

Lesson 25: Questions 54, 55, 56, and 57

In our last lesson we considered the first commandment. We saw that God requires us to have no other gods before Him, which means we must know and acknowledge Him as the only true God and our God, and worship and glorify Him accordingly. We also saw that the first commandment forbids atheism, false worship, idolatry of the heart, and giving to any creature the honor due to God alone. Now the catechism turns from Whom we worship to how we worship Him.

54-57

Question 54: What is the 2nd commandment?

Q. Which is the second commandment?

A. The second commandment is, Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven 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; thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them; for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; and shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.

The 1st commandment teaches us that we must worship the only true God.

The 2nd commandment teaches us that we must worship the true God only as He has commanded.

That distinction matters. Many attempt to worship Him in ways He has forbidden.

We are not merely forbidden the worshipping of false gods, but also worshipping the true God falsely.

Then comes the reason: *“for I the LORD your God am a jealous God”*. God’s jealousy is not petty insecurity. He is not like a sinful man threatened by rivals. God’s jealousy is His holy zeal for His own glory and for the covenant purity of His people. He alone is God. He alone redeemed His people. He alone has the right to define His worship.

This commandment also warns that false worship has generational consequences. This does not mean children are punished for their fathers’ sins, but it does mean that corrupt worship does not stay private. A father’s worship teaches his children. A church’s worship forms its people.

One generation’s drift can lead to disorder in the next and then to defiance.

But mercy has the final emphasis. God shows mercy *“unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.”* Judgment is to the third and fourth generation; mercy is to thousands. So the 2nd commandment is not only a prohibition. It is also a mercy. God does not leave us to invent worship. He tells us how He is to be honored.

Question 55: What does the 2nd commandment require?

Q. What is required in the second commandment?

A. The second commandment requireth the receiving, observing, and keeping pure and entire all such religious worship and ordinances, as God hath appointed in his word.

The catechism now opens the positive requirement of the 2nd commandment. It is not enough to say, “Do not worship God by images.” We must also receive, observe, and keep pure and entire the worship and ordinances God has appointed in His Word.

The phrase “as God hath appointed in his word” is the heart of the answer. The 2nd commandment requires appointed worship.

We are not free to invent worship and then ask God to bless our creativity.

We are not free to take whatever seems moving, impressive, ancient, modern, beautiful, emotionally powerful, or culturally attractive and make it part of God’s worship.

God regulates His own worship by His Word.

This is sometimes called the Regulative Principle of Worship. The basic point is simple: in the worship of God, we may only include what God has appointed. That does not answer every practical question automatically, because we still have to distinguish between elements of worship and circumstances of worship. A church must decide on circumstances like:

- When/where to meet
- Hymnals or projected lyrics
- Whether to use microphones
- What order of service is most fitting

But the elements of worship themselves must come from Scripture.

And when Moses had finished speaking all these words to all Israel, he said to them, "Take to heart all the words by which I am warning you today, that you may command them to your children, that they may be careful to do all the words of this law." (Deuteronomy 32:45-46, ESV)

That is the posture required by the 2nd commandment. We receive God's words. We take them seriously. We teach them. We obey them. This is why the catechism says we must receive God's appointed worship. We do not decide whether God's appointed means are enough. We receive them as gifts. The reading and preaching of Scripture, prayer, singing, baptism, the Lord's Supper, giving, confession, fellowship, discipline, and the gathered assembly of the saints are not man-made entertainments. They are God's appointed means for His worship and for the building up of His people.

The catechism also says we must observe God's appointed worship, not simply affirm correct principles on paper. We must actually worship according to God's command. The early church *"devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."* (Acts 2:42) There is a beautiful simplicity there. The church did not need religious theater. They devoted themselves to the Word, fellowship, the ordinances, and prayer.

This should challenge us. If we say Scripture is sufficient, do we trust God's appointed means? Do we believe preaching, prayer, baptism, and the Lord's Supper are enough? Do we believe the ordinary gathered worship of the church, ordered by Scripture, is enough? Or do we secretly think God's worship needs our additions to become "more effective"?

The catechism then says we must keep God's appointed worship pure and entire.

"Pure" means we must not corrupt worship by adding to what God has not commanded or by mixing His worship with superstition, manipulation, entertainment, or idolatry.

"Entire" means we must not corrupt worship by subtracting from what God has commanded. We must not remove hard preaching, public prayer, congregational singing, the ordinances, confession of sin, or reverent seriousness simply because they feel uncomfortable to modern people.

Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.' You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? And you say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.' You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it. (Matthew 23:16-22, ESV)

Jesus is directly rebuking oath gamesmanship, but the principle matters: man does not get to manipulate sacred things for his own purposes. God's worship is not a prop in our religious performance.

So Question 55 teaches us that the 2nd commandment requires us to receive, observe, and keep the worship God has appointed. The true God must be worshiped in the true way. And the true way is not discovered by imagination, tradition, preference, or pragmatism, but by the Word of God.

Question 56: What does the 2nd commandment forbid?

Q. What is forbidden in the second commandment?

A. The second commandment forbiddeth the worshipping of God by images or any other way not appointed in his word.

The catechism now opens the negative requirement of the 2nd commandment. It forbids “the worshipping of God by images or any other way not appointed in his word”.

The first phrase addresses images directly; the second broadens to all unauthorized worship.

First, the 2nd commandment forbids worshiping God by images. Again, the issue is not simply paganism. It is possible to claim that an image represents the true God. That is exactly what happened at Sinai. Aaron made the golden calf and said, “*Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD*” ([Exodus 32:5](#)). Notice that. This was not presented as Baal worship. Aaron blasphemously connected the calf to the LORD. He used an unauthorized practice in the worship of God. Ask Nadab and Abihu (Aaron’s sons) how that went for them! ([Leviticus 10](#))

God’s verdict was not, “Their hearts are in the right place.” His verdict was that they had turned aside, made an idol, worshiped it, sacrificed to it, and attributed redemption to it ([Exodus 32:8](#)).

Good intentions do not purify forbidden worship.

Calling something “for the LORD” does not make it acceptable to the LORD.

This is one of the most important lessons of the 2nd commandment. Sinners are very good at baptizing disobedience with religious language. We say:

- This helps me worship.
- This makes God feel more real.
- This reaches people.
- This is beautiful.
- This is meaningful to me.

But the question is not first, “Does it move me?”

The question is, “Has God appointed it?”

“Therefore watch yourselves very carefully. Since you saw no form on the day that the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, beware lest you act corruptly by making a carved 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 air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth. And beware lest you raise your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, you be drawn away and bow down to them and serve them, things that the LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven.” ([Deuteronomy 4:15-19](#), *ESV, emphasis added*)

This text grounds the prohibition in God’s own revelation at Sinai. Israel saw no form; therefore, they must not make a form. That is profound.

God’s people may not replace the form of worship God gave with the form of worship man prefers.

God gave His voice. God gave His Word.

Man wants an image. Man wants something he can see, touch, carry, and control.

The 2nd commandment forbids that exchange.

The catechism then adds, “or any other way not appointed in his word”. This is where the 2nd commandment reaches beyond statues and paintings. Images are not the only way to corrupt worship. We may corrupt worship by adding unauthorized ceremonies, manipulative techniques, priestly mediators not appointed by Christ, entertainment elements treated as worship, mystical practices, superstition, drama as a substitute for preaching, or anything else introduced as worship without warrant from Scripture.

*When the LORD your God cuts off before you the nations whom you go in to dispossess, and you dispossess them and dwell in their land, take care that you be not ensnared to follow them, after they have been destroyed before you, and that you do not inquire about their gods, saying, 'How did these nations serve their gods?—that I also may do the same.' You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way, for every abominable thing that the LORD hates they have done for their gods, for they even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods.
Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it or take from it.
(Deuteronomy 12:29-32, ESV)*

That is the principle in plain form: do not worship God by importing the practices of false religion; do not add; do not subtract.

This does not mean worship must be ugly, careless, or lifeless. Sometimes people hear “regulated by Scripture” and imagine joyless minimalism. That is no more true of biblical worship than it is of lawful obedience to the Law. Biblical worship should be reverent, joyful, hearty, thoughtful, and full of faith. But its beauty must be the beauty of obedience, not the beauty of human invention.

Question 56 also protects the church from tyranny. If worship is governed by human creativity, then the strongest personalities, the loudest preferences, the most persuasive leaders, or the most successful trends will rule the church. But if worship is governed by Scripture, then Christ rules His church through His Word. That is where true worship is found.

So the 2nd commandment forbids images in worship and every other unauthorized way of worshiping God. The true God may not be worshiped according to man's imagination.

He must be worshiped according to His Word.

Question 57: Why the 2nd commandment?

Q. What are the reasons annexed to the second commandment?

A. The reasons annexed to the second commandment are, God's sovereignty over us, his propriety in us, and the zeal he hath to his own worship.

Question 57 asks what reasons God attaches to the 2nd commandment. The catechism gives three reasons: God rules us, He owns us, and He is zealous for His worship.

FIRST, God has sovereignty over us. God is not our consultant. He is not waiting for worship suggestions from His creatures. He is King. Psalm 45 speaks of the King in beauty, majesty, truth, meekness, righteousness, and everlasting rule.

*You are the most handsome of the sons of men; grace is poured upon your lips; therefore God has blessed you forever. Gird your sword on your thigh, O mighty one, in your splendor and majesty!
Your throne, O God, is forever and ever. The scepter of your kingdom is a scepter of uprightness; you have loved righteousness and hated wickedness.
(Psalm 45:2-3,6-7a, ESV)*

The catechism applies this royal language to God's sovereignty. He has authority to command. He has authority to define what pleases Him. He has authority to reject worship He has not appointed.

That cuts against a deep impulse in fallen man. We want to be sovereign over worship. We want to decide what feels meaningful, what seems effective, what attracts people, what expresses our personality, or what preserves our tradition. But worship is not self-expression. Worship is obedience to God's self-revelation. Because God is sovereign, worship must begin with obedient surrender.

SECOND, God has “propriety in us”. This older usage of this word means He has ownership of us. Psalm 45:11 says that He is LORD. The church belongs to Christ. The individual believer belongs to Christ. As Question 47 taught us, heart, soul, strength, and mind, all Christians belong to Him.

*Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.
(1 Corinthians 6:19-20, ESV)*

We are not our own. Therefore, our worship is not our own. Worship is not about us!

This is especially important for Christians. God owns all men by creation, but He owns His people by redemption as well. We have been bought with the precious blood of Christ (1 Peter 1:18-19; see Lesson 23, Question 49). That means the church does not have the right to reinvent worship according to the market, the culture, the pastor's personality, the congregation's nostalgia, or the preferences of the age. We belong to Christ. His Word governs His house.

THIRD, God has zeal for His own worship.

You shall tear down their altars and break their pillars and cut down their Asherim (for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God), lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and when they whore after their gods and sacrifice to their gods and you are invited, you eat of his sacrifice, and you take of their daughters for your sons, and their daughters whore after their gods and make your sons whore after their gods. (Exodus 34:13-16, ESV, emphasis added)

God's jealousy is not incidental. His Name is Jealous. He is fiercely committed to His own glory and to the purity of His people's worship.

So Question 57 gives weight to the whole matter. We worship God as He commands because He is sovereign over us, because He owns us, and because He is zealous for His worship. Worship is not a playground for religious invention. It is the holy privilege of drawing near to the living God through the mediation of Christ, according to the Word of God, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

Questions 54 through 57 teach us the 2nd commandment. The 1st commandment tells us to worship the true God alone. The 2nd commandment tells us to worship Him only in the true way.

54. The commandment itself: no graven images, no likenesses made for worship, no bowing down to or serving them, because the LORD our God is a jealous God Who judges covenant hatred and rewards covenant fidelity.
55. What the commandment requires: receiving, observing, and keeping pure and entire all the worship and ordinances God has appointed in His Word.
56. What the commandment forbids: worshiping God by images or in any other way not appointed in His Word.
57. Why this matters: God is sovereign over us, owns us, and is zealous for His own worship.

So take this lesson with you in two ways.

FIRST, let it correct how you think about worship. Worship is not mainly about what feels meaningful to us. It is about what God has commanded. The church does not gather to express religious creativity, but to meet with God through the means He has appointed.

SECOND, let it encourage you. God has not left His people in the dark. We do not need to invent ways to draw near to Him. We do not need images, gimmicks, spectacle, or unauthorized helps. We have Christ, the perfect image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15).

We have His Word.

We have His Spirit.

We have His ordinances.

We have His gathered people.

We have access to the Father through the Son.

That is enough.

Because it is enough, we should receive it with gratitude, observe it with care, and keep it with joy.