

The Second Commandment

The Second Commandment:

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of *any thing* that *is* in heaven above, or that *is* in the earth beneath, or that *is* in the water under the earth: ⁵ Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God *am* a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth *generation* of them that hate me; ⁶ And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.

Exod. 20:4-6

96. What does God require in the second Commandment?

That we in no way make any image of God, nor worship Him in any other way than He has commanded us in His Word.

97. May we not make any image at all?

God may not and cannot be imaged in any way; as for creatures, though they may indeed be imaged, yet God forbids the making or keeping of any likeness of them, either to worship them or to serve God by them.

98. But may not pictures be tolerated in churches as books for the people?

No, for we should not be wiser than God, who will not have His people taught by dumb idols, but by the lively preaching of His Word.

The first commandment forbids the worship of other gods. The second commandment forbids worshiping God in any way that is not commanded in his word.

Although the making of an actual image as an aid to worship is not as common as it used to be, this commandment goes to the heart. Just as a man can be an adulterer without ever actually committing the act, so also natural man is an image maker by nature.

The pagan view of images was that they were useful to control the power of God. No ancient pagan ever believed that the image and the god were identical, but they believed that the god somehow resided in the image or object. But creating an image and carefully guarding the rituals they could control the god's power and use it for their own purposes.

Throughout scripture, it was not merely the image that was forbidden, it was this whole false way of viewing God. There are three reasons why this is forbidden:

1. The independence of God makes it an abomination to create an image.
2. The majesty of God makes it impossible to create an image.
3. The covenant of God makes it unnecessary to create an image.

In Judges 17, Micah had no intention of worshiping another god (verse 3). His goal was to create his own place of worship, where the blessing of God would be assured. When he protests against the tribe of Dan, it was for stealing his god (18:24). The blessing of God could be controlled and used through the image. When the image was gone, God's power was gone with it, in Micah's mind. This led to the corruption of the entire tribe of Dan.

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In 1 Kings 12:25-33, Jeroboam made the same error in Israel. By setting up calves to represent Jehovah, he attempted to force God's favor upon his dynasty. David's house has the temple, so they have God. I will make calves and also have god.

But this is not limited to making specific forbidden images, as if the problem was in the outward form. God himself commanded Israel to make the Ark of the Covenant, but when Israel thought that they somehow controlled God through a box, they were judged and condemned (1 Sam. 4).

All of this shows a complete failure to understand God's true nature. He controls the creature; the creature does not control him. His blessings are only due to his unmerited favor, not due to getting the steps right. He graciously entered into a covenant with his people. He dispenses his blessings independently and according to his mercy.

But for those who still seek to control the blessings of God through ritual, God is "jealous" (el qanah). This word involves the jealous wrath of a husband whose wife has committed adultery. Used for God, it indicates his omniscience, his love, his wrath, and the execution of that wrath. Those who create and image reject God's attributes and spurn his covenant, and God will punish them from generation to generation. See Isaiah 46 for this contrast between true worship and false worship.

In modern form, the prohibition against images is violated:

1. By seeking to earn the blessings of God by doing the right things
2. By attempting through ritual, objects, or any created thing to gain God's favor
3. By seeking to control God through any created thing
4. By forcing God to bless your worship through following specific rituals or any other created thing.
5. Biblical worship is specifically designed to appear foolish and weak in the eyes of natural man. Through biblical worship, God's people set themselves apart from every natural form of worship.
 - a. The blessings of God are not merited by "doing it right", but worship is a response to the free grace of God
 - b. All natural forms of worship involve all sorts of activity to "have that experience", like a shot of adrenaline – when the experience happens, then the activity worked!

But the heart of biblical worship is to be silent and hear what God says to us. We respond in thanksgiving and praise and prayer.

¹⁸ What profiteth the graven image that the maker thereof hath graven it; the molten image, and a teacher of lies, that the maker of his work trusteth therein, to make dumb idols?

¹⁹ Woe unto him that saith to the wood, Awake; to the dumb stone, Arise, it shall teach! Behold, it is laid over with gold and silver, and *there is* no breath at all in the midst of it.

²⁰ But the LORD *is* in his holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before him. Hab. 2:18-21

See also Isaiah 40-55