

The Big Ten: Don't Picture This
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 106:1-6,19-25; Romans 1:18-23; Deuteronomy 5:1-21

Friends, our final reading this evening from from Deuteronomy 5:1-21 – the restatement of the Ten Commandments that we heard from Exodus 20 last week. Let's listen to the Word of God. "And Moses summoned all Israel and said to them, "Hear, O Israel, the statutes and the rules that I speak in your hearing today, and you shall learn them and be careful to do them. The LORD our God made a covenant with us in Horeb. Not with our fathers did the LORD make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today. The LORD spoke with you face to face at the mountain, out of the midst of the fire, while I stood between the LORD and you at that time, to declare to you the word of the LORD. For you were afraid because of the fire, and you did not go up into the mountain. He said: 'I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 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 fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain. Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day. Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God commanded you, that your days may be long, and that it may go well with you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. You shall not murder. And you shall not commit adultery. And you shall not steal. And you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. And you shall not covet your neighbor's wife. And you shall not desire your neighbor's house, his field, or his male servant, or his female servant, his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's.'"

Some things, we all grow out of. None of us uses training wheels or a booster seat. Then there are things we think we grow out of but really don't. You rarely see macaroni and cheese on the adult menu at a restaurant, only on the kids' menu. But whenever I see the boys mowing down on it, I could go for a bowl myself. There are attitudes and patterns we no longer practice – hopefully, we've grown past the cliques and bad attitudes we had in middle school and high school. But all of us know 50-year-olds who still relive their glory days when they were 17.

Last week, we began talking about the Big Ten – the Ten Commandments. We learned they are ultimately relational – God makes a covenant with His people through them. They aren't laws so much as they are boundaries for having a relationship with God. It's through them we know the basics of how to please God. God isn't a cosmic killjoy; instead, He tells us how to find peace through obedience to Him.

We may think we've outgrown the second commandment. Sure, the ancients played around with idols and so do some world religions today, but not Christians, right? But the second commandment is far more important today than we might think. Our modern world is totally saturated with images, so we need to know what God has to say about how images affect our worship of Him. The second commandment tells us about God's character and why obedience to God is so important.

The first commandment, we discussed last week: "you shall have no other gods before me." The second one is related but expands it much further: "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them."

Often, this commandment has been shortened to, "Don't make any graven images." But that misses much of what God says. Images in and of themselves are not the issue. We know that because God commanded the temple to include art made by professionals to exacting standards. God commanded the Ark of the Covenant include images of cherubim, an angelic kind of creature. Imagery wasn't banned. Some Christian groups ban any kind of art, but that's impossible to reconcile with how God allowed artistic representations even in places of worship.

God is specifically banning the use of artwork for the purpose of worship – whether the worship of other gods or the worship of Himself. Every time the term "carved image" or "graven" image comes up, it's in conjunction with using the image for worship. God says, "Worship me – don't worship an image of me, and don't use an image of me in your worship."

Why did this matter to God? There are a few reasons. First, Israel was not to be like the nations around them. Nations in the ancient Near East manufactured countless idols. They made statues, images, amulets, all kinds of things. They put their gods on vases and bowls. They were everywhere. Not having items that symbolized God made them different.

But beyond that, God was teaching the Israelites about Himself. Remember that we said the Ten Commandments were first relational. God wants us to know Him. God teaches us through this command that we cannot limit Him to a piece of art, and we cannot control Him.

God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; we learn that in the New Testament. Yet we also know that God is one singular God. Three yet one...how do you make a portrait of that? How do you capture the essence of God's Trinity in a sculpture? How do you render the likeness of the God who is Spirit in paint? When he dedicated the temple, Solomon said, God cannot be contained to the entirety of the heavens and earth, much less that place – how can we portray His infinity in a piece of stone? We can't. There is no way to do it. We shouldn't even try.

Even the very best artists fail when they try to portray God the Father artistically. That's had huge ramifications over time. Michelangelo reluctantly painted the Sistine Chapel under urging from the papal court. He produced something magnificent. Yet he broke the second commandment when he painted "The Creation of Man." The Sistine Chapel was made for the worship of God, and ever since it was created, people have seen that picture and assumed that's what God looks like. Many times I've heard, "I can't believe in an old man with a beard." You know what? Neither can I. That isn't God. But that portrait has been etched into our minds. It has led some people astray into false worship and others away from faith altogether.

We also cannot control God. That's precisely what the pagans thought they could do. When you made an idol, you created a supernatural conduit to the god. If you made a sacrifice to the idol, the god it was linked with had to bless you and do what you wanted. Pagan gods didn't care about your ethics. They were connected to concepts – war, fertility, water, the sun. To defeat your enemies, you sacrificed to the war god; for children and good crops, call on the fertility god. You made idols so you could control the god wherever you were. Scripture says that when the Israelites became idolaters, they made worship shrines under every tree.

In comparison, God was to be worshipped at the temple alone; you could not make sacrifices anywhere else. You could go to the local synagogue to learn about God, to pray, to honor Him, but sacrifices could only happen at the temple in Jerusalem. Even then, sacrifices did not make God do anything for you. You could not manipulate God, and you had access to Him on His terms, not on your own. In comparison, pagan worship was easy and fed basic desires for wealth, power, sex, and control. No wonder the Jews ran back to it.

The most dramatic break of the second commandment wasn't even about foreign gods. Many of us know that the Israelites made a golden calf to worship while Moses was up on Mount Sinai getting the law from God. What most of us don't realize was the golden calf was meant to symbolize YHWH. Aaron the high priest said, "This is your god, O Israel, that brought you up out of Egypt." Aaron was keeping the people content during a near-mutiny, and he never abandoned YHWH. Yet he and the people committed a grievous sin by worshipping this thing rather than worshipping God in the way He commanded – in spirit and truth.

So what does this mean for us? Many of us have never ever thought about bowing down and worshipping a picture or a statue, certainly not of any other god. We've probably never thought about bowing before a portrait of Jesus. But there are three distinct things I want us to consider today directly related to the second commandment: *the command itself, the power of images over us, and the reality that good intentions do not make up for disobedience.*

First, we are not to use images of God in our worship. That's straightforward enough. Those of us who have been raised in Protestant churches all our lives have never been confronted with this much. But those of us who have roots in Catholicism or Orthodox churches may have seen it, and we need to be aware of how much this has invaded the worldwide church.

Throughout the Orthodox world are icons – pictures of Jesus and of the saints. They are regularly used in worship. When I lived in Russia, you could buy icons on every street corner in Moscow. Because there are Orthodox churches in Detroit, you may have seen them around.

Catholicism regularly makes use of pictures of Jesus, Mary, and the saints. It was not long ago when most Catholic families had a shrine to Mary – many still do. The crucifix is a depiction of Jesus used by many to worship Him. To be fair, Catholic and Orthodox churches have tried to distinguish between using these things as devotional tools and actual worship. But the vast majority of Orthodox and Catholics do not understand the difference.

We love our Catholic and Orthodox brothers and sisters who genuinely love Jesus, have repented of their sin, and desire to serve Him. But at the same time, most Protestant churches completely disagree with them on this issue based on the second commandment. It's why we normally don't have pictures of Jesus up in our sanctuaries. I don't even use them in our PowerPoint presentations. It is something we stay away from to honor God's command.

This brings up a question – if we don't worship the image, can we picture Jesus in art without violating the Second Commandment? Most say yes, and here's why. The invisible God made Himself visible by the incarnation of Jesus as a human being. God who is spirit took on flesh and became one of us. He did this for many reasons, but one was so that we could relate to Him. Because of this, in Jesus, we aren't trying to picture someone who couldn't be seen. God made this concession to us. Watching a show or a film that depicts Jesus is not a sin.

But again, we must be careful. In the recent mini-series called **The Bible**, Jesus is distorted by dialogue that has no basis in Scripture. There are films about Jesus where everything He says is right out of the Bible, but the movie's poorly made. We also have a habit of making Jesus into a blue-eyed, blond-haired European that looks nothing like a first-century Jewish man. All those things can distort us seeing Jesus for who He really is as He is presented to us in Scripture. God knew what He was doing when He forbid images of Himself.

And that leads us to my second take-home thought: *let's examine the power that images have over us*. Images are often beautiful. They take us to distant lands, bring back special events, and remind us of family and friends. But images also lie. We see a picture of a friend's family on Facebook and we think, "Why isn't my family perfect like that?" We see magazines and think, "Why can't I look like that?" Many images make us feel worse about ourselves, not better. But we have no idea how long it took for the "perfect" family to take the "perfect" picture in-between brothers pinching and daughters complaining and parents yawning. We have no idea how many hours of Photoshopping it took to manipulate that picture on the magazine.

I've read a lot of celebrity obituaries recently – Robin Williams, Joan Rivers. They are household names. We would have had them over for dinner. Through movies, TV appearances, their image in our homes, we thought we knew them. We didn't. As I learned, Robin Williams was brilliantly funny in person – and also painfully shy, quiet, even sad. Joan Rivers was cruel in her humor but also generous with strangers. We saw them, but we didn't know them.

I love the movies. I'm far more likely to laugh or cry or get excited watching something on the big screen than I am reading a book. But they are the work of thousands of professionals slaving away to piece together something that's unreal. Since the very beginning of film, we've heard about the "magic of the movies." That magic is very ordinary. Through techniques, tricks, and tradesman, we believe an illusion.

What power do images have over you? Have you ever thought that the reason that God forbid images of Himself and makes us think twice about making images at all is because we are so quickly deceived by them, and so quick to worship them? Maybe not believing that they are gods, but giving them authority? (We listen to the opinions of film and television stars not because they are wise but because we have given them a platform.) Are we ever swayed by images to think that we are not blessed by God with the bodies and families and lives we have? Convinced by them to think that other people have it better? Do we schedule our lives around watching them on TV? Let's think twice about how images lie to us and have power over us.

Last take-home thought: *good-intentioned disobedience is still rebellion against God.* God takes it very seriously when He is disobeyed in worship. God is so angry at the Israelites after they make the golden calf, He nearly destroys them; only because of His promises does He continue to deal with them. Later in Israel's history, King Saul makes a sacrifice because he and his men are waiting to go into battle for God. Saul doesn't think he can wait any longer for the prophet Samuel to arrive and do his job, so Saul does it for him, even though Saul wasn't a priest and thus didn't have permission to make the sacrifice. God took away the kingly line from Saul and gave it to David because of this disobedience. These are just a couple of examples.

Why does it matter to God what we do as long as our hearts are "in the right place"? Think of it this way: you go to a restaurant and order a steak. Twenty minutes later, your server comes back with trout and says, "I don't like steak, and I think the fish here is great. I know you'll like it." What would *you* do? Hopefully you'd be polite, but you'd send it back. You didn't order it! No matter how well intentioned the server was, she didn't fulfill your order. Now imagine that she brought you the trout and said, "We've still got steak in the back, but some of the staff was thinking of eating it later and they're really hungry, so I brought you out the fish instead. I'm sure you'll understand; we didn't think you'd mind." I don't know if we'd be so polite if we heard that!

God is jealous. This is not a synonym for envy; it's not human jealousy when we sinfully want something someone else has. This is perfect jealousy. This is the jealousy a wife and a husband rightfully have for each other's affections – not the kind that bolts the door and says you can never go out into the world, but the kind that says, because we made vows to each other, your love is for me alone. God is jealous for our love. He does not want a rival for our affections; that includes not only other gods but any image we might put up in His place.

God is jealous for us, but He's most jealous for His glory. God is perfect in every way; He will not share His glory with anything that doesn't deserve it. To do so would exchange the truth for a lie; it would require God to say that something that has no value has immense worth. He will not allow an unthinking, unloving, dead statue to have the glory that rightfully belongs to Him. And He is not begging for our table scraps of worship. As creator of the universe and savior of our souls, He deserves every last bit of worship we can give.

Many things we do with good intentions that don't turn out very well. The good news is, when we do them out of obedience and faithfulness to God, God accepts them. Because we as Christians have been given the righteousness of Jesus, even our frail and meager attempts to serve God are blessed. Jesus covers our sin with His own blood so that even in our failings, we are accepted and loved by our Heavenly Father.

But disobedience based on good intentions is still disobedience. It is still rebellion. Let's not pretend that God is happy when we don't do what He's clearly told us to do because it's good enough for us. We might look at our Catholic friends and say, "What's the big deal if they pray to a statue of Jesus?" We might think, "I need this money more than God does; He won't mind if I don't give what I promised to give to my church, my missionary, or my Compassion child." Or we might think, "God will be OK with me giving what I have left over of my time and money and energies, even though He asks for the first of all I have." We might even say, "God should be happy that I come to church at all; He doesn't need me there every week."

Good intentions, good hearted reasons, understandable from the world's point of view...if they lead us to disobedience of God's clear commands, no matter how valid we think our reasoning is, we have a problem. Because God owes us nothing; we owe Him everything. We owe Him our obedience even when we don't fully understand. That's the definition of faith – trusting in God beyond what we fully get with our minds. We must check our hearts carefully to make certain we are not veiling our disobedience in a lot of well-meaning excuses.

But as we finish, I want to leave us on the same note we left on last week, the same note that I think every sermon in this series will finish with. Don't be discouraged. Have you broken the second commandment? In some way, shape, or form, yes. As theologian R.C. Sproul puts it, "In our hearts, every one of us breaks the Ten Commandments before breakfast." This doesn't mean we are condemned. It means we need a Savior. And thank God, we have one – Jesus Christ. Despite our failings, our desire to worship something we can set in front of our eyes or our mind's eye, our disobedience, God continues to reconcile us to Himself through His Son. If you have never turned your life over to Jesus, do it today.

And if you have, take heart. You don't have it in you to faithfully follow the second commandment...but you have the Holy Spirit now, a free gift from Jesus. The Holy Spirit will lead you into greater righteousness. With His help, encouragement, and guidance, you can begin to really worship God for who He is – the wonderful, awesome, magnificent God far too grand to be captured in a stone or statue. Worship Him, love Him, and the blessings of obedience will be yours and to all the generations that come after you.