

2nd Commandment

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[0 : 0 0] read that commandment, and perhaps just it would be helpful if we read from the beginning of the chapter, it's only an extra couple of verses, if we read from the beginning of chapter 20 and through to verse 6. So, Exodus chapter 20, reading from the beginning through to verse 6. It's on page 77 of the church Bible. Exodus chapter 20 from the beginning.

And God spoke all these words. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them, for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers, to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

The words of God. Now, we've just read the first two commandments, and as we think particularly of the second commandment, at face value, this commandment could appear the most antiquated and irrelevant commandment imaginable. Now, to justify that rather outrageous statement, just think for a moment of the picture that it paints. We've just read the commandment. What picture has been painted here? Well, the picture being painted is of a man or a woman who gets hold of a piece of wood or a piece of stone and carves it into some kind of shape, maybe the shape of the sun or of a bull or of a puppy or of Cheryl Cole, for that matter. Any shape that you choose to imagine.

So, you've got your wood. You carve it into a shape as best you can. You put it on a wee pedestal there. And then what do you do? Well, you bow down before him. We were thinking this morning of the wise men, how they worship Jesus and how the word that is described is of men who are posturing before him.

Well, just imagine doing that with a piece of wood or a piece of stone. And we might say, well, is it really necessary for us to give much attention to this commandment?

[2 : 5 9] Who would do that? Is anybody going to do something so, to our way of thinking, I would imagine, so ridiculous, so devoid of any rational explanation? And so, I repeat what I said a moment ago. This commandment would appear to be irrelevant, unnecessary, maybe even patronizing that we would be commanded not to do such a foolish thing. We might say, as we try to understand, well, why is it there at all? We might say, well, perhaps for the primitive goat herders of the Old Testament.

Some people would disparagingly describe the peoples who lived at that time very ignorantly and unfairly, I might add. But we might think, well, for such primitive people, maybe it was necessary a commandment of this kind. But we have moved onward and upwards as a society. We are much too sophisticated for the kind of superstitious nonsense the commandment would seem to be dealing with.

Or not. I did qualify everything, or just about everything I have just said, with the words, at face value. At face value, this commandment would seem to be all these things. But in actual fact, the second commandment is arguably the most relevant and incisive and biting contemporary commandment of the whole lot. And now let's explore why we could suggest that, of a commandment that, as I say, seemingly has little to say to us. The way we're going to consider this commandment is as follows. First of all, we're going to ask, what does the commandment forbid? Then we're going to ask the question. That first question really will occupy most of our attention. But we will go on to ask another question, and that is, why is it a problem to do what is forbidden? Why does God forbid idolatry, having examined what that is in the first place? And then, finally, to ask, what are the consequences that are identified here in the commandment of disobedience, and indeed of obedience?

But our primary concern really is with the first question, what is it that the commandment actually forbids? Well, we have it there in front of us. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything, in heaven above, or on the earth beneath, or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them, or worship them. There's the text stating what is forbidden. Now, as we consider that, just to take a little bit of a step back, to give a little bit of context, especially for those of us brought up in the Reformed tradition, in a traditional interpretation of the first two commandments, there is a distinction drawn between what is being addressed, if we can put it that way. And that distinction is succinctly verbalized for us, expressed for us, by the Puritan preacher Thomas Watson, who I commented on last week, who has a book, a commentary on the Ten Commandments, or particularly the shorter catechisms, treatment of the Ten Commandments. And he states the following, and what he's talking about is how we distinguish between the first and the second commandment. He says as follows, in the first commandment, worshiping a false god is forbidden. You shall have no other gods before me. So the first commandment deals with the prohibition of worshiping a false god. In the second commandment, worshiping the true god in a false manner. So he argues. The second commandment, he argues, deals with how we are to worship god. Now that is quite a neat and tidy distinction. We can actually make it even neater and tidier, and say that the first commandment deals with the who of worship, and the second commandment deals with the how of worship. Who we are to worship, and how we are to worship.

Now on this understanding, what is being expressly forbidden in the second commandment is the making of representations of God for the purposes of worship. That is, it would be argued, what is expressly forbidden in this commandment. Now there no doubt would be those who would say that it can be interpreted in a broader way, but that is, it would be argued at the heart of the second commandment. How are we to worship God? Well not in this way. Not by making idols. Not by making representations of God. Well that's the traditional distinction that is drawn.

[8 : 41] The who and the how, as regards the first and the second commandment. What do we think of that distinction? Well, we certainly agree that both of these things are forbidden. So it is true that we are forbidden from worshiping other gods. It's also true that we are forbidden from worshiping the true God by means of physical representation. Now that clearly is true. But is it helpful to make such a distinction between the first and the second commandment in the manner that it is often done? The first, the who of worship, the second, the how of worship.

I would suggest to you that the second commandment really develops the question addressed in the first of the who of worship. It touches on the how of worship, but it's primarily concerned with continuing to give instruction regarding the who of worship. Who are we to worship? In fact, it seems to me that the second commandment is actually answering the question that would naturally arise when you read the first.

You shall have no other gods before me. The question that arises, well who are these other gods? Who are these other gods that we are forbidden from worshipping? And in the second commandment it would seem that they are identified for us. And so I suggest that really what you have is a developing of this first prohibition. Who are we to worship? Who are we to worship? Or rather, who are we not to worship?

Now we'll notice in a moment, in a few moments, how at another part of the commandment that is, it seems to me, confirmed by something else that's said in the commandment, but that's in a moment.

If we agree, and if we consider that it's reasonable to say that in the second commandment we have described for us these other gods that we are forbidden from worshipping, then the question is, well who are these other gods? Can we identify them? They're described perhaps in general terms there in the commandment, but can we dig a little deeper and actually identify who they are?

[11:10] Now I would say, before I continue, for anybody who is interested in reading a little more about this matter, and perhaps this particular manner of understanding the first two commandments, I would warmly commend to you the book that I think I mentioned last week by Tim Keller, the pastor at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York, Counterfeit Gods. Just Google it and it will come up. Counterfeit Gods. He develops this very helpfully. And some of what I say, I draw, I'm quite willing to confess, if indeed it is a confession, from that book. So if you do wish to develop this further, please, I refer you to that book by Tim Keller. Who are these other gods? Well, the commandment speaks of carved images. You shall not make for yourself an idol or a carved image in the form of anything in heaven above or on earth beneath or in the waters below. Now certainly, it includes in that description the, if you wish, primitive idols that come to mind when we think of idols, when we think of carved images. It certainly includes physical representations of so-called gods, be they physical representations of the living and true God, which is certainly forbidden, but be they representation of other gods, which I think is largely what is being referred to here.

A physical representation of the sun or the moon or some animal deity. Such idols are forbidden. But what is being forbidden here is much broader than that. And we're going to notice now just how broad is the prohibition of idolatry. Before we notice just how broad it is, as we think of the vocabulary used here, it is important to clarify that this idea of making an idol that is forbidden here, you shall not make for yourself an idol. This making of an idol does not refer exclusively to a physical creation. It includes that, certainly. That was perhaps the primary concern at the time at which the commandment was given. Perhaps God clearly was conscious of the many ways in which men and women could make an idol could make an idol. One way was physically fashion it, out of wood or stone or whatever.

But this idea of making an idol also relates to the activities of our minds as we fashion in our mind. It includes also that which we cherish in our heart. That comes under the umbrella, if you wish, of this description of making idols. So, let that be clear. But as we think of the extent of idolatry, of the possible objects of idolatry, how broad it is. Notice how broad it is in the verse or in the commandment. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of, and what does it say? In the form of anything. Okay, in the form of anything. And then it says in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, or in the waters below. If we had to paraphrase that, we could say that what God is saying is that idols can be made out of anything, anywhere. So, even if you just keep those two words as a description of the potential for idol making by human beings, an idol can be made out of anything, anywhere. Is that not a reasonable paraphrase of what we have here? Anything, anywhere can potentially be an idol.

Now, we can clarify this a little with the aid of the first commandment. And we can develop it a little bit by saying, anything, anywhere that threatens to, or actually does take, the place that the Lord alone deserves as our God. If I can just take a wee aside, that anything, anywhere is relevant for those who are filling in the sheets. Anything, anywhere that threatens to, or actually does take the place of the Lord alone, as the one deserving of our worship and our service. Anything, anywhere that we worship or serve is an idol, or becomes an idol to us. Here, if I can just quote from Keller's book, an idol is anything more important to you than God. Anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God. Anything you seek to give you what only God can give, or to express it in another way. An idol is that which we cannot live without. That which we absolutely absolutely depend on. Or if I can put it another way. And these are complementary ways that aren't alternative ways, but that together give an idea of what an idol is. An idol is that which were we to lose, life would not be worth living. I'm sure you've come across people speaking those terms. If I lost this, or if I lost this person, life would not be worth living. Well, in those words, they betray who their idol is, or in any case, one of the idols that occupies their attention.

Now, as we understand idolatry in that way, of course, it becomes much more contemporary and relevant. The heart, your heart, my heart, is an idol factory. Now, that isn't a novel suggestion. It was John Calvin who first, I believe, coined that phrase. Listen to what John Calvin said.

[17 : 31] The human heart is a factory of idols. And then he goes on to say, every one of us is, from his mother's womb, expert in inventing idols.

And, of course, Calvin wasn't being particularly original in making that statement. He was very creative in the phrase that he coins to make the point. But the point itself wasn't particularly original. He was simply recognizing what the Scriptures themselves say. In Ezekiel chapter 14 and verse 3, we read as follows. Ezekiel chapter 14 and verse...

Well, let's read from the beginning of the chapter so that we pick up the idea here. And really, I'm simply reading this to illustrate why what Calvin has said is simply something that is drawn from the Scriptures themselves. Some of the elders of Israel came to me and sat down in front of me.

Then the word of the Lord came to me, Son of man, these men have set up idols in their hearts and put wicked stumbling blocks before their faces. Should I let them inquire of me at all?

Now, for our purposes, it's sufficient to read that much. Idols in their hearts. So, this is in Old Testament times. God is recognizing that idols aren't simply those things that are physically fashioned, but that man sets up idols in his heart. And Calvin picks up on that. Now, idols of the heart are obviously not visible, and so consequently appear to be less crass and less primitive.

[19 : 20] But they're just as much idols, and they're just as foolish as those that are physical or visible. They are God substitutes, which is precisely what the commandment condemns and forbids. Anything, anywhere.

But let's think of one or two examples to make this, I hope, irrelevant to us. Some examples. Now, we can begin with one that is specifically identified in the Bible. Listen to what Paul says in his letter to the Colossians. Colossians chapter 3 and verse 5. What does Paul say there? And it's a verse I'm sure many are familiar with. Colossians chapter 3 and verse 5. Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature. Sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed, which is idolatry.

So there, Paul gives an example. This isn't an exhaustive list of all the kinds of idols that there are, idols of the human heart, but he gives one example. He says greed, for example, is an idol.

Greed is idolatry. Greed, an exaggerated appetite for money or material possessions. And notice that it is an appetite for that which is good in and of itself. Money is good. Material possessions are good.

To have an appetite for these things is human and natural and healthy. But greed is to have an exaggerated appetite. To want something too much. To want something that is good too much. Again, if we listen to what Calvin has to say, the evil in our desire typically does not lie in what we want, but that we want it too much. Most idols are those things that in and of themselves are good.

[21 : 19] They are God's good. They are God's good gift to us. But when we want them too much, when they occupy too much of our attention, when they are at the center of our affections, they become idols.

And our relationship to them is wicked and forbidden. So as we think of this example that Paul gives of greed, of money, of material things, has making money or securing the things money can buy. What can money buy or what do we imagine money can buy? Well, money can buy stuff, it can buy status, and it can buy security, or so we think.

And I ask you, has making money in order to gain these things, stuff, status, or security, has it become the most important thing in your life? Is it what keeps you awake at night? Is it what molds the decisions that you take? How you spend your time? Do you leave to one side duties that you have, responsibilities that you have in order to attend to your idol? Are you perhaps, when push comes to shove, willing to break your own rules and abandon certain values that you have to advance your career and to secure the benefits that such advancement brings? You see, you can identify an idol when you're in a difficult situation. You're at work and you're required to maybe bend the truth. And if you don't bend the truth, well, you will be prejudiced. Your colleague will think less of you. Your boss won't be happy with you. And so at that time you say, what do I do? Do I tell the truth or do I just bend the truth? If you go for bending the truth, then your work is your idol because you're more concerned for your work than you are for the approval of God. You're more concerned for doing that which will achieve what you want than to serve God. And so there, in a very vivid way, it is clear who your idol is.

Well, Paul gives that as one example of an idol. In fact, the word greed is a useful umbrella term for any number of idols. Not simply greed for money or material possessions. There can be greed for power.

There can be greed for status. There can be greed for popularity. There can be greed for love. Wanting love too much or wanting to be loved too much. That can become very easily an idol. Let's think about love. The love that we have for another can be idolatrous. When that special person, that special other becomes our all. The one we worship. The one we serve. Now, how can we know if this is happening?

[24 : 19] Well, would you say of that special person in your life that they are the most important thing in your life? Do you, if you were to be honest with yourself, recognize that you love them more than you love God?

Would you break rules in order to be with them? One example of how we would break rules in order to have the one that we consider the most important. We think of Christians for whom the Bible is very clear that if we are to seek a relationship with somebody that will be lifelong, then we should seek that relationship in the faith. So, if we have faith in Jesus Christ, then we will seek a husband, a wife, who shares that faith. Now, you have a Christian who falls in love with somebody who isn't a Christian, and they have to make a choice. What do they do? Do they continue with that relationship? Do they marry that person? Or do they say, well, no, this is not something that is pleasing to God? What do they do?

Well, if they go for continuing in that relationship and marrying that person, then that person is their idol. Because it was a clear situation where they had to choose between God and between this person whom they love dearly. And I'm not minimizing how much that love might be in a very real and sincere love.

But that person has become their idol, more important than God, more important than being faithful to God. Of course, we break rules in order to secure the one we love above all else, sometimes even when we are married.

And we break our marriage vows because of this love that we have for another. And we rationalize it and justify it. And that other has become an idol and fought us. Another way where we can maybe help to identify if this other person has become an idol has become an idol for us is to maybe ask ourselves this question, would my life become meaningless without them? You see, if our life is centered on God, even though we love dearly our husband or our wife or our children, the loss of them, sad and tragic though that would be, does not convert our life in something meaningless. Because our meaning is in God. And those good things that God give, in fact, find their true meaning in the context of our primarily loyalty to God.

[26 : 51] Irrational jealousy and obsessive behavior could also be suggestions or clues that the relationship that we have with somebody has become effectively an idolatrous one. It's also true that the pursuit of love can become an idol. Where somebody has as the most important thing above all else to secure that partner that they so wish for. It is a healthy desire. But if it becomes the all-consuming desire, then that pursuit has become an idol. And you can be sure that even if they find the one they so seek, it is likely to end in tears. Family, something as precious and as God-given as family, can become an idol.

It is good in and of itself. It is very good. But a parent can be guilty of idolizing a child. Our lives revolve around that child. And indeed, our meaning and purpose is altogether a function of the child that we have been given by God. I think the phrase that I used last week in this connection, to love the jewel more than the giver. An ambition or a desire can become an idol. Those of you who are wise and use your time much more wisely than me will not be able to relate to this example. But any of you who are superficial and trivial like me and have watched an occasional episode of the X Factor will be able to relate to what I say when the folks on the X Factor are interviewed and they're asked, what does this mean to you? It's uncanny how the answer given is so similar. The answer generally is, this means everything to me. This means everything to me. What does it mean to you to get through to the final? What does it mean to you to get on and to win this competition? It means everything to me. Well, there's idolatry. Clear and simple. It means everything to them. God isn't on the agenda. He's not even considered. This, this ambition, this desire means everything to me. It's idolatry.

Now, it could be a much more respectable, seemingly respectable ambition or desire. Academic advancement or expertise or recognition in a particular field of professional endeavor or science.

And that is everything to us. It can be pleasure. Some people live for pleasure. They live for sex. They live for the weekend. Lots of people live for the weekend. The weekend is, is their idol. They go through the drudgery of the week for the weekend. And the weekend is their idol. Holidays can be an idol.

You put up with the drudgery of work so that you can worship your idol of that, that holiday once or twice or three times a year, depending on what your resources permit. Good things turned into supreme things.

[30 : 08] Or maybe what is more common, a series of good things that together displace God from the central place that he merits. Some suggestions as to those things that can be idols based on the authority of the text that we're in a very clearly state that idols can be anything, anywhere. Moving very swiftly on and much more briefly. Why is this a problem? Or why does God forbid idolatry? Well, we're given the answer there.

God himself gives us the answer there in the second half of verse 5, for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God. Now we've already touched on that last week, so we won't dwell on that. But this is the reason God gives. And just in the passing, notice that this reason God gives confirms what we're saying about the second commandment really being a development of the first.

If the second commandment was about primarily the how of worship, this would seem a strange reason to give for not doing these things. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God. But if we understand the second commandment to be a development of the prohibition of other gods, then this makes perfect sense that God would say, don't do this, don't worship other gods because I'm a jealous God.

If God were simply saying, don't worship me by means of a representation, then for him to say, and the reason is because I'm a jealous God, would be less, it seems to me, less coherent.

But if he's speaking about other gods, not simply representations or attempted representations of himself, then the reason makes perfect sense. Why should you not do this? Because I am a jealous God.

[31 : 57] I am the one who is alone worthy of worship. There is no other god worthy of worship. Indeed, no other god that has existence in and of him or herself. Certainly none that is worthy of worship.

Now that is sufficient reason for idolatry to be forbidden. But it's also worth noticing, and we'll have to do this very much in the passing, that there's another very good reason why we should seek very carefully to avoid idolatry and idol worship. And it is, if you wish, a pragmatic one.

And it is this, that other idols simply don't satisfy. They are simply not fit for purpose. Indeed, idols can destroy you. We think of money, it has a mercurial quality. You've never quite got enough.

Never satisfies you quite enough. And when it's gone, and those who have built their lives around financial prosperity, when it's gone, life isn't worth living. Notice the spate of suicides there were that coincided with the financial crash. Men who were hugely successful, and yet when the money was gone, they took their own lives. Why? Because money was their idol, and it was gone, and life literally wasn't worth living in their perception. Just this past week, the son of this Bernie Madoff, that crook that fraudulently secured billions of dollars. And he's, thank God, a hundred year sentence. His son committed suicide just this past week. Now, I don't know the ins and outs of the reasons for that, but is it unreasonable to presume that it could have been this reason? That which was at the center of his life, removed from it. And so life was no longer worth living. Idols don't satisfy. They can't satisfy.

If we've idolized a relationship, well, what happens when the relationship breaks down? What happens when it doesn't break down, but the loved one simply dies and is no longer with us? If you idolize your family and your children, what happens when they grow up and they get their own lives? They're not there, and your life can't revolve around them, shouldn't revolve around them. Often an emptiness. The idol has been taken from you, and the idol destroys you. Let's close with a final question. What are the consequences of obedience and disobedience? Well, the commandment gives us the answer to that question.

[34 : 24] There in verse 5, Again, at face value, this doesn't look very attractive or very pleasant. It seems to be that God treats very harshly those who refuse to worship Him, and He treats benevolently those who do.

That is a caricature, really, of what is being said here. In actual fact, both responses of God, the response to the disobedient and the response to the obedient, both responses are motivated by love.

His visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me is motivated by love in what sense? It's motivated by love in the sense that God recognizes the ultimate consequences of idolatry, of where it takes people, of the dead-end alley that it is, and so his punishment is intended as a warning. It is to draw the idolater back to himself. He doesn't want the idolater to suffer. He doesn't want that third or fourth generation victims in many ways of their parents and grandparents who were idolaters themselves and raised idolaters. He doesn't want them to suffer the consequences, and so his punishment serves to warn them and to draw them back.

Here he is speaking very particularly of his covenant people, and he's recognizing that among his covenant people there will be those who are covenant breakers, who will become idolaters, and their children and their grandchildren will be victims of the parents and of the grandparents.

And even to those victims he would punish them with a view to drawing them back. Now they have followed in the footsteps of their parents. The punishment isn't that they're paying for the sins of their parents or their grandparents, but they have followed in the footsteps, which is what ordinarily happens. And God lovingly would draw them back, would warn them as to the consequences.

[36 : 40] But showing steadfast love to thousands, to thousands of generations is the reasonable way of understanding this as it's suggested in the text of those who love me and keep my commandments. Thousands of generations, thousands of generations, surely a vivid way of saying forever, showing love forever to those who love me and keep my commandments.

This is an eternal commitment on the part of God. So the second commandment, and we must finish. You shall not make for yourself a carved image of anything anywhere.

Very contemporary, very contemporary, very relevant. Two concrete applications. Firstly, for ourselves. The need for self-examination, to examine that idol factory that is our heart, and identify what idols there are lurking in our own hearts. We cannot say more about that.

But secondly, by way of application, the opportunity that exists for us as Christians in an age of what we might call disenchantment. Many of the idols that our society has worshipped have come, or are coming, crashing down.

And at such a time, it's as if the spell has been broken. And there is disenchantment with money, with science, with success, with progress. And that disenchantment provides the Christian with a marvelous opportunity.

[38 : 12] And what is that opportunity? Is it to point the finger and say you're an idolater? Is it to point the finger and say your money is your God? Well, that's not going to achieve the objective. You see, in the face of idolatry, the challenge is not to simply remove idols.

The need and the challenge is to replace idols. To remove an idol, you achieve nothing. For you remove one and another takes its place. You don't remove idols. You must replace idols.

And so we must present to idolaters the living and true God, the one worthy of their loyalty and affections and service. They must discover Jesus Christ. And discover in Jesus Christ, to use the language, the well-known language of Thomas Chalmers, discover in Jesus Christ, to use the word of Jesus Christ.

A new affection that removes the idols, but they are replaced by one who is worthy of their worship and their loyalty. And as they discover Jesus Christ so that they would bow down and worship Him alone, the one who is alone worthy of worship.

Well, let us pray. Amen.