

NO GRAVEN IMAGES

EXODUS 20:4-6

- Need: To bring to God worship from the heart.
- Proposition: God forbids the use of man-made representations of Him in our worship.
- Objective: To lead God's people to render to Him pure worship.

Introduction:

Two cowboys had spent the weekend in the little West Texas town, and did something on Sunday that they rarely ever did--they went to the little community church for the morning worship. The pastor gave a rather stirring interpretation of the Ten Commandments that morning. The two cowboys left the worship with their heads bowed.

As they rode out of town, Peter turned to Tom and said, "Well, at least we haven't made any graven images!" That may reflect what we feel as we read the Ten Commandments. We feel relatively comfortable with this commandment because we do not have any idols in the house-at least none

that we know of. It may be that we have not really understood the real force of this commandment.

It is worth remembering that some groups, including the Catholic people, see this as actually a part of the first Commandment. They recognize that both of these commandments have to do with worship. The first commandment has to do with who or what we worship. The Second has to do with how we worship. The use of images was common in the worship of the gods in that ancient world. Many who would have claimed to be worshippers of the One true and living God used graven representations of God in their worship. This commandment forbids the use of any man-made likeness of God in our worship of Him. The Hebrew word translated "idol" in our NIV text means a graven or carved image. It could be carved with a knife, or chiseled out of stone, or molded out of metal. It is something that the person would then use in the worship rendered unto their deity.

This prohibition sets the worship of the Creator-God who made the covenant with Israel apart from all of the other gods of the ancient and modern world. He will not tolerate the use of graven images in the worship that is performed in His name.

Let us see if we can understand how this would apply to the worship that we attempt to render unto God.

I. THE MOTIVATION OF THE IMAGE-MAKER.

It is not just the presence of an image that offends God, but rather the motive that is behind the act of making graven images. Motive is very important when you are approaching God in worship.

1. The Image-Maker is motivated by a desire to create an aid to worship.

Since the God of Israel and the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is a spiritual being, sinful man feels that he needs some help in worshipping God. He feels that it is difficult to worship a God that you cannot see, touch, or feel. He reasons that it would be easier to worship the true God if he only had something made in the likeness of God. So the image-maker sets out to carve out of wood something that he feels can be a representation of God when he comes to worship. He never considers what the consequences of making such an image might be.

I have read of people who use physical aids in worship. One tells of using a picture of Jesus to help him focus on Jesus when he is in worship. It is an aid for him; it makes it easier for him to feel closer to Jesus. Another finds it easier to sense the presence of the unseen God if she is surrounded by quiet organ music and the beauty of stained glass windows. The motivation may be rather worthy-but the end result may be damaging.

When you come to worship God, what do you need? Do you need a beautiful church structure with stained glass windows around you? Do you need a certain type of music before you can worship? Careful! God forbids the use of man-made images in the worship of His name! It is so easy for the aids we have made to either stand between us and the true God, or to become in themselves a substitute for God.

2. A refusal to accept what God has revealed of Himself as sufficient.

Can you not see the folly of the image-maker? God in His wisdom has not revealed Himself to any human being-at least He has never allowed even the most holy of men to see His likeness. The nearest He has come to this is the revelation of Himself that He made in Jesus Christ. But it is interesting

that He did not allow a physical description of Jesus to survive, nor any drawing that preserved anything about his likeness.

If God had wanted us to have a picture of him, or an image of him to be used in worship, would he not have given us one? The image-maker ignores this fact. He attempts to go beyond what God has revealed of Himself. God prohibits this since whatever man comes up with can only be a perversion of which He really is. Whatever you use as a representation of God will surely be less than He is. How can anything man has made ever represent the eternal, infinite Creator-Redeemer?

II. THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE WORK OF THE IMAGEMAKER.

The consequences of image making are serious. Lets me just list some of them for our consideration.

1. They dishonor God.

When I came to First Baptist Church in 1980 as pastor, we had a most unusual older lady in the fellowship of the church. She is now with the Lord, but while she was still alive, she thought of herself as a gifted artist. Even

though her eyesight was gone, she still thought that she could paint beautiful portraits.

While Dr. David Ray was still our pastor, she insisted on doing a painting of him. When she had finished, I understand that she insisted that it be hung in a prominent place in their home. I don't think I ever saw this portrait, but I can assure you, based on the paintings that I did see, the resemblance to David was rather slight. I doubt that he felt honored by the painting.

This is what the image-maker does. In his spiritual blindness he attempts to make something that looks like God, but in the process he actually ends up bringing dishonor to the Lord he pretends to love. You can be sure that there is not even one instance in Scripture where God felt honored by something that had been made to represent him.

2. He opens his life to spiritual darkness.

The Apostle Paul helps us appreciate the seriousness of image making. He recounts the path that the Roman world had followed into the darkness of idolatry. "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known of God is plain to them, because God

has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities-his eternal power and divine nature-have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles." (Romans 1:18-23)

The insight of Paul is clear! When you refuse to accept God for who He is, and begin to try to do worship on your own terms, you open your life to all kinds of spiritual deception. Scripture consistently identified the imagemakers with the demonic.

Neil Anderson, a gifted pastor and counselor, writes: "At its very root, idolatry is a demonic strategy to give an individual permission to indulge in his strongest natural desires without guilt." Is this not what Israel did at Sinai when they made the golden calf and worshipped it?

3. He brings a curse on his children.

This is a part of the warning that God attached to the commandment. Not all of the commandments have such a warning attached, but this one has one.

"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 thousands who love me and keep my commandments."

What does it mean when God is called jealous? We almost put jealousy in a bad light, an unacceptable emotion or response. As the word is used in this context it refers to intensity of God's love for His people. He is intolerant of their giving to another that love and worship that should come to Him alone. He feels so deeply about it that he will allow the outcome of their actions to affect the next four generations. This must not be seen as some harsh act on the part of God. Rather it should be seen as an act of God in which He simply allows the idolatry to follow its natural course.

The chances are pretty high that your children will worship whatever God you worship. Whatever is important in your life will be even more important in the life of your children. So by your actions you are bringing your children under the judgment of the Lord that falls on the image-maker. Did you notice that the Lord accuses the image-maker with actually hating Him?

But the true nature of our Lord is seen in the mercy that extends to thousands that love Him.

III. THE ALTERNATIVE TO THE IMAGE-MAKER.

Ultimately we will come back to the same point on each of these commandments-love! "Showing love to thousands who love me and keep my commandments." Love is the key! Love accepts God as He is and worships Him in the manner that pleases Him.

1. Approach God as the Person He is-an eternal, spiritual Person.

This is how you approach God. Since He is a Person without a body, without any need to manifest Himself physically or materially, you acknowledge Him to be such a God. You do not try to make Him something like something else. There is nothing else in the universe like God-He is Holy! While we are created in the image of God, this does not mean that He is like us. There is a great difference between God and man. This must be acknowledged in our worship of Him.

2. Refuse to allow any physical or material thing to come between you and God.

Nothing is to be more important to you than God. Nothing physical is to be essential in your worship of God. You are to be dependent only on the Holy Spirit who lives within you and is able to energize and guide you in your worship of God.

Paul laid this truth down to the Philippi an Christians when he declared: "For it is we who worship God by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh." (Phil. 3:3) Worship of God is to be consistent with His spiritual nature. No place, building, tools, aids or anything else is necessary. All that is needed is the truth of God and the Holy Spirit who dwells in your heart.

3. Learn to listen to the spoken Word of God.

The image that we need to see, the reality that we need to encounter, in our worship of God can be found as we listen to the proclaimed Word of God. The Holy Spirit can do with the spoken word what man will never be able to do with an image or likeness or painting of God. We must continue to give proper place to the spoken Word in the worship of the Lord. Moments of personal revelation and encounter take place as the Word is preached.

4. Cultivate an awareness of the unseen presence of God.

This is an essential. He is revealing His glory in the world all around you. Our Lord was able to see the heavenly Father in the lilies of the field, the birds of the air, in the falling of a hair from a head, in the way a friend responded to a friend. We need to cultivate this side of our lives.

Have you considered it? If you were to make an image of God that embodied everything that you have learned of God up to this moment, it would be useless by tomorrow. It is likely that God will reveal something new about Himself to you tomorrow. We must keep growing in the knowledge of the Lord-do not accept this moment as the final moment. There is "more so much more" for us to know of Him. We still see through a glass darkly-but someday we will see Him face to face.