mean that a righteous child will be punished unfairly for the sins of his wicked father.

That's a common misunderstanding from **verse 5**, so common, it seems, that **Ezekiel 18** means to correct it. In **Ezekiel 18:20** we read, *"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."* God does not say to a righteous child, *"Tough break, kid, your dad was wicked, so I'm going to really let you have it."*

When God talks about punishing the children for the sin of the fathers, He is not talking about children inheriting the _____ of their parents' sin but the _____ of their sin.

So, the rule: no idols. The reason: God is a jealous God. The warning: He doesn't forget and does something about it. Next, please note...

IV. The _____ (20:6)

CONCLUSION

What can we take with us this morning?

1. Anything _____ can become an _____ if we _____ it too much.
2. Because our children unconsciously _____ our values, once _____ enters our family's spiritual bloodstream, it is very difficult to _____
3. The ultimate _____ of idolatry is that it _____ all that you have and gives nothing in _____.