

NO IDOLS

Deuteronomy 5: 6-22

Our reading today from Deuteronomy Chapter 5 is a recapitulation of the Decalogue – more commonly referred to as the Ten Commandments – originally stated in Exodus chapter 20 which Giles preached from last week. The two sections are virtually identical statements of the Ten Commandments. This week we're looking at, what for Protestants, is the second of these commandments – You Shall have No Idols. The Catholics join what are for us the first and second commandments together as a single first commandment. But, I think that misses some of the point of our second commandment as we shall see in a minute.

This second commandment is contained in verses 8 to 10 of our reading, so let's start by looking at these verses again – you can find them on page [***] of your bibles and they and other relevant material will also be displayed on the screen. Verses 8-10:

“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.” (Deuteronomy 5:8-10 NIV)

Now at first sight these verses appear to logically follow on from and express much the same idea as verse 7:

“You shall have no other gods before me.” (Deuteronomy 5:7 NIV)

and give some specifics to the meaning of that verse. To some extent that's correct. Verses 8 to 10 are spelling out the “no other gods” of verse 7, indeed Catholics regard them as so much linked together that they join them together as a single first commandment. At the most literal level we are not to make any representation of any god or anything we might see as a god and we are not to worship it. Our verses give examples of the kinds of representations that are forbidden, although I don't think the list is intended to be exhaustive. They include not only human and animal forms (“the earth beneath”), but heavenly beings (“heaven above”), mythological monsters, and dark powers (“waters below”) - and all their modern counterparts.

But I believe these verses give us a prohibition that goes much further than verse 7. Along with many theologians such as Nielson, I believe that this prohibition extends to worshipping images of Yahweh. That's always a temptation, to reduce our God to human form – we were made in the image of God but God was not made in our image. Once we make any kind of representation of God we'll be tempted to worship that representation rather than worshipping our true living God. We mustn't attempt to limit our God and reduce him to the size of anything we can make. That's why I think this needs to be a separate commandment, it makes a different and wider point than our first commandment.

In his classic book on the attributes of God, A. W. Tozer once wrote, "What comes to our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us". An image always leaves out as much as it reveals, and by boxing in God with an image we always obscure God's glory and greatness. The chasm between Creator and creation is infinite, and nothing in all of finite creation can adequately capture what by definition is infinite. The finite can't represent the infinite.

All of Israel's neighbours used images and idols in worship, but here the Israelites were commanded to be distinct from them. As distinctive as Yahweh is from pagan gods. This distinctiveness was both external and conceptual. Externally, the Israelites had no physical objects which were worshipped, and internally they also had a completely different idea of their religion. Yahweh was immanent in the world, but he was not confined to the world. He was and is transcendent. That transcendence was preserved in this commandment. The Israelites had no image of Yahweh to worship. Can you see why God is so passionate about this? No humanly designed image can capture what God is like, it misleads us.

We need to remember that whenever God revealed himself to the Israelites he never gave himself a concrete form. He appeared to Moses through a burning bush and accompanied the Israelites after the Exodus as a pillar of fire or cloud.

The most famous incident in the Bible illustrating a breach of this second commandment is that of Aaron and the golden calf. Let me just read you the story from Exodus chapter 32: "He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt." When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, "Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD." So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterwards they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry." (Exodus 32:4-6 NIV)

Now the NIV translation I quoted above renders v4 as "gods" in the plural, but the Hebrew could be read either as the plural "gods" or the singular "god". The Hebrew could go either way because it uses the word *elohim* here, which can be translated singular or plural, depending on the context. To be fair to the NIV it does make a margin note of the alternative. But since Aaron only makes one idol, since he identifies this idol with the God who had just brought them out of Egypt, and since he identifies the golden calf with the Hebrew name Yahweh in v5, I take v4 to be talking about one god, not many gods (Sarna 224 n. 138). This is also how the New American Standard Bible takes this verse, as well as most Jewish translations of the Old Testament. Aaron was presenting the calf as a representation of Yahweh.

So the incident with the golden calf doesn't violate the first commandment - the Israelites had the right God, Yahweh - but it violates the second commandment - they tried to worship the right God in the wrong way.

Now the Hebrew word translated calf actually means a young bull and was a symbol of power in the ancient world. Aaron probably felt he was giving God a compliment when he made an image of a young bull, because it symbolized power. After all, God had just dramatically defeated the Egyptian armies, miraculously parted the Red Sea, and appeared on Mount Sinai with amazing demonstrations of power. But the young bull obscured as much about God as it symbolized, because not only was the young bull a symbol of power, but it was also a symbol of male sexual potency (Hughes 46-47). Their false worship of the true God started innocently enough, with burnt offerings, fellowship offerings, and a ceremonial meal, but by the end of the day it had become "revelry," a word implying sexual permissiveness. They lived up to (or down to) the image of God they had created. When Moses came down the mountain, he destroyed the golden calf, because it represented God on the Israelites terms not on God's terms.

Returning to our main text for today, a reason is given for the prohibition against idols, namely, that “God is jealous” (verse 9). This jealousy is expressed in retribution (v. 9), but much more, indeed above all, in God’s faithful love (v. 10). The commandment carries both a warning and a promise. The retribution reaches to grandchildren (third generation) and great-grand-children (fourth generation), that is, all who live under the same roof as the offender, in the context of the extended family. Although I think the second part of our verse 9 makes it clear that it is only children who follow their parents in a hatred of God who will be punished. Children often copy the attitudes of their parents. Here is a solemn reminder that the consequences of our actions spread out to influence everyone within our total living environment.

But then in verse 10 comes the ‘Good News’ that God’s faithful love (*hesed* in the original Hebrew), vastly outweighs the effects of “retribution.” In contrast with the “third and fourth” generation of v. 9 who suffer retribution, we have the “thousand” generations of v. 10 who are shown God’s love. “Showing” (v. 10) is literally “doing” This steadfast love is manifest in; the concrete gift of land, the overcoming of enemies, the fertility of flocks and fields, the creation of just and stable communities - all these are the deeds of God’s “*hesed*”.

No term is more theologically significant than *hesed*, translated in the NIV here as “love.” It speaks of God’s unmerited favor by which he elects people to covenant relationship and on the basis of which he extends all its blessings. In fact, *hesed* and *berit* (“covenant”) are used as synonymous (Deut 7:9) and interchangeable terms (Deut 7:12). As the basis for covenant election, *hesed* is unconditional, for it is a manifestation of pure grace. Within that relationship, however, *hesed* is part of a reciprocal process, a disposition conditioned upon the love (*ahabâ*) and obedience of those who owe them (v. 10).

So we see that the whole thrust of this commandment is as a whole is the preservation of the relationship between God and man which is characterized by love. It’s the same kind of jealous covenant love that we experience for our husbands or wives. The attempt to limit God to some visual form, and the tendency to worship the attempted representation, means that the essential love relationship becomes distorted. Conversely, the prohibition of images, eliminating any visual substitutes for God, meant that man was constantly cast back upon his knowledge of God gained from the experience of God’s living reality, especially the experience of the Exodus (5:6), so that he responded in love to an invisible but no less real God.

We also need to recognize how wide this commandment is for us today. The word translated “worship” in verse 9 *abad*, literally means “serve.” Of course in religious terms worship is the essence of service, but the covenant nature of the Israelites relationship with God would favor the notion of service beyond that. To bow down is to recognize the sovereignty of a god, but to serve is to express commitment to that sovereignty in a practical, tangible way. Israel had been redeemed from bondage or service in Egypt in order to serve Yahweh. To serve other gods, then, was to reverse the exodus and go back under bondage, thus betraying the grace and favor of Yahweh.

This explains the seriousness and severity of the divine reaction in v. 9: “I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing.” Because he had redeemed his people from slavery to another and had made covenant with them, the Lord deserved and demanded their exclusive allegiance. This is why he is a “jealous God” (*el qanna* in the Hebrew), that is, one who is zealous for his own person and position as Israel’s sovereign God (cf. 4:24; 6:15). The

jealousy here is not the human emotion of envy but the proper insistence by God of his uniqueness and exclusiveness. Those who fail or refuse to recognize that exclusiveness by resorting to idolatry may expect inexorable punishment for that iniquity. The repercussions are so great as to affect the extended family of the offender as we have already seen.

So what idols do we serve – money, sex, power? Anything which we allow to assume such an importance in our lives that it pushes out our God is an idol and we need to repent and turn away from it right now and ask for God's grace and mercy his *hesed*. Just as bad is our tendency to trivialize God, to reduce Him to our own image of him, to make Him a more manageable deity we can feel comfortable worshipping. God will eventually shatter these false images. He will only allow us to worship him on his terms, not ours.

Poet Henry Twells has a word for all of us, in danger of being comfortably self-satisfied with our worship:

Not for our sins alone thy mercy, Lord, we sue;
let fall thy pitying glance on our devotions, too:
what we have done for thee, and what we think to do.
The holiest hours we spend in prayer upon our knees,
the times when most we deem our songs of praise will please,
thou searcher of all hearts, forgiveness pour on these.

We avoid trivializing God by seeking Him and worshipping Him as He truly is. So how can we know what God is truly like? Well, for us today it's easy. When Jesus came something new happened. Colossians 1:15, says Jesus "is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation". Hebrews 1:3 reiterates this idea: "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being,". So God has now provided us with an image of himself, his Son Jesus Christ. In fact, the word "image" in this verse is the Greek word *eikon*, and it means "that which is the same form as something else" (Louw and Nida 58.32). God forbids us to make images because we'll inevitably distort his nature, but God himself took on human flesh in Jesus Christ. God himself provides the only icon that makes Him known accurately. Jesus Christ is both fully God and fully human—the only icon of the invisible God. Although of course we mustn't worship physical statues or representations of Jesus either.

Jesus takes us beyond what God revealed of himself in the OT and Jesus is God's final and perfect revelation of himself. The real meaning of the second commandment is this: God is passionate about us worshipping Him accurately and on His terms. If the most important thing in life is to have the right God in the right place, a close second is to make sure we worship this God accurately and on his terms. God is passionate - even jealous - that we worship Him - Him, not some second hand image handed down to us by imperfect parents, not an idol constructed by a theologian, not an icon concocted in our own imagination. God wants us to know Him, that's why he sent Jesus.

God: he can't be leashed, domesticated, or controlled. Worshipping the God of the universe who's revealed himself fully through His Son Jesus certainly isn't safe – to echo C S Lewis in the Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe. We risk being changed every time we encounter this God in worship. We can't put him on a leash, nor can we use him to endorse our favourite cause. He won't be our genie in a bottle, to rub for all our wishes to come true. He's God, and we're not. But he'll love us, and he'll enter into a relationship with us, because even though he's majestic and awesome, infinite and incomprehensible, he loves us and he offers us a relationship with him through His Son Jesus. Isn't that wonderful.