

**“The Jealous God”**  
**Ten Commandments Series, No. 3**  
**Exodus 20:1-6**  
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**Text Comment**

v.6 This command not to make or worship idols has been described by one biblical scholar as “perhaps the unlikeliest thing that has ever happened.” [Craigie, *Deuteronomy* NICOT, 154] The peoples of the ancient near eastern world made and worshipped idols of every kind. The manufacture of images was a major industry in all countries. Gods and goddesses were everywhere. They were represented as animals – fish, bulls, calves, and the like – or as human beings in figurine form, often highly sensual or even obscene, or sometimes as pillars or poles. They came in all sizes, some of them immense, some small enough to fit in a wall niche. Idolatry was a universal institution, a part of the life of all peoples save one, Israel herself.

Indeed, it was the universality of the institution of worshipping gods by means of images that explains Israel’s only very partial success in resisting the lure of idols or images throughout her history up to the Babylonian exile. At first the temptation was simply to worship Yahweh after the manner in which other peoples worshipped their gods. They all used images, why should we Israelites not do the same? And, then of course, as we know from the biblical history, her idolatrous worship ceased being the worship of Yahweh alone and became instead the worship of the other gods of the ancient pantheon: Baal, Ashtoreth, Molech and the like. One of the great themes of Israel’s prophets was the comical stupidity of worshipping a piece of stone or metal that one had to pay a craftsman to make well enough that it would stand up by itself and not topple over, or some piece of wood, from some of which the carver would make a figure for worship and with the rest warm himself by the fire!

*Jealousy*, in modern English usage, is a pejorative term. It describes an unworthy, selfish, and small-minded attitude toward others. But here it does not have that implication at all. It refers rather to God’s loyalty. He will prove absolutely loyal to his people and he expects them to remain loyal to him. It is in this sense, for example, that we can describe faithful husbands and wives as jealous of their commitment to their spouses. As the context indicates, this jealousy is expressed on God’s part by steadfast love toward his people. *That is what this kind of jealousy does; it loves through thick and thin!* Were Yahweh not a jealous God, Israel could not expect such love and loyalty.

The second commandment specifically prohibits the making of images intended in some way to represent Yahweh. It is not images of other gods that are prohibited here since the worship of any other god was already prohibited in the first commandment. Other gods have been forbidden outright already. What is prohibited is the making of images *as a means of worshipping Yahweh*. [Craigie, 153]

It is important to mention this fact briefly as we begin because there has continued to be something of a controversy on this point, even within our own Presbyterian Church in America. There are those, for example, who regard as a violation of the 2<sup>nd</sup> commandment any depiction of Jesus Christ in children's Sunday School material, in a stained-glass window, or in a religious painting or sculpture. Some even object to the presence in a church of any artistic representation of any natural object: say a fish, the famous early symbol of Christian faith or a dove, a biblical symbol of the Holy Spirit, and so on. But the commandment does not forbid artistic representation *per se*, but only artistic representation *for the purpose of worship*. Solomon's temple, for example, had representations of all kinds, from pomegranates to angels to bulls, artistic forms some of which, by the way and very interestingly, were actually commonplace in ancient near eastern *worship*. You might have thought that no sculpture of a bull – often worshipped as a god – would have been allowed in the precincts of the temple, but there they were – four immense bulls upon which rested the giant basin that held the huge amounts of water necessary for the cleaning up after the sacrifices had been made. But they were not instruments of worship in Solomon's temple. In fact, the great sea, the immense basin of water rested on them, as if the gods of the ancient near eastern world had been reduced to beasts of burden! And, of course, a picture of Jesus is simply a depiction of his human body, not his divine nature. People, many people, had seen Jesus as a man, had even fallen at his feet in worship. They remembered what he looked like for years afterward. There was no sin in that. It is God who cannot be represented in a man-made image.

Now this commandment had an historical context. You will understand it better if you have some of that context. The worship of the ancient near eastern world was founded on the conviction that the image, whatever it was, was a faithful, adequate representation of the deity. In the ancient near eastern mind this image, while not the god itself, *possessed the life* of deity. The image represented the *presence* of the god, his or her power and authority. *So, by worshipping the image one worshipped the god or goddess*. But Israel was taught that *no image of a natural object could represent the living God; no such object does or could possess his presence and power*. The transcendent God cannot be reduced to an image and certainly cannot be manipulated by worship directed toward an image.

It is this same background and historical context that makes so significant the Bible's teaching that human beings were made *in the image of God*. It is this image that separates man from the animals. There is a direct affinity of man with God, an affinity, a likeness utterly unique among the creatures that God made. The word "image" as used in Genesis 1:26, "Let us make man in our image..." is not the same word used here in Exodus 20:4, but it means much the same thing and often does refer to carved or shaped images used in ancient worship, to idols in other words. It is the human being in whom the presence and power of God is made most visible in this world. We are not God, of course, we are only like God in certain ways; but, as Calvin put it, in a way we are little gods, microcosms of God, given the creative powers that God has given human beings, given our capacity for fellowship with God, and given the authority he has given us over this world. Then in the New Testament we read that Jesus Christ is the *express or the exact* image of God. We find and encounter God in him! In other words, it was the use of the term "image" in the ancient world that explains its use in the Bible as a description of human beings.

The image of God in man has been marred by sin, of course. Think of man as one of those ruins of a once great cathedral that one sees in Europe. You can imagine what it once was, but now the walls go only so far up and the roof is missing and the floor is grass, not finished stone.

But, given that background, what does this commandment mean? When we speak of idolatry today, we tend to mean the worship of other gods. We think of idols as other gods that we are not to worship. That is natural enough as the term “idol” or “image” is used that way in the Bible. In that day most images of wood or stone were thought to represent other gods than Yahweh. And then Paul will say, for example, that “greed is idolatry.” That is, you can make an idol, a god out of money, or pleasure, or a hundred other things. But that is not what this second commandment forbids: the worship of other gods. If that were so, it would be simply the first commandment in other words. *What the second commandment forbids is worshipping the one true God in the wrong way!*

The fundamental problem with idolatry *per se*, the use of images in the worship of the living God is not only that it tempted Israel to the worship of other gods besides Yahweh. No, more seriously the problem was that it inevitably diminished Yahweh in the worshipper’s mind; it conveyed a false view of his nature. *The entire problem with man is that he fails to appreciate who and what God is.* In his sinful rebellion against God he finds it always and everywhere in his interest to denature God, to make him less transcendent, less different, and more like himself. Man can be comfortable with a god more like himself; he is terrified by the God who actually is! The 2<sup>nd</sup> commandment prohibits the redefinition of God. It forbids men to think that they are free to define God themselves, as they invariably will, as they must, if they devise their own ways to worship him. And so, it was in the idolatrous ancient world, where gods were not actually thought much of. In the temples the gods regularly got the poorest cuts of meat!

God cannot be confined in nature or confined to nature, and that is what men are always doing; what they were doing in Moses’ day and what they are doing today. God cannot be confined in any definition that suits a human being. And, that is precisely what men do when they use images and what they do when they substitute something for God himself: they are redefining God in a way that domesticates God. You must confess and worship the one and only God, the living God, the God who is there. *But you will not long do that if you don’t worship God as he himself commands us to worship him.*

And if we doubted that, the history of the world will prove the point soon enough. What happens when men devise their own ways of worshipping God? Well, like the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, they dance around an altar and cut themselves until the blood flows. Does the living God want that to be done? Or, they come to believe that God must want them to take their children, slit their throats, and burn them on an altar fire. Really? Or they come to think that God will bless the seasonal cycle of rain and sun, so essential for bumper harvests, if they have sex with temple prostitutes as part of their worship of him. What an interesting idea! And what a blasphemous one.

And, of course, in our modern world, our redefinitions of God, expressed and communicated to the heart in our various forms of worship, actually are very similar. God is someone, we learn in this worship, who always wants for us what we want for ourselves. His jealousy is not for our

faithfulness to him, but for our personal peace and affluence. He will understand if we can't be bothered at the moment to live in obedience to his commandments, because he is a God of unqualified goodwill and condescension. That is how he is depicted in modern western worship so often now. Not with images of stone or wood or metal, but in words and worship that accomplish the same thing: cut God to size, make him easier to serve, simplify our loyalty to him by requiring it only in certain ways and at certain times.

What was lost when Israel used idols or images in its worship and what is lost when we redefine both God and the nature of our relationship to him in our more sophisticated modern ways, I say, what is lost is *God himself*, the God who cannot be contained in an image, cannot be approached by the use of an image, cannot be understood in the guise of some artifact, the God for whom there is no substitute, there is no illustration or figure or representation. As Augustine tartly put it, "If you can grasp it [– and images were easy to grasp and so is money, pleasure, fame, and power –] if you can grasp it, it isn't God." [Sermon 117.5] Or as the Presbyterian J. Gresham Machen said it, "Not only [is modern America's view of] God uninteresting – nothing is so insipid as indiscriminate good humor – only a God enveloped in impenetrable mystery and awful righteousness could satisfy the soul." [In Hart, *Defending the Faith*, 73] But such a denatured and diminished God is the inevitable result of the wrong worship of God. When we invent our own ways to worship God – always the ways of our culture, of the world around us – he is always brought down to us; we are never brought up to him! The Bible absolutely insists on a self-named, self-revealed, and self-defined God. It absolutely withholds from us any right either to figure out who God is by ourselves or to determine for ourselves how he is to be worshipped and served.

To worship God by an artifact of nature, whether images made of wood and stone or money made of paper or numbers in a bank account, is to lose touch with God as he actually is. *That* is the burden of the 2<sup>nd</sup> commandment.

God has revealed himself in his Word. He has told us about himself, at least what we are capable of understanding about himself, though even much of that is so fabulous that it transcends real understanding. We have a glimpse of the love that reigns in the heart of God, the wisdom that governs all his ways, the justice that does, must, and will prevail in the universe he has made and over the life of all his personal creatures, I say we catch a glimpse, if only a glimpse, of who and what God is in the divine likeness he has stamped on the life of human beings, marred as that likeness has been by sin. And we have been given to see the nature and character of God still more profoundly in the person, character, life, and work of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God. But God is so far beyond these glimpses, so far beyond man's peeking into the divine life, that God remains largely unknown and incomprehensible to us.

And that fact, so frequently and powerfully taught in the Bible is *fundamental to any true understanding of God and any true worship of him*. And since our lives will rest, for good or ill, on our concept, our understanding of God – whether we grasp his utter transcendence or not – only that worship that respects God's otherness, his incomprehensibility, his being so far above us as to baffle our minds is sufficient to nourish a true faith and a holy, God-like life. The wrong worship of God introduces poison at the well-head and must finally destroy real spiritual life. The problem with the use of images in worship in the ancient world was precisely that this

*method of worship profoundly determined the object of worship. A God who could be worshipped in this way, was not, never could be the God who is!*

The God who has been worshipped by images throughout human history is a base, utterly unworthy, despicable, and corrupting caricature of the living God – if you don't think so, study what was thought to be the nature and the character of the gods of the ancient world – whether that image used to worship that god was a figurine in metal, a stone animal, a wood pillar or phallic symbol, or money, fame, or power. And the people who have worshipped God – if only as the ultimate interest of their lives – by this means have always come to live a similarly debased caricature of what human life ought to be. *What the 2<sup>nd</sup> commandment teaches us is how essential it is, and what great care must be taken, to ensure that we get God right!* That we have a faithful, accurate understanding of him to the extent that any mere human being can understand God. Listen to this from Charles Spurgeon:

“It has been said by some one that ‘the proper study of mankind is man.’ I will not oppose the idea, but I believe it is equally true that the proper study of God’s elect is God; the proper study of a Christian is the godhead. The highest science, the loftiest speculation, the mightiest philosophy, which can ever engage the attention of a child of God, is the name, the nature, the person, the work, the doings, and the existence of the great God whom he calls his Father. There is something exceedingly improving to the mind in the contemplation of the Divinity. It is a subject so vast, that all our thoughts are lost in its immensity; so deep that our pride is drowned in its infinity. Other subjects we can compass and grapple with; in them we feel a kind of self-content, and go our way with the thought, ‘Behold I am wise.’ But when we come to this master-science, finding that our plumb-line cannot sound its depth, and that our eagle eye cannot see its height, we turn away with the thought, that vain man would be wise, but he is like a wild ass’s colt; and with the solemn exclamation, ‘I am but of yesterday, and know nothing.’ No subject of contemplation will tend more to humble the mind, than thoughts of God.... But while the subject *humbles* the mind it also expands it. He who often thinks of God, will have a larger mind than the man who simply plods around this narrow globe.”  
[*The New Park Street Pulpit*, 1]

Now what is important about that is not that the sermon was the first delivered by Charles Spurgeon as the pastor of the London church that would springboard him to international prominence and immense influence, or even that he was only 21 years of age when he preached it in January of 1855, but the powerful emphasis he placed on how fundamental to everything in human life is a true knowledge of God and a serious reckoning with who and what God is.

Do you know what my worst problem is? Do you know what more than anything else cripples my Christian life? And do you know what is very likely most to cripple your own Christian life? I will tell you. It is your far too small, far too familiar, far too inadequate conception of God. He does not dominate my thoughts as he should. He doesn't define my life as he ought to define it. I do not see everything and think about everything and judge everything in terms of his Majesty as I ought to do. He doesn't thrill me or humble me or cause me to fear him as he ought.

If, for just a few moments, you could behold the glory of God; if but once you heard his voice as it was heard by a few long ago; if but once you could look into heaven and see it bathed in the light of God's presence and feel that warmth in your soul; if you but for a few moments felt in your heart the terrible but wonderful power of the divine holiness; if you could but once grasp the ineffable, transcendent, utterly incomprehensible life of the Triune God; if you could have the experience Dante describes in the final canto of his *Paradise*:

“How powerless is speech – how weak, compared  
To my conception, which itself is trifling  
Beside the mighty vision that I saw!

I say, if you could see just that much of God – still so far beyond your comprehension as he would remain – you would realize with an irresistible intuition that everything, including you, is from him and to him and for him, and that the fulfillment of your life, the satisfaction of all your longings, the perfection of all your ways must lie, could only lie with him.

And knowing that, it would seem not only obvious to you, but absolutely essential that nothing be allowed in life or in worship, in thought or in action, to hide you from God as he actually is or to diminish him in your conception. *Every one of us will be as the God we worship!*

Some of you have read, many more should read Armando Valladares' *Against All Hope*, one of the most important and moving and instructive memoirs of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Valladares, then 23 years of age, was sentenced to 30 years in prison for refusing to put an “I'm with Fidel” sign on his desk at work. He spent 20 years in Fidel Castro's concentration camps before international pressure forced his release in 1982. It is a heart-breaking and revolting account of man's inhumanity and, at the same time, an extraordinary testament to the reality of the God who is actually is, the living God, the God who became man in Jesus of Nazareth. The guards saw their purpose to be breaking these men who resisted the revolution and used tactics so cruel as virtually to defy description. But through months and years, in the face of the daily prospect of summary execution, amidst the beating and torture, the deaths of so many of their fellows, weeks without a bath, living amidst the human sewage, without visits from loved ones for months and even years on end, compelled to live naked because they refused to wear the uniform that identified them as common criminals – the very claim that the Castro government, with outrageous dishonesty, was making to the world – I say, through all that time when it would seem that it was impossible to see anything of God, *in fact his presence, his nature, his power were on display to an astonishing degree!*

Never did the God of Elijah humiliate the idols any more completely than in those Cuban concentration camps. To the very end the men knew they were with God, the God who actually is. The last act of a number of them before the firing squad ended their lives was to cry, “Viva Cristo Rey!” “Long live Christ the King!” Sergio Brava, a fine athlete and a finer Christian and preacher of the Word, Valladares says, “Was a great help in the prison in the struggle of love against hate, of Christ against evil passions.” Brava's leg was amputated when he was shot by prison guards while attempting to hide a little Bible he had had smuggled page by page into the prison and there lovingly reassembled. Of an older man, Gerardo, a Protestant minister the mostly Catholic men called “The Brother of Faith,” Valladares says, his “life was his own most

moving sermon.” He was always moving among the men instilling faith, calming spirits, leading singing, and praying, though all of those actions could be punished with beatings. Once when the guards were savagely beating some prisoners he interposed himself between them, almost a skeletal figure with white hair and flaming eyes, opening his arms into the form of a cross, lifted his face to the sky, and cried out, “Forgive them, Lord, for they know not what they do!” A moment later his head was almost severed from his body by a burst of machine gun fire. And then there was Armando himself, who entered the camp a nominal Christian but encountered God there and became his willing servant.

Again, and again, we read him saying such things as, “My heart rose up to God, and I fervently prayed for Him to help me stand up to this brutality and do what I had to do. ...God heard my prayer.” [41] Or, “I was utterly exhausted. The lack of sleep and tension were seriously affecting me. I sought God then. I never asked him to get me out of there; I didn’t think God should be used for that kind of request. I only asked that He allow me to resist, that he give me the faith and spiritual strength to bear up under these conditions without sickening with hatred. I only prayed for him to accompany me. And his presence, which I felt, made my faith an indestructible shield.” [138]

No idols can do that; no God who is capable of being worshipped by idols can do that. Only the God who stands utterly above such diminishment can do that! *You will be, I will be, as the God we worship, the God we trust, the God we serve.* Is he the God who actually is, or a God of our own making? That is the concern of the 2<sup>nd</sup> commandment and it should be the principal concern of our lives. Idols and images can make a Manasseh who sacrificed his children on Judah’s altars. Marxism can make a Castro, money and pleasure can make a Hugh Hefner, but only the living God can make a Sergio Brava or an Armando Valladares and make them such men in conditions so brutal and so ugly that we can only wish to be like them ourselves!

The second commandment requires us to reckon with the living God, jealous with steadfast love, and to refuse, absolutely refuse, to permit ourselves to settle for any diminishment of his divine glory; any diminishment of any kind!