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"The Second Commandment"

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The second commandment, of the ten God gave at Mt. Sinai to Israel, speaks of the sin of making graven images: "Thou shalt not make unto thyself any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me: And showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments." (Exodus 20:4-6)

The second commandment is definitely distinct from the first which spoke of idols. The idol is another god--that which is set up in the place of the Almighty, Eternal God. The second commandment rather points out that images cannot be made of God, nor of other creatures when the intent is to worship these. An image is a likeness or representation of something else.

We are confronted in the command with the question whether we have images of God. Before we can properly answer the question, we should consider some of the implications of this second commandment.

This command, as the first, is based upon a glorious spiritual truth: in this case, upon the truth of the infinity and eternity of God. It is very difficult for our minds to grasp the full significance of infinity, and its related truth, eternity. According to one often used figure, eternity is like a granite mountain, a mile square, which is pecked by a sparrow once every thousand years. When this mountain is worn down, this (so it is said) would be the length of eternity. Of course, there would be a fantastically long period of time involved in wearing down this mountain--but it would still be a period of time. Time is a creature of God--made the first day of the creation of the universe. Eternity and infinity involves the very Being and existence of God--and apply strictly to God alone.

Very simply stated, this means that there is no way of measuring the greatness and glory of God. There is no way of measuring the length of His existence nor of the size of His being. Even the greatness of the whole universe cannot contain the Infinite God. Frankly, my mind cannot really grasp then how great must be our God!

Scripture does indeed teach that He is very near to His people. His greatness does not separate Him from them in their needs and cares. He continues also to uphold and direct even the minutest parts of His universe. Yet He is Transcendent--infinitely far above all that which He has made. Solomon, in the dedication of the beautiful temple, declared in I Kings 8:27, "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain Thee; how much less this house that I have builded?"

In light of the above, we must confess that the mind of man cannot begin to comprehend all of God. There is no way to define Him so as to say all there is to say about God. To express this glorious truth, it has often been said: "God is God." The thrust of that confession is that there is no other way of acknowledging the greatness of His Being than to say: "He is God."

This truth is the basis of the second command. The infinity of God may never be compromised. We are but creatures which He has made. We may never do anything or say anything which brings God down to the level of man.

And God insists upon all of this. He is indeed and rightly the jealous God. He will punish all such who seek to deny Him or detract from His greatness and glory.

Therefore, we are not to make graven images to worship these. We do have images--at least most of us have pictures of ourselves and dear ones. These we set about our homes--but not with the intent to worship such. This sort of image is not being condemned in the command.

But we may not make images of God. Examples of images made of God to worship can be found in Scripture. Shortly after the giving of the ten commandments, after Moses went to meet God in the mount, the children of Israel persuaded Aaron to make for them the golden calf. That golden calf was not meant to be an idol, another god than the true God. It was rather constructed that Israel might have some representation of the living God. These worshipped that image with the intent of serving God through such worship. Though they had, only days before, heard God say, "Thou shalt not make unto thyself any graven image," they were already transgressing that command. Soon this one sin led them into others as well.

Later in the history of Israel, after the ten tribes separated from Judah, Jeroboam determined to keep Israel from worshipping God in the temple at Jerusalem. He built also two golden calves and placed them in Dan and Bethel. These also were meant to be representations of the living God.

All such images of God are to be condemned. God is not to be represented in the form of a calf or of any other creature of the universe. Any form or image of necessity limits God, or attempts to limit Him, to that which is graven out of wood or stone.

Nor, obviously may images be made of any other being to worship them. Many have sought to do this. Images are made of the great saints of the church who lived in past ages. Though the worship of these saints, through the images, is said to be a different form of worship than that offered to God, the fact remains that these are worshipped. All proper worship must be to God alone--not to an image or to another creature.

Images and pictures of Christ must not be made to worship either. One can really question whether it is proper to make any picture of Christ anyway. He was indeed a real man--like us in all things though without sin. Had there been cameras in that day, pictures could have been taken of Jesus. Or artists could have painted His picture. But none did. There are no real pictures of Jesus extant. Pictures which are shown today are the result of the imagination of the artist. There is no reason to believe that these are in any way true resemblances of Christ. Besides, any picture of Christ can only portray the human nature He possessed--but could not at all portray His Divinity. These pictures cannot be of any real value to the child of God--and there is the danger that he begins to worship these images too.

But other images of God have been constructed; these too must be strongly condemned. I refer now not to graven images, but mental images of God. How easy it is to form in our minds mental concepts of God. These mental concepts are such that they limit the infinite God. We begin to think of Him as less than He truly is. Allow me to give some examples.

There are many who have vastly different understandings of Who God is. Surely these views are not all in harmony with God's own revelation in the Bible. Yet how many people declare that this does not really make much difference. One believes that He is Triune; another denies the Trinity. One declares that He eternally determines the destiny of every moral, rational creature; another insists that the destiny of man rests in his own hands. Someone has obviously constructed an image of God--and Scripture must be carefully studied to determine who this is. We cannot worship God in any other way than that in which He has revealed Himself in His Word.

But also, often the way we address God or think of Him reveals that we have a poor understanding of the Being of God. In prayer we can too easily speak to Him as though He were our next-door neighbor. A disgusting

and disgraceful familiarity is often heard in address to God. He is indeed "Father" but, "in heaven." He must be addressed thus too. There are also times in our prayers when we speak to God--without knowing or remembering really what we have said. What is our conception of God when we so speak to the Almighty? Would we dare to treat the president of the United States that way? How then can we ever thoughtlessly address God? We have made an image of Him.

Lack of respect in prayer and worship also reflects our own image of God. When we fail to show the kind of reverence His Divine Majesty deserves, we have made an image of God. Let us not fool ourselves. God knows and sees all that we do.

We make images of God too when we think we can do "our own thing," even when it is very contrary to the Word of God. One might believe that he can get away with dishonesty, with moral corruption, with lies. He might think that because no man knows that he does this, that therefore God also does not know. Yet the infinite God knows all things. He beholds every action of man. He who thinks he can hide from God, has formed an image of God in his own mind. All this is sin.

The sin, of course, is that all of these images of God are attempts to limit the Infinite. No image, graven or mental, may be made of God. We must denounce all that limits Him. We may not ascribe to our image the glory which is due to God only. God has every right to be forever angry with all those who so violate His own being.

So, we must worship and praise God properly and in harmony with His own revelation of Himself. The Christian is deeply conscious of his own failing in this regard. For, first, it is impossible that any man, by nature, could worship God correctly. Natural man is ready enough to worship images or idols--but never the one true God as He has revealed Himself in His Word. Natural man finds pleasure in trying to represent the god he will serve. He deliberately will place limits upon his god in order that this god does not infringe upon his own will and work.

But also how easy it is to try to impose upon the Scriptural revelation of God, our own ideas of what God ought to be. This is done repeatedly also within theological circles. How often, for instance, is not the love of God defined according to human conceptions--rather than according to Scriptural revelation? It is said: "The God of love must seek and desire the salvation of everyone." It is said: "The God of love surely sent His Son to pay for the sins of everyone." The same is done with God's mercy and with His grace. It is as though man would say that the Bible does not know enough about these virtues--therefore we, men, will explain these according to our own wisdom and understanding.

Therefore, to obey this command properly, we need the constant and blessed Presence of the Spirit of Christ in our hearts. We need the assurance that One, Jesus Christ the Righteous, fully paid for the sins we have committed. We need the testimony of His Word that He will lead and guide us in all the truth. We must have the confidence that Jesus will so teach us that we may know how to worship and honor our God as we must.

Then, we are to use those means which God provided in order that we may develop and grow in an understanding of this great and glorious God. That means which God gave is the lively preaching of His Word. We read of that in Romans 10:15 and in the following verses. It is through the preaching of the Word that God calls His elect sinners to repentance. It is through the preaching of the Word that God directs in the knowledge of Himself and of His requirements for His people.

This ought to emphasize for us also the essential fact that the Christian must ever seek the purest preaching of the Word. One cannot be content with anything or everything. One may not be influenced by personalities nor by elaborate gimmicks designed to catch the eye of the beholder.

But one must seek ever to hear the truth of the Word of God purely proclaimed. There he is instructed and directed in the worship of the Living God. There also his children grow up with an understanding of proper worship and service of God. The Christian must, therefore, carefully study the position and confession of a church. He must know the teaching of a church--in order to belong where he believes that he and especially his children may be properly instructed. Not any church, but the faithful church of Christ is the place where we can best honor our God Who will be served not through images of man's imagination, but in harmony with His revelation in Scripture.

God reminds us in the second command of the seriousness of all of this. He is, so He declares, the "jealous God." Now "jealousy" is usually regarded to be a vice--not a virtue. People who are jealous of others are in a bad state. They are to be reminded of the foolishness of this. Yet God is the jealous God--and that is right and proper. He is jealous of His own holiness and righteousness. He is not willing that any should ever compromise that. He demands and expects perfect service to Himself. He requires that all glory be ascribed to Him alone.

For those who do not do this, there is the terrible condemnation: "I will visit the iniquity of the fathers upon the children..." That God visits their iniquity does not mean that He merely observes this. To "visit" is to express His just judgment upon those who have violated the command. To "visit" their iniquity means finally that such are cast eternally into hell. There is no escape from that place from the awful wrath of the Almighty.

But God visits the disobedient already now in this age. The iniquity of the fathers is visited upon the children unto the third and fourth generations. God surely does not punish children because of the sins their fathers did. But the punishment of God is seen in this: the sons imitate the sins of their fathers. Through the generations, the sins continue and grow. This is one of the most awful consequences of a sinful walk too. Not only does God punish the sinner, but that sinner sees his family develop in these same sins. And this is especially true of the worship of the image. Where heresy, where wrong views of God are taught by the fathers, the sons follow after these images and make their own horrible modifications upon these. Thus does God visit the iniquity of the fathers upon the children. It ought to make one consider seriously the consequences of his sin: for himself and for his children after him.

But God assures His people also of His mercy--which He shows to thousands of those that love Him and keep His commandments. God shows mercy not because these love Him and keep His commandments. Scripture makes plain that God first loved us before we ever loved Him. But in the way of obedience, His people experience God's mercy upon them day after day. They may face their times of trial and affliction, but yet they know that God works all things together for their good. And in His mercy He will lift them from this vale of tears and bring them to the blessedness of heaven to dwell with Him forevermore.

It is indeed blessed to keep this command--and be assured of His mercy on His people forevermore.

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