

Congregation, last week when I spoke on the first commandment that insists we worship God and him alone as the only true God, you could be forgiven that I was getting confused with the second commandment. Now I admit, the two are closely related. The first has to do with idolatry, having another 'god' in your life, and the second is with image worship. The second prohibits us to represent God in any visible image and is based upon the truth that God is Spirit and is infinitely glorious. The first says, "Worship only me" and the second command says, "You shall not make for yourself an idol," or as the old RSV version had it, "no graven images." So, God forbids us to make, fashion, cut or graven an image that we worship as God. That includes things in the heavens, it includes things on the earth beneath and it includes things in the waters. And by the way, that also includes man, for although made in the image of God, he is so tainted with sin that he is not anything like God.

So, we ask, "Why is God so concerned about this?" Allow me to give you several reasons. First, let us remember the fact that God is a jealous God. He will not allow a creature to trample his infinite glory under foot, nor will he give his glory to another. Isa 42:8 makes that very clear. **"I am the Lord; that is my name. I will not give my glory to another or praise to idols."** And that is exactly what we do when we worship an image of God. Now some people who do have images will quickly tell you that these images are only used as an aid to worshipping the true God. People who make an image and bow to an image do not say that the image is God. In Bible times, people didn't believe that the image they made was a picture or look alike of God.

Rather, they believed that in the shape of the image resided the power of the deity. And if you knew how to use that power to your advantage, you had favour and fortune at your disposal [Judges 18]. In 1 Sam 4 the Israelites thought that if they brought the Ark of the Covenant to the battle that they could not lose. Not so. They were defeated and 30,000 men lost their lives. God isn't in a box even if it is made of gold. Yet, there seems to be this desire within sinful man to see God and to have this power. It already started in the Garden of Eden and Israel's history is full of this striving after power through the carving of images. And this worship of an image inevitably leads to idolatry.

Those who transgress the second commandment will also break the first, even if they never intended to do so. And that is the danger. Israel did not mean to choose another 'god' when it constructed the golden calves under Aaron (Exo 32:4b) and Jeroboam (1 Kings 12). In fact, on both occasions their leaders emphatically stated, **"These are your gods O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt."** They did not think that the golden calves were God, but ascribed God's power to those calves. And it is precisely this sin against the second commandment that became Israel's downfall.

And sadly, it still happens today when leaders of the church initiate incorrect worship of God when they erect images. Apparently, when you go to some of the Asian countries and some in Central and South America, you will see that they are filled with images, particularly of Mary and other so called saints. In fact, while we were in Europe, visiting some of the Cathedrals, there is still heaps of images in those places. And when you get close to these worship practices, you begin to see the frightening transgression of the second commandment. They give God's glory to an image. They bow down to it. They want to touch it because they think it has the power of God in them!

When images are set up it inevitably leads people to false worship. And the sad result is that these people think they are close to God when in fact they are estranged from God and His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. We cannot worship nor know God through images! For God makes himself known through his Word and Spirit and never through something that man has carved out of wood or chiselled from a piece of rock! Yet, we do need to be careful, for God himself taught his own people through monuments, rites and symbols to worship him. The twelve stones from the Jordan were to tell the story of the crossing of the river into the Promised Land (Josh 4:8-9). Israel's own calendar was loaded with events of commemoration.

The Passover feast, the feast of Weeks; the feast of trumpets; the Day of Atonement and the feast of tabernacles were all to be remembered and remind them of God's acts. Israel's liturgy pointed to God and to realities still to be revealed and the sin offerings is just one example and there are more. Yet history has shown these things may outlast their usefulness. A classic example is when the Israelites became so impatient that they despised God's great acts of salvation. So God attacked them with some venomous snakes.

But after Moses' intercession, a bronze serpent was made and placed high on a pole. And when anyone was bitten, all they had to do was look at the snake and they lived (Numbers 21:9). But centuries later they ended up worshipping the bronze snake, and in 2 Kings 18:4 King Hezekiah destroyed the snake. King Hezekiah was an iconoclast, someone who

destroys an image. During the Reformation, we had such people and we still have them today. But sometimes I wonder whether they go too far. We have all heard about the “The Passion of Christ” film. Some people say we shouldn’t see it at all because it breaks the second command. But in fairness to Mel Gibson the producer, he has never said that we should see the actor and worship him as the Christ or his film or that it should be shown in a worship service. And whatever people want to say about it, the fact remains that it has caused many people to attend church services for the first time in their lives with true repentance and confession. And although we give thanks for that we know that the Lord’s physical suffering was but a small part of his suffering and that his spiritual and mental suffering was far worse and can never be captured on film.

Congregation, God has given us his Word to instruct us, and we shouldn’t try to be wiser than God. God tells us to worship him according to His Word and not through some silly image that cannot talk. And so, in the fullness of time this Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us. And this Word that become flesh is Jesus, the perfect image of the Father! And if we want to worship an image, then Jesus is the one to worship as Lord and Saviour, for this is the worship that God is pleased with, and that brings glory to his name. People who transfer the fear and reverence due to God alone to some silly image or to a holy site or shrine do not advance the cause of true religion.

On the contrary they reduce the cause of true religion because they will never come to know Christ or the way of salvation! And in the Protestant churches, including our reformed denomination, must be on our guard for golden calves. In some instances, church history and traditions have become salvation history and some people spend their energy dancing around these “golden calves.” How often haven’t I heard it said, “This is the way our parents did it, so this is the way we should continue to do it.” Now I don’t mind, but don’t say it when there is no biblical warrant for it!

Others have put new methods of worship and their inventors on such a high pedestal that they almost dance around the man and his methods rather than God and be obedient to His Word. But God will not give his glory to another. He has bought us with the precious blood of his Son! So, God adds a warning in this second command. **“Punishing the children for the sins of the father to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to thousands who keep my commandments.”** (5b-6)

Steve Farrah in his book, “Anchor man” speaks about the impact fathers may have on their children, for three to four generations. If this is true, then we as parents need to be careful, for our children see God through our eyes. That is how we learnt and they are taught. Therefore, there is nothing more important than giving the right teaching about God to our children. Be aware, a false or sickly idea of God is quickly passed on and becomes the scourge for generations.

Let me also add, that although it is true that children can sometimes be victims of their upbringing, they cannot use their parents as an excuse for their own spiritual poverty indefinitely! The Bible is very clear. Each person is responsible for his or her own sin and neglect of God’s Word. We cannot cry sour grapes on judgment day and say, “It’s our parent’s fault.” It remains every person’s duty to know the Father and His Son by His Word and Spirit, rather than free wheel along holding onto the coat-tails of previous generations. That is an unacceptable excuse.

Now some people say that we all believe in the same God and all of life is worship it doesn’t matter where we worship. That dear friend is a serious error. The church to which we belong mostly determines the way we worship God. It’s primarily in this setting where God’s will is made concrete and his worship receives shape. This is the area that is governed by the second command. The positive sense of this command is taught in John 4:24, which reminds us, **“God is spirit and his worshippers must worship in spirit and truth.”** Now most people understand that to mean that our worship must not rely on mere rituals or crude objects, but worship must be inward, spiritual, sincere and according to God’s revealed truth.

This is not all that different than what God expected in the OT. God calls for a contrite heart and a humble spirit in the OT too. And He warns about using empty words and meaningless phrases. Nor does He need sacrifices, for all the rivers of oil and all the cattle on a thousand hills are his. But this text does add “newness” about how to worship. To worship by Spirit and Truth now means to worship in and by the Spirit of Jesus, who is the truth. Worship that denies or ignores Christ is not acceptable to the Father. Jesus Christ himself is the perfect image of God. **“Through Christ therefore let us continuously offer to God a sacrifice of praise – the fruit of lips that confess his name”** (Heb 13:15).

That brings me to another question. “Is God still as picky about how we worship him as He was in the OT?” We know the story of Nadab and Abihu (Lev 10) Aaron’s sons who decided to worship God their way rather than God’s way and God’s fire consumed them. God’s requirements for his worship have not changed. He is still meticulous. Our worship needs one basic requirement. It’s not that we have the pews set up in a certain pattern. It’s not the trumpet or other musically

instruments, or whether we sing from the BOW or some other book. It's not even whether we have the right tie on or not a tie or whether we have a cross in the church. The one basic requirement is that we have "faith in the last Word for the last days, Jesus Christ himself." If you don't believe in Jesus, then your worship is empty, useless and offensive.

Now the catch phrase is that all of life is worship and therefore we can worship on our own. True. But let us not neglect meeting together, for we also offer God true worship in the assembly of his people. Again, this is primarily where the second command is fulfilled and obeyed. Let us be on our guard against making an image and bowing to it and placing it in the corner of our lounge rooms as many Buddhist's do and thereby rob God of his Glory.

None of those silly graven images ever went to the cross to pay for our sins and give us life. Only our Saviour God brought that about through His Son. To Him belongs the glory and to Him alone! Do not make for yourself a graven image or bow down to it. That would be a serious mistake. Amen.