

We are back in our fall sermon series today on the Ten Commandments, looking at these ancient words through a fresh lens, trying to see them through the eyes of ancient Israel. Because when we do that, the words are amplified, perhaps, in ways that we've never read them before.

And if you haven't listen to the last two sermons, I really want to encourage you to listen to them. Because as we keep going through this series, we're building on the things that we've already talked about—especially with these first few commandments.

As I've mentioned in the last couple weeks, by giving Israel the law, including these Ten Commandments, God was doing something that no other god had ever done. He was setting Himself up as their King and providing a way for them to not just live orderly in society but also in a way that identified them *with* Himself.

It's all about identity. Remember who I am and remember who you are in me. I am the God who pulled you from slavery. Everything starts there. God set out to identify Israel with Himself through these commandments so that *everyone* would know that He is *their* God and they are *His* people.

Last week we talked about how nothing else was allowed to come between them. The Israelites were to be exclusively loyal to Yahweh as He had been and would be to them.

And this second commandment, which we'll read in just a moment, is directly connected to the first.

Read Deut. 5:1-8.

In thinking about this passage, I was reminded that back in my college days—when I was studying at a small private school down in Iowa—the theatre department of which I was a part always had a rule that you could never depict God on stage. I think putting someone as Jesus was okay, but not the Father. Because no 'image' or artistic depiction of the Father was appropriate, based on what we read here in the ten commandments.

Now, I don't necessarily disagree with that principle. I think there's good reasons for it. But I'm not convinced that *that's* what this commandment is referring to.

Another example came to mind as I was thinking about this passage. Tamara and I have had some good laughs in the last few months because we have been routinely coming across little statues of Jesus in our offices. We don't know who has been hiding them, but I've almost got enough for a Jesus soccer team—I've have ten now sitting on my desk. I have found Jesus hiding behind my books, overseeing my commentaries, in my desk drawer. He was even once found on the coffee machine, taking in the lovely aroma of high-end Keurig coffee.

And again, I look at these little figurines on my desk and ponder if their presence is somehow breaking the second commandment. These little statues are of course less reverent than other depictions of Jesus. But wouldn't the logic be that that *every* depiction of God (including Jesus) would somehow break the commandment?

How *should* we read this second commandment? What did God mean when He asked the Israelites to not make any images? Can we not picture Him or depict God in any way? There's a lot of ways that we could go with this text, and a number of implications that could be talked about.

But in looking at the text, if you remember last week passage and then immediately read verses 8-10, these really aren't two different commandments. They hang together, like a part one and part two.

God has just told the Israelites that they are to have no other god—no household gods, temple gods, city gods, nothing—in His presence. So in that context, it would then naturally follow that there should be no idols either.

And as I mentioned last week, this was a hugely counter-cultural request. Trying to extract the Israelites from the culture would have been like trying to extract sugar from a baked cookie. Because they were swamped in an ancient culture that was the exact opposite. The more gods you had, the better.

Think of today, how we are encouraged to have an app for everything, to make life easier. An app for when you travel. An app for when you buy bread. An app for paying your bills, managing your finances, making grocery lists. There's an app for everything.

Back then, you could have a *god* for everything. And they actually functioned quite similarly. If you needed help in pregnancy, there was a goddess to help you. If you wanted to keep rats out of your home, there was a god to help you.

Everyone had multiple gods that they sought out for different reasons, often for protection. And everyone was accustomed to *seeing* those gods in the form of an image. We have to understand this. So just as we download an app to have it accessible on our phone, they would download the god's spirit into a carved image to have the god accessible to them.

We see this play out actually a number of times in Scripture. In Genesis 31, we have a story of Rachel—the wife of Jacob—stealing some of her father's household gods as she leaves with Jacob, because they were a kind of life insurance for her.

After the Israelites came out of Egypt, what did they do? They got tired of waiting for Moses to come down the mountain that they pressured Aaron to make what? A golden calf. Why? *Because that's what you do.* When you want to celebrate the mightiness of your god, you worship their image.

Every god in the ancient world had a carved image or statue. Because the spirit of the god had to dwell in it to be present with you. It's why every temple in the ancient world—apart of course from the one in Jerusalem—had an image in it, a massive statue of the god to whom the temple belonged. That's where the god lived. And that's still the case for many temples in the world today.

So then why does the God of Israel say no to this? No images. Verse 8: "*You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything.... You shall not bow down to them or worship them.*"

Why does He give this command? Because it seems like this commandment is basically just reiterating what the first commandment was about—that Israel should not have any other gods.

However, when we look closely at it, this commandment is *also* making two important assumptions that separate it from the first commandment. One about God, and one about us.

What is it assuming about God? That He does not want Israel to treat Him like one of the other gods. Don't have any other gods or idols because then you'll start treating *me* like one of them. The God of Israel does not want to be treated like how the nations treat their gods.

Why? Because He does not want to be *categorized* in the same way. These other gods needed to be held in something. They were always alongside of *other* gods because they were limited to a certain job or function.

This God did not want to be limited.

It's why He says to Moses back in Exodus 3 that His name is... what? Do you remember? "*I am who I am.*" That's what He wanted Moses to tell the Israelites, that the *I am* had sent him—as if to say that He cannot be limited to any one particular role or human conception of what a god should be like.

It's why no other god was permitted to be 'before' Him, as we talked about last week. *He was not like those other gods.* He stood outside of the ancient religious imagination and the categories that had been created. You can't give Him an image because He created all images.

Again, this was a revolutionary request. But it's why the psalmists and prophets were constantly reminding the Israelites to turn away from useless idols.

Look at Psalm 115:

Why do the nations say,
"*Where is their God?*" (Because Israel didn't have an image of their God.)

³ *Our God is in heaven; (He's not contained.)*

he does whatever pleases him. (He's not limited to a function.)

⁴ *But their idols are silver and gold,*

made by human hands. (How foolish to even compare this God to things created by human hands.)

⁵ *They have mouths, but cannot speak,*

eyes, but cannot see...."

In other words, *God is not like the other gods*. It's why Moses told the Israelites back in Deuteronomy 4 that God intentionally did not show them a 'form' of Himself to make this point.

He cannot be contained. He has revealed Himself as a God who is over all and above all. And He will not put up with anything that challenges this, because it's not only His glory that's at stake but also His character.

Look at verse 9: "*You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God....*"

He's jealous for us. Now, I know that oftentimes, at least in English, jealousy isn't always a positive word. But in this case, it's referring to God's devotion to His people.

I'm jealous *for* you, He says. I want you for myself. I don't want to share you with anyone else. It's a word that's only used five times in the whole Old Testament but always in this kind of context, and always for God.

He wants to be everything to us. And He's not going to settle for anything less than that. Because He made Israel. He made you and I. We're only here because of Him. So of course He wants to be everything to us.

But this commandment is also highlighting the problem that stands in the way of God being everything to us. Because the other assumption being made here is that Israel *would be* inclined to do exactly the opposite—to look at what everyone else has, start their own collection of idols, and in doing so, treat Yahweh just like one of them. A 'god' in the mix, who they can see and categorize.

Which makes this commandment so relevant for us still today, because that assumption is still true.

I read an article this last week about a woman—Jacqui Braithwaite—who recently had a 'spiritual experience' with ChatGPT. And she admitted that it touched her heart more than it should have. She had turned to ChatGPT in a moment of crisis and found herself asking it to pray for her.

And reading her article made me think, 'Ooh, I think this commandment is more applicable today than we realize.'

It's life-like demeanor, she writes, along with its compassionate questions and answers, had invited her to turn to it for spiritual care and advice. It had helped her understand aspects of the Bible, draw her closer to God, and help her in preparing a talk at church.

But could it pray for her?

Now, to the app's credit, it informed her that it didn't know how to pray in the way a friend might. Because it didn't have a soul or an actual relationship with God.

But that was the moment for her when she realized how quick she had been to replace God with a technological companion that could more immediately address her needs. A 'god' that she could see. It was right in front of her. It was tangible, accessible. She could more-or-less control the conversation. It catered to what she needed. She had found security and comfort in something that sounded like God, felt like God, seemed 'spiritual,' and was immediately accessible—but was definitely not God.

Now, that may sound ridiculous to you, but we all do this all the time—just in less obvious ways.

This past Wednesday, I had spent the whole day at the office sitting in front of a screen, and I was exhausted. So when I got home, Danny offered to take the dog and the boys out so that I could have a bit of quiet time. And I immediately visualized myself sitting on the deck, drinking a coffee, and having some quiet time with the Lord.

But you know what I did instead? I sat on the couch *inside*, having been distracted by an article that I'd been reading earlier in the day, and then got caught up reading useless junk that has no relevance to my life. Until 45 minutes passed, and I realized I had to make supper.

So I start making supper, Danny and the boys came back in, and I say to Danny, "Man, I still don't feel great. I don't know what's wrong with me."

And then it hit me. *I just lived out my sermon application.* I chose, almost unconsciously, something else over God. I limited His role in my life and didn't even give Him a chance to refresh me.

God knew what He was doing when He gave this commandment. He knows us. He knows that we will often chose the tangible, the obvious, the right-in-front-of-us options over-and-over, above Him all the time. That we will limit His role and place in our lives to whenever it's useful to us.

He knows that we forget all the time that He is *jealous for us*. For our attention. For our devotion. Because, like Israel, we make room for all these other comforts in our lives and limit His authority. Because we've placed Him alongside of other things. He's not everything to us; He's one of many.

For example, how often do we make decisions and choices without asking ourselves, “I wonder what God thinks about this?” I mean, He’s invisible, so He’s a little easy to forget about, right?

How often do we squeeze Him out of our day-to-day because there’s just too many other things occupying our minds? How often do we unconsciously limit Him because everything else has been prioritized *over* Him?

How often do we forget that part of our shared identity in God is that we have been sent *by* Him to do God-given tasks that pursue *His* agenda rather than ours?

One writer put it this way: *“We act as if we have to choose how, where, and with whom to live. We act as if we were simply dropped down in creation and have to decide how to entertain ourselves until we die. But we were sent into the world by God... Once we start living our lives with that conviction, we will soon know what we were sent to do.”*

Isn’t that such a captivating way to think about it? God had redeemed Israel from slavery and connected Himself *to* them because He wanted to reconcile the whole world to Himself *through* them. Involving Him, then—and only Him—in their everyday existence was essential to living this out. And the same is true for us today.

So this commandment, then, in closing, isn’t really addressing the topic of artistic depictions of God. The focus isn’t so much on giving Yahweh an image but having other images *alongside of Him* that impact His authority in our lives. Because when we place Him in the mixture of all our other comforts and schedules and security blankets (yes—idols), then we naturally limit Him and His role in our lives. We turn Him into an image that can be accessible whenever we need Him.

This commandment makes it clear that it was never God’s intention to give us that option. Because of course only God can do that. Only God could create an image that could actually contain Him.

Only God can make an image for Himself.

And is that not exactly what He’s done in Jesus? Is Jesus the answer to this commandment? You shall not make an image or bow down to it, because *only I* can make an image that contains all the fullness of me to which you can bow down,

Look at Colossians 1:15. *“The Son is the image of the invisible God....”* And Hebrews 1:3, *“The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being....”*

In other words, Jesus is the first and only ‘vessel’ to contain God in all His fullness, the first “image” carved by God’s own hands that in fact does have eyes that see and a mouth that speaks, because He is God in the flesh.

Only in Jesus do we see the fullness of the Father, the full representation dwelling in human flesh. God has literally given us a category by which we can understand Him, one that He's comfortable being placed in. The one image that we *can* worship because He is God with us.

And not just that, but in Jesus, according to 2 Corinthians 3, *we* are now being transformed more and more into that same image. Because Jesus has given *us* God's Spirit. *The* Holy Spirit. The Spirit of this God now dwells in us, enabling *us* to be accessible to *Him*.

God refused to dwell in an idol—not only because His likeness could only be fully displayed in His Son, but also because His Son would then enable the Spirit to dwell in *us*.

And now, just as children bear the image of their parents, so now can we, *in the Spirit*, *reflect* the image of our heavenly Father, who desires—as He did in the very beginning—to stamp the likeness of His image on us...

...demonstrating yet again just how jealous He is for us.