

Image, Idols, and Addictions
Men's Bible Study at Park View
October 11, 2005

Scriptures: Exodus 20:4-6, Joshua 24:1, 11-28, I Corinthians 10:14-22

This week we are studying the second commandment. It is so closely related to the first that some consider it to be a part of that commandment. Like the first commandment, it demands *exclusive* worship of the one true God.

The second commandment has to do with the making and worshipping of images – a common practice of Israel's neighbors. The prohibition to worship other gods or their images is reinforced by a reference to God's jealousy; God brooks no rivals. God's wrath can affect one's offspring up to the fourth generation. His love, however, extends to thousands of generations of those who love him and keep his commandments. This wonderful promise is designed to call his people to total allegiance.

It was the second commandment that motivated the 16th century Reformers, including Anabaptists, to tear down the religious icons and images in Roman Catholic churches. To this day, people who tear down other people's images are called iconoclasts.

Some have understood the second commandment to forbid the making of an image of anything in creation. That is surely not what is intended here, since the people of Israel were commanded at about the same time to make images for the tabernacle. For example, they were commanded to place images of the cherubim over the "mercy seat" that covered the ark of the covenant. They were also to fashion flowers like almonds on the candelabra in the tabernacle. Later, the temple of Solomon had engravings of flowers, palm trees, pomegranates, lions, oxen, and cherubim (I Kings 7). Faithful people can make images of things in creation, but they are never to be worshipped.

Elton Trueblood avers that the second commandment was the one most frequently quoted by the prophets because it dealt with the clearest spiritual danger to the survival of the Israelite people. "*That danger was the danger of an easy tolerance.*"¹ When the Israelites came into Canaan, they were sorely tempted to adopt Canaanite gods and ways of worship into their own worship of the true God. This resulted in syncretism, the mixing of various elements of faith that were never intended to be together. It compromised and weakened their loyalty to the true God, just as it does today.

After the death of Moses, Joshua called the people to throw away the foreign gods that their ancestors had worshipped beyond the Euphrates and in Egypt (Joshua 24:14). Although the people promised to serve the LOD, they found this very difficult to do in practice.

Indeed, ten of the twelve tribes of Israel were eventually "lost." After their exile from the land of Palestine, they intermarried with foreign peoples, worshipped their gods, and

¹ Foundations for Reconstruction, p. 23

adopted their ways. Consequently, they lost their unique identity as the people of God. They disappeared from the Biblical record. Those that returned to the land of Palestine were called Jews, a designation for members of the tribe of Judah.

We may scoff at the foolishness of the ancient peoples who carried household gods in their baggage (cf. Genesis 31:34). Why were the people so foolish as to believe that the spirit of the gods lived in images made of wood, metal, or stone? Perhaps we can best understand the nature of an image or idol by considering some of our “icons” today. Why is it considered offensive (or at least distasteful) to burn a flag, to throw darts at someone’s picture, or to tear down someone’s statue? Would you spit on the picture of a loved one? The image represents the reality to us. What can start out as a reminder to worship God can itself eventually become the object of worship.

The worship of idols may well extend beyond physical representations of reality to the more abstract. In today’s world, we are tempted to worship at the altar of gods such as success, sex, the nation, wealth, or fame. They may also be religious customs or traditions. Martin Luther is to have said, “truly, whatever thy heart clings to and trusts in, that is properly thy God.”²

The people in the early church were surrounded by idols (Acts 17:16). In Corinth, they wrestled with the ethical issue of eating food that had been offered to idols. Paul gave them practical and spiritual counsel.

Perhaps the most common form of idolatry today is addiction, the uncontrollable urge to seek well-being from a particular substance or experience. One of the fastest growing addictions among men today is the grip of pornography, the gratifying of emotional or sexual urges through the viewing of sexually titillating images. Boys and men of all ages, as well as some women, find themselves caught in this net. Some find it extremely difficult to extricate themselves.

When we truly worship God with our whole heart, we will put away all other objects that draw our attention away from God or interfere with our total commitment to him.

Questions to ponder:

What has been the most gripping aspect of this lesson?

What images, idols or addictions tend to most readily kidnap your attention away from God?

What commitment(s) would you like to make in response to today’s study?

² Cited in Ronald Wallace, *The Ten Commandments*, p. 20.