

Foundations: The Second Commandment
Deuteronomy 5:8-10 (AFBC 8/28/16)

⁸“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.

⁹You 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, ¹⁰ but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

God’s second commandment says:
“You shall not make for yourself an idol.”

Last Sunday, we began our look at the Ten Commandments by considering the first law: “You shall have no other gods before me.” God’s people were immersed in a culture that recognized many gods, and the Lord God had to set the record straight. There is only ONE GOD SUPREME—ONE ALMIGHTY GOD.

I doubt that many of us today struggle with the notion that there may be several different gods competing for our allegiance. We would quickly affirm that we not only believe in God, but we also believe that there is only... one God.

So the question for us is not whether there’s more than one god. The challenge for us is “Do we honor anyone or anything in our lives above this one God that we claim to believe in?” The answer is found in whether we keep His commandments.

This morning, we come to the second sermon on these Ten Commandments. To be fair, I must tell you that it’s challenging to translate these laws from the culture which received them about 3,400 years ago to our lives and very different world today.

I mean, does a law against making idols or “graven images” really present much of a challenge to how we live now. Seriously, when was the last time you were tempted to carve a piece of wood or chisel some stone into the shape of whatever and then bow down and worship it? It’s probably been a while.

There’s a story about an army private who went to chapel services for the first time and the Chaplain did a sermon that touched upon all Ten Commandments in one message.

After it was over, the young private was heard to say, "Well, at least I haven't carved any graven images." So, can this just be a "feel good" sermon for us?

In the year 1918, a law was enacted in New York City--it was still on the books, last I heard—a law that makes it illegal to sneeze in public. That sounds silly--until we realize that in 1918, the entire world was in the grip of a flu epidemic that claimed more lives than all of the battles fought in World War I.

500,000 people died in this country during that flu outbreak—and who knows what the next pandemic will be? The Centers for Disease Control is always issuing warnings and trying to get us ready just in case.

Back in 1918, it became imperative for the sick to remain at home, isolated from others. This is what led to the law against sneezing in public. I understand that the law is not actually being enforced today, but the need to do so could still arise, couldn't it?

Now, it would be easy enough to view the second commandment as outdated, irrelevant—important once upon a time, but not now. Worshipping idols is not our problem. Whether or not we've kept the other nine, like the young private, we're probably safe when it comes to this commandment.

Well, perhaps. But if we dig a little deeper—we'll attempt this with all the commandments--we may discover that the second commandment does apply to our lives and that it represents a bigger challenge than we might think! So... let's start digging.

1. Let's think about the second commandment on three levels. And, really, we don't have to dig at all to get to the first level—it's right on the surface--the most obvious meaning: **DO NOT MAKE ANY IDOL**—no graven images.

Maybe that's not such a big deal for US, but a quick reading of the Old Testament will tell you that it was a very serious problem for Isaiah and Jeremiah and the other Hebrew prophets. Anytime the Israelites wandered away from God, you could count on a graven image of some kind making its presence known.

First, there was that golden calf we talked about last week. It had to be destroyed; and that was only the first of many idols

along the way. In fact, anytime there was a revival in the Old Testament, it began with the people destroying their idols. This WAS a big deal for THEM!

So, does any of this have any relevance to our lives today? Well, not if you think of idolatry only as the process of creating gods out of pieces of wood and stone. For most of us, that's a silly notion--and we'd never think of doing it!

We begin to see the danger, though, when we recognize that idolatry is also an attempt to limit God—to contain Him within something we can see and comprehend and, thus, control.

An idol exists to do our bidding, to carry out our desires, to be whatever we want *it* to be, rather than the other way around. We're guilty of a kind of idolatry when we try to reduce God in similar ways—making Him more into what we want *Him* to be.

I like the story about little Sara, a student in Ms. Hunter's kindergarten class. Sara loved to draw; and at the end of each school day, Ms. Hunter gave the children some free time—and Sara used this time to draw pictures.

One day, Sara was so preoccupied with her drawing, she didn't hear the last bell ring. Ms. Hunter was walking around helping the other students get their backpacks and jackets on so that they could go home when she noticed that Sara hadn't moved.

"Sara, what are you doing?" Ms. Hunter asks. "I'm drawing a picture of God," Sara answers.

Ms. Hunter smiles and says "Sara, no one knows what God looks like." To which Sara replies, "They will when I get through with this picture."

Well, I don't think that quite qualifies as idolatry; but it is a kind of idolatry when we form our own images of God—images that have little to do with the picture of Himself that God gives us in His word—both His written word, the Bible, and the Living Word, Jesus Christ.

We're all probably guilty of this to some degree, but I encounter pictures of God on a regular basis that seem to me to so distort the God we find in the Bible that they probably qualify as idols.

I don't want to give illustrations of this because--the truth of the matter is—I'm probably as bad about distorting God's image as the next guy is. Any examples that I'd try to give you would simply reflect in some way my own distortions.

The real danger in this comes, though, when we don't recognize that we all have a tendency to do this—to make God look like we want Him to look.

This must have been what Anne Lamott was getting at when she wrote, "You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do." (Christianity Today, Vol.41, #8) Did you get that?

Assuming that "God hates all the same people you do" is a sad but spot-on illustration of how we can make our own gods in our own image. That's idolatry, and the Almighty God says, "Don't! Don't make for yourself any idols.

2. But now let's dig a little deeper. We're not to MAKE any idols, but the commandment also says **DO NOT BOW BEFORE AN IDOL**. That simply means that we are not to worship anything or anyone other than God.

Jesus talked about this in Luke 16:13. He said, "No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other."

Now, fact of the matter is, most of us have to submit to all sorts of authorities in life. If you're a child or teenager, you've got both parents and teachers—for some, ministers and coaches, too-- whose job it is to keep you on the straight and narrow.

If you're an adult, you may have to submit to a boss or a spouse; and we all have to submit to federal, state and local governments. We have to pay our taxes, obey the laws, and show some respect if we get pulled over (Please!). We submit to lots of authorities.

The Bible tells us, though, that these are systems of authority that God has put in place. He knows we need them. For instance, listen to this passage from **Romans 13:**

"Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God

has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God."

We can find similar guidance regarding relationships within the family and in the workplace. We may not always like this, but whenever we are told to submit to someone in authority, it's because this authority is allowed or established by God.

There are times, however, when our allegiance to God must take priority over some earthly authority. Recall the story of Daniel. His enemies had set him up, so Daniel was put in a position where he had to choose between obeying God or the king. Daniel was obedient to God. He defied the king in order to be true to God.

The point is, there can be many authorities in our lives, but there can only be one God. And to whomever or whatever we give supreme allegiance in our lives, whoever or whatever controls our thoughts and actions, that's our God.

Now, any sermon on idolatry has to get around eventually to pointing out that there all kinds of things that can become idols for us. In fact, when you or I break one of the other Ten Commandments, it's often because of idolatry.

Have you ever known anyone who would take the Lord's name in vain because it helped them to fit-in with their peer group? Being accepted by their buds was more important to them than obeying God. That's idolatry.

How about the man or woman who consistently breaks the Sabbath commandment by never taking time off for worship and rest? Has not some other activity (e.g., work, play, laziness, etc.) become a kind of idol in that person's life, more important to them... than God?

In Colossians 3:5, the Apostle Paul calls covetousness, which is forbidden in the tenth commandment, idolatry. Did you hear that—coveting is actually a form of idolatry.

Think about this: the person who covets what another person has thinks the blessing of happiness is bestowed only by something they can touch and see and, ultimately, control. And often they will attempt to justify this passion for possessions by claiming it's God's will for them to be happy.

And there are other idols. When we equate our personal worth with financial success, we try to locate the abundant life Jesus promises, not in our relationship with Him, but in a number at the bottom of a bank statement.

We begin to think of salvation--not as freedom from sin and death--but as freedom from financial problems. Or freedom to buy anything our hearts desire. But this kind of desire will never be satisfied—at least, not in that way—not by buying more stuff!

It's idolatry that turns a house into a status symbol. Rather than being a place to live and stay safe from the elements, it becomes our grand statement of who we understand ourselves to be.

And it doesn't really bother us if God doesn't seem to be able to find His way into that house, or into the lives of those who live there. Because of our idolatry, having an impressive house is more important to us than having a loving, Christian home.

Do you see what a problem idolatry continues to be? Sometimes we don't recognize it for what it is because it's a very different brand of idolatry from what the early Israelites struggled with; but it's really just the same old thing. It's bowing down before, worshipping something—anything—that's not God.

3. Well, by now, you may feel that we've dug deep enough into this second commandment, but let's take it one level deeper. The negatives of "Do not make an idol" and "Do not bow before an idol" finally lead us to the positive side of the 2nd Commandment, which tells us to **WORSHIP GOD, AND HIM ALONE.**

We worship the One we love most. We worship the One we trust with our lives. So this raises the question: How many of us really love God and demonstrate our love by the way we live, and by the way we keep God's commandments?

If we love God and keep His commandments, it's because we've placed our trust in God. So do we sincerely, genuinely trust God?

There's an old story about a man who falls over very steep cliff; but before he falls very far, he grabs hold of a small bush that's growing out of the rocks. This stops his fall, but he can tell the bush won't hold him for long. In desperation, the man cries out,

"God, if you are up there, help me."

Well, much to the amazement of the man, he hears a voice responding to his plea. The voice says, "This is God. Let go of the bush and I will catch you. Trust me."

The man looks down—and it's a long way down. He considers God's offer, then he cries out, "Is anyone else up there?"

We struggle with trusting God—trusting a God that we cannot see and touch. This is why we find idols so tempting. It may also be why God decided He had to come and be with us for a while—not just spiritually, but "in the flesh!"

The Almighty God came to us in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ, fully God and fully man. It's a great mystery, but the Bible says that in Him, we find the exact representation of God. We know God, we experience God, we come to God in Christ Jesus.

He said to us, "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father." Maybe this is the ultimate reason idolatry is so strongly condemned.

Rather than us wasting our time trying to figure out what God looks like, God decided that when the time was right, He'd show us. He'd send us His self-portrait, if you will, in the person of His one and only Son.

This is what God did. Christ came, and the Eternal Father, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, said: "This is how much I love you.

This is what I'm willing to give up to save you. Believe in Him, put your full faith and trust in Him, and I will be your God and you will be my child forever!

Why in the world would we ever settle for any other God? Whatever idols keep hanging around your life and getting between you and the Lord, turn away from them. There is but one all-knowing, all-forgiving, all-loving God—worship Him, and no other!