

Exodus 20:4-6 (The Second Commandment)

Q. What does God require in the first, second, and third commandments?

A. First, that we know and trust God as the only true and living God. Second, that we avoid all idolatry and do not worship God improperly. Third, that we treat God's name with fear and reverence, honoring also his Word and works.

Text: **Exodus 20:4-6**

⁴ "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."

As almost every commentator notes, if the first commandment answers the *who* of true worship, then the second answers the *how*.

As Enns notes,

The second commandment goes into greater detail than the first, and it seems to follow it logically. The second certainly entails and expands the first, which is why the first two commandments sometimes have been thought of as one. The Israelites are not to worship other gods; therefore, they are not to make any idol of any kind. They are not to represent these other gods by any earthly, created form.¹

Why this prohibition?

As Ryken notes, "How we worship matters nearly as much to God as *whom* we worship."²

¹ Peter Enns, *Exodus* in NIVAC (), .

² Ryken, P. G., & Hughes, R. K. (2005). *Exodus: saved for God's glory* (p. 568). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

According to Isaiah 46:5, to make an idol is to compare and liken Yahweh – the uncreated Creator – to His creation.

Again, Enns is helpful:

Part of this command is also to prevent Israel from identifying the true God with any created thing. To identify God with any created things is merely one step from thinking of God in terms of that image. It would be creating God in the image of His creation, which would put Israel's God on par with the gods of the nations.³

To make an image of Yahweh, in the words of Hamilton, suggests that He – like the gods of the pagans – can be controlled or manipulated.⁴ By manufacturing idols, we seek to limit or redefine – and ultimately replace – the true and living God with a god that can be managed and manipulated.

As DeYoung notes, no image will capture God's glory.⁵ By creating an image of God, we ultimately fall prey to the original temptation in the garden, whereby the creature seeks to become God, who alone has the sovereign prerogative to create images of Himself.

- Which is why even the apparently sincere motive of idols and icons to facilitate in true worship is deceitful and to be denounced.⁶

God has chosen *how* He is to be revealed to His people. To 'help' Him by creating idols to better 'see' Him is not humility but hubris.

How has God chosen to reveal Himself?

John Calvin, as always, is helpful: "It has pleased the Lord to hallow His truth to everlasting remembrance *in the Scriptures alone.*"⁷

³ Enns, *Exodus*, .

⁴ Victor Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1982), 203.

⁵ Kevin DeYoung, *The Ten Commandments* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), .

⁶ Calvin, in response to the Catholics' insistence of the usefulness of idols for the illiterate was not to provide images for them, but robust biblical teaching from the Scriptures.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.7.1. (emphasis mine)

In fact in **Deuteronomy 4:10-20**⁸, Yahweh explains why Israel is not to make any kind of image (לִפְסֵל, *pesel*) of Him:

Remember the day you stood before Yahweh your God at Horeb, when Yahweh said to me, ‘Assemble the people to Me, that I may cause them to hear My words so they may learn to fear Me all the days they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children.’ And you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, and the mountain burned with fire to the very heart of the heavens: darkness, cloud, and dense gloom. Then Yahweh spoke to you from the midst of the fire; you heard the sound of words, but you saw no form—only a voice. So He declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to do, that is, the Ten Commandments; and He wrote them on two tablets of stone. And Yahweh commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and judgments, that you might do them in the land where you are going over to possess it. “So keep your souls very carefully, since you did not see any form on the day Yahweh spoke to you at Horeb from the midst of the fire, lest you act corruptly and make a graven image for yourselves in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the sky, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water below the earth, and lest you lift up your eyes to heaven and see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, and be drawn away and worship them and serve them, those which Yahweh your God has apportioned for all the peoples under the whole heaven. But Yahweh has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, from Egypt, to be a people for His own inheritance, as today.

Simply put, Yahweh reveals Himself to His people through His Word. If we want to “see” what God is like, we must go to His Word.

As OT scholar Victor Hamilton notes,

Because God speaks from heaven without anything representing Him being visible, there is no legitimacy for making any kind of an image of Him...The Sinai experience has become a paradigm of Yahweh’s self-disclosure to

⁸ Taken from the LSB, emphasis (underlining) mine.

Israel. Since at that holy mountain God does not manifest Himself in an image, images are therefore excluded as a means by which God reveals Himself. How God reveals Himself on that august occasion has become the pattern by which He defines worship for His people in the ages to come.⁹

This is why Calvin can say, even thousands of years later, “As long as doctrine was pure and strong, the church rejected images”¹⁰ reminding us that there is an inverse relationship between the sufficiency of Scripture and necessity of idols.

Tragically, despite Yahweh’s stern warning to Israel in Exodus 20, we find them – almost immediately after – making a carved idol while Moses is (ironically) going up the mountain with the two stone tablets to inscribe the Decalogue upon. We read in Exodus 32:1-6 (LSB):

Then the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain. So the people assembled about Aaron and said to him, “Arise, make us gods who will go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.” And Aaron said to them, “Tear off the gold rings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” Then all the people tore off the gold rings which were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. And he took this from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made it into a molten calf; and they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.” And Aaron looked and built an altar before it; and Aaron made a proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a feast to Yahweh.” So the next day they rose early and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink and rose up to play.

What is Yahweh’s response to their violation of the second commandment?

Then Yahweh spoke to Moses, “Go! Go down at once, for your people, whom you brought up from the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. They have quickly turned aside from the way which I commanded them. They have made for themselves a molten calf and have worshiped it and have sacrificed to it and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of

⁹ Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 330-31.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.11.13.

Egypt!” And Yahweh said to Moses, “I have seen this people, and behold, they are a stiff-necked people. Now then let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them and that I may consume them; and I will make you a great nation.” (32:7-10, LSB)

Thankfully, God provided a faithful “covenant mediator” for Israel, who would “remind” Him of His covenant promises to Abraham, as well as His zeal to be glorified in the world (cf. 32:11-14).

Discussion:

1. How is the second commandment broken today?
2. Are God’s covenant people guilty of worshipping a Jesus who resembles the gods of this world more than the Jesus of the Bible?
3. Who is our faithful Mediator in the new covenant, the One whom Moses merely prefigured and pointed to?

Excursus: The Second Commandment & the Regulative Principle

1. What about the use of images (e.g., Catholics) or icons (e.g., Russian Orthodox) to “assist” in worship of God?¹¹
2. Is it possible to apply the second commandment to our contemporary (pun intended) worship of the Lord?

¹¹ Regarding the former, Garrett says, “From the second part of the commandment, it follows that we should not bow down before any artistic representation, be it of Jesus, a saint, or an angel. In this, it does not matter whether or not one affirms that the person represented is a god. It is the very fact of bowing before such images that is illegitimate. Even the pagans, at least the more sophisticated ones, would have understood that they were not actually worshipping the image but were worshipping the god through the image. But this does not make the activity any less illicit. And one cannot avoid the force of this by having only images of saints (and not of God) to kneel before. When the Egyptians deified a mortal (such as the Old Kingdom architect and physician Imhotep), they did not think of him as “God” as we understand the term. They merely thought of him as a good and wise mortal who had been elevated to a high status among the heavenly beings, and who could now be entreated for help. If a pre-Christian pagan could see a Christian kneeling before an image of Mary and making requests for aid, that pagan would have no doubt about what that Christian was doing: he was calling upon his goddess. If the Christian were to counter that Mary is not a goddess, the pagan would rightly reply that the Christian simply does not understand the meaning of the word.” In Garrett, D. A. (2014). [A Commentary on Exodus: Commentary](#) (pp. 475–476). Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic.

- Ryken: In a visual age we need to be all the more careful not to look at the image but to listen to the Word.¹²

3. What about “impressions”?¹³

As Duncan notes,

The Bible’s inviolable Creator-creature distinction makes necessary the regulative principle. If worship is to be in accordance with God’s nature, which is transcendent, infinite, and incomprehensible, then how else can we worship Him other than by the direction of His word?¹⁴

That the second commandment is “longer” than the first is owing to the fact that Yahweh attaches a word of threat and a word of promise to it.

- As the Scriptures regularly do, Yahweh is simultaneously seen as holy and gracious, righteous and merciful, faithful and jealous.

In the words of Calvin:

“[God] commends to us the largeness of His mercy, which He extends to a thousand generations, while He has assigned only four generations to His vengeance.”¹⁵

Here, Yahweh identifies Himself as ‘*El-qanna*’,¹⁶ “the jealous/passionate God.”¹⁷

- This word describes a righteously jealous husband, and thus confirms our assertion from our study on the first commandment that the context of

¹² Ryken, P. G., & Hughes, R. K. (2005). *Exodus: saved for God’s glory* (p. 575). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

¹³ Regarding this, Begg says, “Imagination is a wonderful gift, but when we use it to conjure up our own image of God, it leads us astray. It is quite common to hear people say, “I like to think of God as...” and then add whatever picture they have in mind.” In his *Pathway to Freedom*, p.

¹⁴ Ligon Duncan III, in *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2003), 53.

¹⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.21.

¹⁶ Hebrew = אֱלֹהֵי קַנָּא

¹⁷ Sarna notes, The Hebrew stem *k-n-*, in its primitive meaning, seems to have denoted “to become intensely red.” Because extreme and intense emotions affect facial coloration, the term came, by extension, to express ardor, zeal, rage, and jealousy. Whether one renders *kanna*’ as “jealous” or “impassioned,” the term emphasizes that God cannot be indifferent to His creatures and that He is deeply involved in human affairs. In his *Exodus*, 110.

these commandments from Yahweh to His people is that of an intimate covenant.

Is Moses teaching “generational curses” here?

- If so, what about the clear statement elsewhere in Scripture that God will not judge children for the sin and rebellion of their parents?
 - See, for example, Deuteronomy 24:16, Ezekiel 18:4, 20

It is likely, as many commentators note, that this warning carries implications for the community, and the nation as a whole. When one generation continues in idolatry and rebellion, it will affect subsequent generations. Sarna’s words are helpful:

The Israelite conception of itself as a community bound to God by a covenant has dual implications. Society is collectively responsible for its actions, and the individual too is accountable for behavior that affects the life of the community¹⁸

If “to the third and the fourth generation” and “to thousands [of generations]” are to be taken figuratively and not literally, as Enns contends, then,

“It seems that the second commandment is teaching that *both* obedience *and* disobedience have far-reaching implications for Israel’s life as God’s covenant people. If they disobey, the effects will be felt for a long, long time...In comparison to Ezekiel 18, Exodus 20 seems less intensive: it communicates the fact that the degree to which Israel obeys the commandments – will have long-term vibrancy and health of the community. Taken this way, this is a statement of corporate responsibility, that the disobedience of one or a few affects the whole, not of literal blood descendants paying for their father’s sins.”¹⁹

Regarding this, Begg says: “Parents are called to count the cost of the effect their sin will have upon their families,”²⁰ and “Moses is not advocating a teaching about

¹⁸ Sarna, N. M. (1991). *Exodus* (p. 110). Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society.

¹⁹ Enns, *Exodus*, p.

²⁰ Begg, *Pathway to Freedom*, p.

generational curses here. He is simply warning that God's judgment falls on those who walk in the wicked ways of their parents and grandparents."²¹

Discussion

1. What harmful "idols" are we "passing on" to our children?
2. Is it possible that we are currently experiencing the "[rotten] fruit" of the ecclesiastical idolatry of previous generations?

Man as "the image of God"

One of the great ironies in the Bible is that man does not need to make "images" of God since God has already done that Himself (Genesis 1:26).

As DeYoung helpfully notes, "We don't need images of God because He has already created them...*We* are the divinely chosen statues meant to show what God is like, created in His image and after His likeness...Idolatry not only diminishes God; it diminishes us."²²

Ultimately, says the NT, Jesus the Christ is the ultimate revelation, expression, and essence of God's image in God's world.²³

Conclusion: 1 John 5:21

²¹ DeYoung, *The Ten Commandments*, .

²² DeYoung, *The Ten Commandments*, .

²³ See especially Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3.

“To have access to an image of God suggests almost that such a god can be controlled and manipulated.”²⁴

Augustine: Idolatry is worshiping anything that ought to be used, or using anything that is meant to be worshiped.

Enns (Exodus, NIVAC)

The second commandment goes into greater detail than the first, and it seems to follow it logically. The second certainly entails and expands the first, which is why the first two commandments sometimes have been thought of as one. The Israelites are not to worship other gods; therefore, they are not to make any idol of any kind. They are not to represent these other gods by any earthly, created form.

The idols that the Israelites had seen were idols of other gods, a ubiquitous ancient custom.

Did this prohibition, then, allow the Israelites to make idols of Yahweh?

Absolutely not! Part of this command is also to prevent Israel from identifying the true God with any created thing. To identify God with any created things is merely one step from thinking of God in terms of that image. It would be creating God in the image of His creation, which would put Israel’s God on par with the gods of the nations. Thus the command has a twofold thrust: Israel is not to do as other peoples do by worshiping the idols of *their* gods, nor are they to do as other nations do by worshiping their *own* God in that way.

²⁴ Victor Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1982), 203.

The second commandment is longer also because it contains both a threat and a promise. As YHWH earlier “visited” (*pqd*) Israel in salvation (3:16; 4:31; 13:19), so He will “visit” them in judgment.

That children may suffer for their parents’ actions seems contrary to explicit statements made elsewhere in the OT (e.g. Deut. 24:16; Ezek. 18:4). However, “third and fourth generation” need not be taken literally. For e.g. the refrain in Amos 1-2 (“for three sins...even four”) simply means for their *many* sins. Likewise the “thousands” in 20:6 means *a lot*, perhaps even never-ending. In view of this, it seems that the second commandment is teaching that *both obedience and disobedience have far-reaching implications for Israel’s life as God’s covenant people.* If they disobey, the effects will be felt for a long, long time.

In comparison to Ezekiel 18, Exodus 20 seems less intensive: it communicates the fact that the degree to which Israel obeys the commandments – will have long-term vibrancy and health of the community. Taken this way, this is a statement of corporate responsibility, that the disobedience of one or a few affects the whole, not of literal blood descendants paying for their father’s sins.

Begg

The second commandment teaches us that we must worship the true and living God in strict accordance with the manner in which He has revealed Himself to us. It is not enough to worship the correct God (#1); we must worship the correct God *correctly!* (#2)

Wherever there is an absence of gospel preaching there is a greater likelihood of finding superstitious rituals.

Isa. 40:18 – since all things were created by God and are [thus] subject to Him, it makes no sense at all to think of fashioning anything that could ever represent the Creator of the universe. Anything we imagine will inevitably be less than God.

Imagination is a wonderful gift, but when we use it to conjure up our own image of God, it leads us astray. It is quite common to hear people say, “I like to think of God as...” and then add whatever picture they have in mind.

Exodus 32; Romans 1:23-25; Colossians 1:15; Isaiah 29:13; John 4:21-24

Moreover, parents are called to count the cost of the effect their sin will have upon their families.

Calvin

“As soon as idols appear, true religion is corrupted and adulterated.”²⁵

“It has pleased the Lord to hallow His truth to everlasting remembrance in the Scriptures alone.”²⁶

“As long as doctrine was pure and strong, the church rejected images.”²⁷

“He commends to us the largeness of His mercy, which He extends to a thousand generations, while He has assigned only four generations to His vengeance.”²⁸

DeYoung

If the first commandment is against worshipping the wrong God, the second commandment is against God in the wrong way.

Most generally, the second commandment forbids self-willed worship – worshipping God as we choose rather than as He demands. There basically two prohibitions:

1. We are not to make images to represent God in any form
2. We are not to worship images of any kind.

In Exodus 32, the Israelites were trying to worship the LORD; but they were doing it in the wrong way. They were violating the second commandment.

To treat religious symbols as though they had real religious powers is also forbidden (e.g. 1 Sam. 4:1-11; Jer. 7:1-15).

²⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1960), 2.8.17.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.7.1.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.11.13.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.8.21.

Moses is not advocating a teaching about generational curses here. He is simply warning that God's judgment falls on those who walk in the wicked ways of their parents and grandparents.

Lessons we learn from the second commandment:

1. God is free.
 - Once you have something to represent God or worship as if it were God, you undermine God's freedom.
2. God is jealous.
 - No image will capture God's glory. The separation between God and His creation is one of the defining characteristics of biblical Christianity.
3. Believing sight comes by sound.
 - "You heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice" (Deut. 4:12)
4. God provides His own mediators
 - I.e., prophets, priests and kings
5. We don't need images of God because He has already created them
 - Gen. 1:26. *We* are the divinely chosen statues meant to show what God is like, created in His image and after His likeness.
 - Idolatry not only diminishes God; it diminishes us.

How we can practically keep and guard the second commandment:

1. Guard against images, both physical and imagined
2. Don't contribute to the idolatry of others
3. Consider the wisdom of the regulative principle
4. Give God's people what they need, not what they want
 - In the medieval ages, images and icons were justified because the people were illiterate and needed 'helps.' The Reformers said, in turn, "Let us then teach the people."
5. Look to Christ as the fulfillment

Block (For the Glory of God)

Carson: “John 4:21-24 is a way of saying that we must worship God *by means of Christ*. In Him the reality has dawned and the shadows are being swept away.”²⁹

Ligon Duncan

The Bible is God’s pervasive concern for how He is worshipped.

Moreover, the ten words themselves are a disclosure of God’s own nature and not merely a revelation of temporary social, religious, and moral norms. The first commandment shows us a Lord who alone is God. The second witnesses to a God who is sovereign even in the way we relate to Him (since there He teaches us that we may neither think about Him nor Him according to our own human categories and designs, but must rather know Him and glorify Him on His own terms and by His own revelation).³⁰

Whom we worship determines *how* we worship. (33)

Biblical evidence that God cares about how He is corporately worshiped:

1. Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10)
2. Warnings in Deuteronomy (4:2; 12:32)
3. Saul’s unprescribed worship (1 Sam. 15:22)
4. Uzzah and the ark (2 Sam. 6)
5. God’s rejection of pagan rites in Jeremiah’s days (Jer. 19:5; 32:35)

The Bible’s inviolable Creator-creature distinction makes necessary the regulative principle. (53) If worship is to be in accordance with God’s nature, which is transcendent, infinite, and incomprehensible, then how else can we worship Him other than by the direction of His word?

Thomas Watson

God is to be adored in the heart, not painted to the eye. All ideas, portraitures, shapes, images of God, whether by effigies or pictures, are here forbidden.

²⁹ Quoted in Daniel Block, *For the Glory of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 4.

³⁰ In *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2003) 30.

What greater disparagement to the infinite God than to represent Him by that which is finite; the living God, by that which is without life; and the Maker of all by a thing which is made?

But how shall we conceive of God aright, if we may not make any image or resemblance of Him? We must conceive of God spiritually. (1) In His attributes – His holiness, justice, goodness – which are the beams by which His divine nature shines forth. (2) We must conceive of Him as He is in Christ. (Col. i 15; John xiv 9)

Indeed, what need of so many words in the commandment. Where the tide is apt to run with greater force, there we had need to make the banks higher and stronger. The plague of idolatry is very infectious.