

Idolatry, Imagery and Worshipping God Rightly (Exodus 20:4-6)

When we bought our house years ago there was some re-painting that was needed.

- The dining room had chili pepper wallpaper that was a little too festive for us.
- There were weird planters built into the room but something weirder in the casita.
- We walked in the casita to see a creepy Virgin Mary image staring at you, eye level.
- A kid of ours asked as we saw it, “what’s that?” So we told him about idols.
- The room had evidently been a place where someone knelt and prayed toward an image.
- Soon as we bought the house, we got rid of it (and planters and chili peppers wallpaper).
- It reminded me of the Philippines where I grew up,
 - o religious icons, graven images of saints they pray to,
 - o baby Jesus ceramics, carved statues of adult Jesus they bow to, kiss feet of, etc.
 - o Many serve paintings of Mary, and trust in crucifixes superstitiously.

At our house that image is gone but idols aren’t gone. I’ll explain that more later in the message

Some idols can’t just be painted over and their stain remains

Please turn in God’s Word to Ex 20 and let’s continue our series on the 10 commandments.

- We studied the 1st commandment last week in v. 3: *You shall have no other gods before me.*

Today in v. 4 we’ll study the 2nd commandment,

- but if you grew up in a Catholic or Lutheran church you may have never heard this one.
- If you did catechism or confirmation, they count the 1st of the 10 as v. 3-6.
- *No other gods* is how they sum up the 1st, then the 2nd is v. 7, *you shall not misuse His name.*
- So v. 4-6 are skipped over and not studied as a separate or 2nd commandment.
- Catholics pray in worship and bow to graven statues, unaware v. 5 says not to.

To count 10 commandments, RCC divides v. 17 into 2,

- don’t covet your neighbor’s wife (#9) or stuff (#10).
- That avoids questions about v. 4 if your worship service has carved images all around
 - o or painted likenesses made of people in heaven.

But God’s law isn’t taught by evangelicals enough anymore and we can be guilty in other ways.

We’re not under the Mosaic law like OT Israel, but God’s moral law is above all

Look at Exodus 20:4 where God tells His people how not to worship: “*You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or **any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.***”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 the fourth generation of those who hate me,*⁶ *but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.*

This is for all time, as we’ll see later the NT affirms

How is v. 4-6 a different commandment from the 1st (*you shall have no other gods before me*) in v. 3?

- The 1st lays down the law of WHO the 1 true God is, the 2nd HOW He’s truly worshipped
- v. 3 starts in the heart, v. 4-5 moves to the body (hands make, eyes see, heads bow, etc.)
- The 1st commandment is to prioritize the right God as #1, the 2nd is to praise God rightly
 - o It’s not enough to honor and serve the right God, He says it must be the right way
- The 1st forbids having false gods, the 2nd forbids representing even the true God falsely
- In v. 3 God must be the only object of worship, v. 4-5 forbids adding objects in worship
- Praying is a part of worship in scripture, we’re not to pray to people in heaven or pictures

- v. 4 covers 3-D (graven or carved objects) and 2-dimensional art (any likeness or image)
- Pagans bowed to Dagon, but before the ark Dagon bowed (and lost its head and hands!)¹
- This isn't just idolatry of false gods, it also forbids imagery for worshipping the true God

Outline:

- 1. Israel's context of imagery**
- 2. Scripture's concept of idolatry**
- 3. Our Application**

Let's start with the context of Israel. v. 2 says God brought them out of Egypt.

- That was a land of religious images of all kinds of creatures, real or imagined (half-man half-dog/cat/eagle, etc.).

Egyptians carved statues of Sphinxes and snakes raised up as well as mythical underworld gods.

- v. 4 forbids in worship the making or taking of images from creation or imagination.

Powlison: 'Idolatry is by far the most frequently discussed problem in the scriptures'²

Go forward in the context to ch 32 and keep in mind the plagues hit Egypt's gods.

- For example, Egypt had sacred cows literally that God sent plagues to strike down.
- Pharaoh and others wore gold horns of cattle as an image to represent they were a god

That's the context Israel lived in 430 years before this, and that helps explain Ex **32:3**: *So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron.* ⁴ *And he received the gold from their hand and **fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf**...* [now notice in v. 5 this isn't an Egyptian god] ⁵ *When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the **LORD**."*

That's the covenant name of Israel's God, not a calf named after an Egyptian god

Israel believes a cow or calf represents deity,

- Aaron wants them to worship the true God in this image.
- Aaron uses the name *Yahweh*, a call to worship of the right God but in a wrong way.

The physical golden calf was just a visual image he thought would help them worship Yahweh. He'd say we're not worshipping the gold, just worshipping the God it represents/reminds us of.

- God says no, you shall not grave or make or take images you worship, bow to, or serve.

It's not just the image maker (Aaron), all who worship what he made are guilty

If it's not for worship God allows carved images or creating artistic likenesses.

- Look at Ex 31:3 where outside of worship God's Spirit filled and gifted people,
- 31:4: *to devise **artistic designs**, to work in gold, silver, and bronze,* ⁵ *in cutting stones for setting, and in **carving** wood, to work in **every craft**.*

Go to ch **25** and the same word for *make* used in the 2nd commandment is actually commanded.

Craftsmanship, cutting, carving, creating art is ok, it's not worshipped or picturing God

Ex 25:18, in making the ark of the covenant God commands: *And you shall **make** [same verb in ch 20 for what you shall not do] two cherubim of gold; of hammered work shall you make them, on the two ends of the mercy seat...* ²⁰ *The cherubim shall spread out their wings above, overshadowing the mercy seat with their wings, their faces one to another; toward the mercy seat shall the faces of the cherubim be [so their faces weren't seen and Israel wasn't to worship them. **26:1**] "Moreover, you shall **make** the tabernacle with ten curtains of fine twined linen and blue and purple and scarlet yarns; you shall **make** them **with cherubim skillfully worked into them**.*

Same Hebrew verb *make* from Ex 20, used both of 3D carved images and 2D images of artwork

But Israel didn't go into this holiest place for worship, they were outside (later in synagogues)

Only the high priest would go inside the curtain to the ark but dared not worship it lest he die.

- A priest didn't bow to a cherub on a curtain.
- The people weren't to use those images in corporate worship or in private worship.
- There's no artistic likeness we're to use to praise or pray toward.

DeYoung says it doesn't mean 'trash all our nativity sets and angel ornaments and artwork on the wall. But it does mean [not] using pictures or icons to focus us in prayer... If we bow to... or focus on it, or think we need it to be closer to God, it's a violation of the 2nd commandment.'³

The context is Israel's worship, Jn 4:24 says worship is in spirit (spiritual) and truth

Don't trust a cross necklace for help.

- It's ok to have an empty cross with no one hanging on it.

Jesus died once for all and is in heaven and we're not to make a likeness of what's in heaven.

- I have long been uncomfortable with any likeness of God the Son in worship services.
- Ex 20 says don't worship, serve, or bow before a likeness of any heavenly thing or being.
- Pictures of Jesus you look at even privately to help pray to Him aren't biblical worship.
- Or man-made images of Him before my eyes or in my mind as I sing in worship to Him.

Outside of a worship service I think there's a place for visual teaching aids from the gospels

- (like Seth, kids curriculum, etc.).
- GOG (our SS materials we use before the worship service) doesn't show Jesus' face.
- Its cartoon drawings show faces of others and help kids see Jesus was a real person.
- But it only shows Him from behind, generic non-specific parts, never a facial likeness. In Ben Hur we see His shadow, His back, or a distant view, never a likeness of His face.
- I like not having facial images of the Lord that can impact worship.
- In NT times rulers had likenesses, statues or busts made to capture their looks.
- But Jesus didn't leave us a visual, He left a verbal word.

Outside worship it's debatable but be careful:

- don't add to the sufficient gospel or wrong images of who Jesus is.

Go back to Ex 20, but my conscience urges caution with likenesses of our heavenly Lord

Ex 20:4-5 warns against physical or visual images of what's heavenly in worship, whether it's representing God (the calf) or another god. That takes us to #2. Scripture's concept of idolatry

Let me read Ex 20:4 in NASB: "*You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth.*"⁵ "*You shall not worship them or serve them...*"

So the 2nd command forbids worship imagery (likeness of God)

- and idolatry (a more specific word for false god).
- v. 5 also forbids worshipping or serving idols others make.

God is a jealous God of covenant love, so scripture's concept of idolatry is spiritual adultery.

- And like adultery, the sin of idolatry could receive the death penalty in the OT.
- In the NT, it's church discipline if an idolater doesn't repent,
- and to the end of the Bible idolaters end up in hell and not heaven.⁴

But even in this life, v. 5 warns of long-lasting consequences from this sin

- (more than others in the 10 commandments).

Turn to Rom 1 to see scripture's concept of idolatry, not just for Israel.

We've talked before about God's moral law, or morality people know who don't know OT law. ¹⁹ *because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them.* ²⁰ *For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.* ²¹ *For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God...* [1st commandment to honor as #1, next domino is 2nd commandment] ²³ *and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.* ²⁴ *Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them.* ²⁵ *For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.* ²⁶ *For this reason God gave them over...* [visiting sin on generations? We've seen v. 26-32 that in 3-4 U.S. generations]

v. 27-30 cover several of the 10 commandments violated, but it starts with #1 and #2

So go back to Ex 20 but scripture's concept of imagery and idolatry is

- worshipping or serving anything created instead of the invisible Creator.
- It leads to giving over to more sin over time.

But what does Ex 20:5 mean exactly, that God will visit iniquity on children 3 or 4 generations?

- Some have taught generational curses from this (or Bill Gothard warning against adoption since you don't know the idols of the father or forefather⁵).
- But v. 5 isn't a curse, it's consequences to a family.
- Israelite patriarchs often lived with children, grandchildren,
 - o up to 3-4 generations in a same tent or group of tents.⁶
 - o Simply put, a father's iniquity negatively impacts a whole family.

Case study: Abraham's iniquity in lying continued in Isaac, Jacob, and sons

But any descendant by grace can be saved to love God and break the cycle! Read the end of v. 5 '*visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation [key phrase:] of those who hate me,* ⁶ *but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.'*

Kids, grandkids, others who hate God are judged with a family as those sins keep visiting them,

- but God shows saving love to His children He adopts who love Him and by grace obey
- I love the math, 3-4 vs. thousands of generations (endless love, greater grace).
- His mercy is more!

God shows His love in Jesus keeping the Law, dying for idolaters hating Him and rising in love

Bow before Jesus alone who has your name graven on His hand

3. Our application: Look to Jesus alone as the image [Gr. *ikon*] of the invisible God, Col. 1:15

Listen to Dt 4:29, after warning the children of Israel about idolatry, God promises future Israel

'you will seek the LORD your God and you will find him, if you search after him with all your heart and with all your soul. ³⁰ *... in the latter days, you will return to the LORD your God and obey his voice.* ³¹ *For the LORD your God is a merciful God. He will not leave you or destroy you or forget the covenant with your fathers...*

That's the covenant love God shows no matter how many generations of Jews lived in idolatry.

- In the latter days or end times, God promises Israel will return to this merciful God.
- This is part of what Iain Murray calls The Puritan Hope
- that God will purify and save Israel before the end.⁷

Zech 12-13 says Jerusalem will look on Jesus they pierced and He'll cleanse and banish idols⁸

That should give you hope, no matter what happened in your past or what sins your father did!

Eze 18:20 *'The son will not bear the punishment for the father's iniquity...'* But we're not ok if we don't set up idols in our homes. Eze 14:3 *'these men have set up their idols in their hearts...'* ⁶ *...Thus says the Lord GOD: 'Repent and turn away from your idols... [not graven outwardly, a god inwardly; not metal idols, mental idols].*

- If you say ‘I feel God is...’ or ‘I like to think of God as...’ that mental imagery is the path to idolatry
 - It’s idolizing if you’re prioritizing certain attributes (“my God is a God of love, not a condemning God”)
 - You can make an idol by trying to take from God control. Idols can be power, people-pleasing or pride.
 - 1 Sam 15:23 ‘*arrogance [is] like the evil of idolatry*’ (or ‘*stubbornness is as bad as worshipping idols*’)⁹
- Col 3:5 among other things ‘*Put to death...covetousness, which is idolatry*’ (KJV links to ‘inordinate affection’)
- Having affections too high is sin, having addictions to TV or technology rules you as only God should
 - A major idol of our day is screen, like shrines we serve in our home or hand, devices treated like deities
 - What we turn to first or most for help or comfort or blessing, what we trust or treasure is a god or idol
 - What you carve out time for most, or images you make online or on social media can become your Lord
 - Coveting friends, followers, and likes is idolatry and Eph 5:5 ‘*a greedy person...is an idolater*’ (NIV)
 - A sign of idolatrous coveting is grumbling over what you don’t have. Calling a greed a need is idolatry
 - 1 John calls it desires of the flesh and the eyes and it ends with ‘*keep yourselves from idols*’ (2:15, 5:21)
 - An idol can be anything you desire so strongly you’re willing to sin to get (ex: manipulate, threaten, etc)
 - Or if you sin when you don’t get it (bitterness, sinful anger, yelling, talking behind his or her back, etc.)

Dr. Lloyd-Jones diagnoses an idol as anything ‘central in my life, anything that seems to me... essential...An idol is anything by which I live and on which I depend... [or that] holds such a controlling position in my life...[in] so much of my time and attention, my energy and money’¹⁰

Calvin’s Institutes: ‘man’s nature...is a perpetual factory of idols.’¹¹ God: *you shall have no idols.*

- HANDOUT Diagnostic Questions**¹²
- a. what do I want to make sure people know about me?
 - b. What makes me feel successful or competent?
 - c. Whose opinion do I really care about? Who can make my day with their affirmation, or crush me with their disapproval?
 - d. What gives me a feeling of peace and security?
 - e. What distracts me or bothers me when it’s not “just right”?
 - f. What do I worry about most? What consumes my idle thoughts?
 - g. What feels constraining to me? What do I fantasize or daydream about?

What I Seek	The Price I’m Willing to Pay	My Greatest Nightmare	Others Often Feel...	I Often Feel...
Comfort (privacy, lack of stress, freedom)	Reduced Productivity	Stress, Demands	Hurt	Boredom
Approval (affirmation, love, relationship)	Less Independence	Rejection	Smothered	Cowardice
Control (self-discipline, certainty, standards)	Loneliness, Spontaneity	Uncertainty	Condemned	Worry
Power (success, winning, influence)	Burdened, Responsibility	Humiliation	Used	Anger

A communion hymn has this line: We take the cup in reverence and new commitment take
To cast out every idol and live for Jesus’ sake¹³

1 Corinthians 10:1 *For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea [talking about Exodus, look at v. 6] Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. ⁷ Do not be idolaters as some of them were... ¹² Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. ¹² Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. ¹³ No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your*

ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. ¹⁴
Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry... ¹⁶ The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? ¹⁷ Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. [Flee idolatry to Christ, His church]

11:23 For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” ²⁵ In 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.” ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. ²⁷ Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹ For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.

¹ 1 Samuel 5:1-7, note the ark of the covenant housed the Ten Commandment tablets and the very presence of God in those days.

² David Powlison, “Vanity Fair and Idols of the Heart,” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling*, 13/2 (Winter 1995), p. 35.

³ Kevin DeYoung, *The Ten Commandments* (Crossway, 2018), p. 47.

⁴ For the OT death penalty, see Deuteronomy 27:15. For NT discipline by a church of professing Christian idolaters, see 1 Corinthians 5:9-11, and for ultimate exclusion from God’s future kingdom for unrepentant idolaters, see Ephesians 5:5 and Revelation 21:8, 22:15.

⁵ [An Overview of Some Problems with Bill Gothard's Teachings — DonOwsley.com](#)

⁶ Duane Garrett makes this point in his Exodus commentary.

⁷ Iain Murray, *The Puritan Hope: Revival and the Interpretation of Prophecy* (Banner of Truth, 2009 reprint): ‘belief in a future conversion of the Jews became commonplace among the English Puritans... that the conversion of the Jews would be close to the end of the world... was probably the dominant view until the 1640s... “That there shall be a general conversion of the Tribes of Israel is a truth which in some measure hath been known and believe in all ages of the Church of God, since the Apostle’s days ... Only in these late days, these things have obtained credit much more universally than heretofore.” So [Increase] Mather wrote in 1669.’ p. 43, 52, 45.

⁸ Zechariah 12:7, 10, 13:1-2.

⁹ NIV84 and NLT.

¹⁰ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, “Idolatry,” in *Life in God: Studies in 1 John* (Crossway, 2002), p. 728–29.

¹¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), p. 108.

¹² This section and the chart from “Identifying Idols,” in *Gospel Eldership*, by Robert Thune

¹³ Peter Davis, “Communion Hymn / Thy Body, Blessed Jesus.”