

No Graven Images

*Basic Scripture resources: Exodus 20:4-6;
Deuteronomy 4:12-24; Acts 17:29;
Romans 1 :18-24; Psalm 139:7-10; John 14:8-11*

"Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image" (Exodus 20:4).

The second Commandment has an unusual history. In fact, some do not even consider it to be a separate commandment. Roman Catholics and Lutherans include it in the first Commandment. They see it merely as a continuation of the prohibition of idolatry. (In order to keep the list at *ten*, in accord with Deuteronomy 4:13, they then divide the tenth Commandment. "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house" becomes the ninth; "thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife" becomes the tenth.)

Is it, then, intended to be a separate commandment, the second in a list of ten? Most likely it is. It deals not with idolatry as such, which is the worship of false gods. Rather, it deals with the making of *images* to represent the *true* God. The first Commandment establishes God alone as the only true God; He alone must be worshiped. The second Commandment speaks about the *manner* of worship: we must not try to worship Him through images intended to portray Him in any way.

Underlying this prohibition is one of the most basic truths or principles, namely, the *transcendent nature of our God*.

I. What is Prohibited?

The second Commandment specifically prohibits making of graven images in the form of created beings of any kind. Does this mean that a sculptor cannot make a statue of a bird, or that an artist cannot draw a picture of a cow? No, this is a prohibition not of images as such, but of images intended to represent the divine nature.

Again, this is not merely a prohibition of the worship of idols, such as Dagon the fish-god of the Philistines (see 1 Samuel 5). The worship of false gods is condemned by the first Commandment. The second Commandment forbids making and worshiping images of the true God. It attacks the very idea that God's holy and transcendent nature can be captured and represented in a physical form of any kind.

For instance, some Bible scholars think the golden calf made by Aaron (Exodus 32:4) was intended to be a visible representation of the Lord God. The same is thought of the two calves made by Jeroboam and placed in Dan and Bethel (1 Kings 12:28, 29). "Here is the God you worship," Aaron and Jeroboam were saying; "here is what He looks like."

"Stop it!" says God in the second Commandment. "No image you construct, no matter how beautiful and majestic, can be true to my nature. So do not even try it."

This commandment appears in other places. Deuteronomy 4:12-19 repeats it in a more specific way. The apostle Paul sums it up in Acts 17:29 thus: "Being then the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man (NAS). See Romans 1:21-23.

Someone may raise the question, "*Why* should such activity be prohibited?" The basic reason is that God's nature is uncreated, transcendent spirit. It is *impossible* to limit Him to a two-dimensional form of *any* kind.

God is not like *any* created being. He is not like any thing "in heaven above," namely, He is not like a bird. Nor is He like any thing "in the earth beneath" (land animals) or "in the water under the earth" (fish). (See Exodus 20:4, and compare Deuteronomy 4:16-18.) He is not even like the physical form of human beings. (See Deuteronomy 4:16.)

A familiar fictional story has a first-grade teacher ask her pupils to draw a picture of just anything. Johnny gets a very serious look on his face and begins the task. The teacher passes his desk and inquires, "What are you drawing, Johnny?"

He replies, "A picture of God."

"But," says the teacher, "no one knows what God looks like."

"They will when I finish," he assures her solemnly.

Of course Johnny is mistaken in thinking that he knows what God looks like. But the teacher is also mistaken in assuming that God "looks like" something -- we just don't know what. The fact is that God does not "look like" anything. He is not like any creature in our experience; His nature is beyond even our imagination.

Thus by forbidding attempts to make images of Him, God preserves His uniqueness as the only true God. He does not want to be associated with the pagan "nothings," whose only reality is in their representations!

Through this prohibition God helps us to maintain a high concept of His nature. Despite their good intentions, idol-worshippers tend to equate their gods with their idols. A purported statue of God would thus tend to limit God in our minds to one place. By prohibiting such images, God helps us remember that He is not limited by space, but is present everywhere at all times in a way that no statue or creature can be. (See Psalm 139:7-10.)

An image would only degrade God in our minds. Can a statue be greater than the one who carved it? Is not the living artisan more powerful than the lifeless stone or wood? How could we help losing confidence in a god made finite by a mortal's mind and hands? As someone has pointed out, there is something terribly demoralizing about seeing one's idols smashed.

Occasionally we see a work of art, such as Ernst Barlach's "Hovering God the Father," that attempts to depict the divine nature. This is the kind of sin prohibited by the second Commandment. Most of us, however, would not think of trying to draw a picture of God or carve a statue of Him. But sometimes we do form images of Him in our minds, such as the familiar elderly grandfather-type with flowing robe and beard. Though it may be difficult, we should try to guard against this tendency, for even this may cause us to limit our concept of the true God.

When we think of God, then, what kind of image should come to our minds? Why not Jesus? Christ our Lord is indeed the "real thing"; He is the perfect image of God.

Hebrews 1:3 says that Jesus "is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature" (NAS). "He is the image of the invisible God," says Colossians 1:15 (NAS). The apostle Philip once asked Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." Jesus replied, "Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:8, 9, NAS). Why, then, should we want any other image of God?

But, you may say, we do not know what Jesus really looked like. That is true, but it doesn't matter. It was not the *physical* nature of Jesus that resembled God anyway. It was His divine, *personal* nature. Since God is personal, He can be represented to us only in a person,

namely, Jesus. The kind of person Jesus was -- loving, compassionate, forgiving, yet holy and just -- is the character of our God.

If we know Jesus through the Gospel portraits, we do not *need* images of God. Jesus himself is that image.

This shows how important it is to study the Bible, especially the Gospel records of the life of Christ. What Jesus did, how He reacted to various situations, the attitudes He displayed, the kind of person He was, His character -- all these are like windows into Heaven through which we get a glimpse of the divine nature, not with our physical eyes but with the eyes of our hearts (see Ephesians 1:18). Are we looking?

II. What Is Permitted

The second Commandment is sometimes misapplied and is taken to forbid certain things not actually included in its intended scope. For instance, ordinary art and photography are certainly not prohibited here. In the Bible God himself commanded certain images to be made for various purposes, such as the figures of the cherubim over the ark of the covenant (Exodus 25:1 8-20) and the serpent of brass (Numbers 21:8, 9).

Often the question arises whether pictures of Jesus can be permitted in light of this commandment. After all, Jesus is divine; He is God the Son, God incarnate. Since we are forbidden to make images of God, wouldn't it be wrong to depict Christ in art?

In reference to this question we must remember that Jesus was not only divine; He was also human. What is being portrayed in a picture of Christ is *not* His divine nature, but only His physical human nature. This is not wrong. It does not break the second Commandment. The divine nature of our Lord was not something visible to the eye; it cannot be captured on canvas.

Regarding pictures intended to represent Jesus, a few things should be remembered. First, in all probability we do not know what Jesus really looked like. Thus all portraits of Him are little more than guesses. Second, any picture of Christ should definitely be in good taste, with nothing that detracts from His holy and majestic character. Finally, images of Christ should not be used as vehicles of worship. They are best used in educational materials and as symbols of commitment.

Another serious misapplication of the second Commandment is the effort to find in it a mandate against the use of musical instruments in the worship of God. It should be obvious that those who use instruments in worshiping God are in no way equating them with God himself or thinking of them as representations of the divine nature!

This Commandment does, of course, presuppose that God is the Lord of worship and can dictate whatever form of worship He pleases. Whether instrumental music in worship pleases or displeases Him must be determined from other Scriptures. See Psalm 150:3-5; Revelation 5:8.

III. What Is Required

Pictures of Jesus on the wall or musical instruments in worship are neither prohibited nor required by the second Commandment. They are simply permitted; they are matters of opinion. A few things, mostly of a general nature, are required by this commandment, however. We will mention only two of them.

One thing required by this commandment is that we worship God according to His terms, not ours. Many things, of course, are left to our good judgment as informed by the general teaching of His Word. Other things are specifically mentioned as being essential to worship, whether it be individual or collective. For instance, we are taught to pray (Acts 2:42; 1 Timothy

2:1), to sing praises (Ephesians 5:19; 1 Corinthians 14:26), and to observe the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:23-26; Acts 2:42).

Another thing required by this commandment is that we seek God not through visible representations of His nature but rather through His revealed words. Compared with all false gods and idols, this is what is unique about the true God: He has spoken!

God mocks the idols of the nations thus:

Their idols are silver and gold,
The work of man's hands.
They have mouths, but they cannot speak ...
They cannot make a sound with their throat.
Those who make them will become like them,
Everyone who trusts in them
(Psalm 115:4-8, NAS).

Our God, however, is the *living* God, who speaks His will to our ears and hearts. This is the way we commune with Him: not by fawning over little statues, but by hearing and heeding His word.

The full force of this Commandment and of this particular point can be seen in Moses' comments to the people of Israel in Deuteronomy 4. He reminded them of their experience at Mount Sinai.

Then the Lord spoke to you from the midst of the fire; you heard the sound of words, but you saw no form only a voice. So He declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to perform, that is, the ten commandments; and He wrote them on two tablets of stone. . . . So watch yourselves carefully, since you did not see any form on the day the Lord spoke to you at Horeb from the midst of the fire; lest you act corruptly and make a graven 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 sky, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water below the earth. . . . So watch yourselves, lest you forget the covenant of the Lord your God, which He made with you, and make for yourselves a graven image in the form of anything against which the Lord your God has commanded you. For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God (Deuteronomy 4:12, 13, 15-18, 23, 24, NAS).

"You did not see a form, but you did hear a voice." This is the point of the second Commandment. The Bible is God's voice speaking to us today. Let us hear it and heed it.

