

“The Second Commandment”
Deuteronomy 5:6,8-10
September 25, 2022
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

We returned this morning to our series in the Book of Deuteronomy, as we come this morning to the second commandment. We’ll include the preface to the Ten Commandments with that, so our text will be Deuteronomy 5:6, 8-10.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this morning.

The Lord said to his people:

⁶“I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

[...]

⁸“You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁹You shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I Yahweh your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, ¹⁰but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.”

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, we know that those who walk in the ways of your word are blessed –
those who keep your testimonies
and seek you with their whole heart.

Lord, make our ways steadfast
in keeping your statutes.

Keep us from dishonoring your name,
by fixing our eyes now on your word.

Teach us the way of righteousness,
so that we might praise you with upright hearts,
Grant this for Jesus’s sake. Amen.

[Based on Psalm 119:1-2, 5-7]

Introduction

We come this morning to the second commandment. And this is a commandment over which Christians have often debated about the details of how it might apply to us. In fact, throughout Church history there have been debates and even divisions about what this commandment means for how Christians use visual art, how they use visual representations of Jesus, and how that all applies to how we worship. And those are important questions.

Maybe those are questions you have wondered about. Maybe those are questions you've had about our practice here. Maybe you've seen the images of people in general, of Jesus specifically, even of angels that we have had up on banners here in the sanctuary, or on our bulletins as we come in. And maybe now, this morning, as we come to the second commandment you are looking forward to hearing an explanation about why we do what we do here.

If that describes you this morning ... then I really encourage you to come back tonight, at 6:00, for our evening worship service. Because that's when we'll be dealing with some of those questions. So please, join us.

This evening we'll talk about those kinds of detailed and concrete questions about the second commandment.

This morning I want to go a bit deeper. This morning I want to get closer to what is at the heart of this commandment.

Now, to be clear, the details of application and the heart of the matter are connected. But they are also distinct.

And I think it's important to consider both aspects, because when we only focus on concrete details, we can let ourselves off the hook on this commandment, way too easily. We can assume that because we have refrained from a set of external practices, we have fulfilled this commandment. But as Jesus shows us in the Sermon on the Mount, the Ten Commandments are not just concerned with outward actions. They are also concerned with the disposition of our hearts. And so this morning we will focus on the heart of the second commandment.

With that in mind, we're going to consider three things when it comes to images of God. We'll consider:

- The problem of projecting a false image onto God in our hearts,
- The call to receive the true image from God,
- The gift of delighting in a fuller image of God

So: the problem, the call, and the gift.

The Problem of Projecting a False Image onto God

First, let's consider the problem of projecting a false image onto God.

And to understand what this looks like on a heart level, and why it's so problematic, it might be helpful to start by thinking of this dynamic in our human relationships. In fact, it might be helpful to start by thinking about when this sort of thing has been done to us by other people.

Have you ever had that experience – where you realize that someone else, in a way that is big or small, is projecting an image onto you that you don't recognize? An image that isn't really you?

I can think of some examples in my own life.

I've had two experiences lately where I walked up to a group of people, and one of the people in the group, who I knew, began to tell the rest of the group about me. And I didn't really recognize or like the person they described. And at least in this case, it wasn't that they were pointing out actual flaws in me, but instead, it became clear to me that they had a few pieces of information about me, and then they had sort of filled in more details with their own assumptions. They had crafted an image of what they assumed I must be like.

And in both cases, it made me kind of sad ... and it wasn't just because I didn't like what they had assumed about me – though that didn't help. It was because in each case I thought the other person knew me. And I realized, in that moment, they didn't really know me as well as I thought. Rather, they had constructed an image of me in their minds, and now they were projecting it onto me before this group of people.

Now ... those are minor examples. But I think we all have experienced that before in some ways. And I'm sure some of you have experienced it in even deeper ways. Have you ever had an interaction with someone who you thought knew you well – maybe really well ... but then they said something that made you realize that they had constructed an image of you in their minds that was different from who you really were ... that maybe even made you feel like they viewed you as more of a caricature of yourself, rather than you as truly really are? How did that feel?

Sometimes the images people project onto us are negative. And it's not surprising that that bothers us. But I think it's noteworthy that it can bother us when the false images they project on us are positive as well. That tells us that there is more going on here than just wanting people to think well of us. Flattery, or idealized views people have of us if we're honest, can hurt. Because it means a gap in who we really are, and the image the other person has crafted of us. It means the relationship is not as deep as we may have thought. Have you ever had that experience?

I can think of an example from my own life. Growing up, one of my friends was named Frank. And Frank was, without question, the smartest one in our group of friends. I still distinctly remember a conversation with someone who knew me and who knew Frank, when they said, very earnestly to me: "Steven, I know that you are just as smart as Frank. And you can do the same things he can do if you choose to."

Now, that might sound like affirming words of praise. And my guess is that, at least in part, they were intended that way. But that's not how they felt. What they felt like, among other things, was a sadness that the person who spoke those words didn't really know me as well as I thought they did.

Because as nice as the thought is, I'm not as smart as Frank. Frank went on to be valedictorian of our school. Frank went on to graduate from Princeton. Frank went on to found a company, which he is now the CEO of, and when I looked him up this week (to prepare for this sermon), after spending several minutes reading about the company he started and now runs ... I still don't understand what they do. I'm not as smart as Frank.

And that's okay. I'm fine with that. I knew it all the way back in middle school. But what made that apparent compliment so many years ago so sad ... the reason why I still remember it today ... is that it was just inaccurate, but that, among other things, it meant that the person who spoke those words didn't know me as well as I thought ... They were projecting an image onto me of someone who I knew wasn't me.

What experiences like that have you had? When is a time where you heard someone describe you, and as you listened, you realized they don't know you as you thought they did – you realized that they were projecting an image onto you that was either better or worse than you actually are ... and it made you feel less known ... it made you feel less connected to them ... it made you feel a bit more alone. It made you realize that your relationship to them wasn't as deep as you thought.

That's something I think we have all experienced – something we have all had done to us.

Our text this morning reminds us that it's also something that we can do to God.

In many ways, that's what's at the heart of the second commandment: that in our hearts, we project an image of our own making onto God, an image in which he is someone different than he actually is. And the result, our text tells us, is a break – a disconnect – in our relationship with God.

When other people project an image onto us, I think it can be hurtful for a number of reasons. Sometimes it's hurtful because the image projected onto us is just wrong – it's inaccurate. Other times it's hurtful because the image projected onto us is over-simplistic: it fails to capture the depth and complexity of who we are. We feel like the other person sees us as a two-dimensional caricature. Still other times, the image is hurtful because it's so static. As human beings, we are dynamic: we have different moods, different emotions, and different responses to different situations. But the image others project onto us is often static, as if we have just one main mood, one main way of being.

And such false, or over simplistic, or static images in a relationship are a barrier to two people really knowing one another. Because one person can be more focused on the image they have made of the other person than they're interested in the actual person themselves.

And that dynamic of relational breakdown comes up in verse nine, where Yahweh says that such images are wrong because God is a "jealous" God.

That word there can confuse us, because we tend to think of jealousy just negatively – we equate it with coveting, or we think of it as a sinful form of suspicion. But that's not what's in view here. What's in view here is good jealousy – right jealousy. The kind of jealousy in view here is the right expectation of the exclusion of rivals within a relationship of covenant love and loyalty. It's a dynamic we are familiar with in a wedding. When a man pledges his faithfulness to his wife in a wedding ceremony, he's also promising that he will not entertain rivals to his wife. In saying yes

to the bride before him, he is saying no to all other women. Healthy jealousy in his wife is her expectation that she does not need to compete with other rivals for the affection of her husband, and her distress if he does entertain interest in another woman – in a rival – her distress is a healthy form of marital jealousy. [Leithart, 35-36; Wright, 71]

That is the kind of jealousy being described here in verse nine.

But interestingly, it's not just other gods that can evoke that kind of rivalry. We covered other gods in the first commandment. Here in the second commandment, the emphasis is different. While the second commandment does include a prohibition of bowing down to images of other gods, the emphasis seems to be on a prohibition to bowing down to images of Yahweh. [Wright, 70] But if the images are of Yahweh, why would that evoke jealousy?

Well, the marriage imagery may again be helpful. How would a wife feel if her husband started giving less and less attention to her ... and instead focused more and more of his attention on pictures of her he had on his phone? What if she found herself sitting next to him on the couch, while he was turned away from her, gazing instead at photographs of her?

She would begin to feel hurt – even jealous. Because her husband would seem to prefer a version of her that was less than who she really was. She may feel an angry or hurt jealousy over her husband's preference for a two-dimensional representation of her, over the real thing sitting beside him on the couch.

Now imagine how much worse it would be if the photos were also not accurate – if she learned that her husband had photoshopped them, and altered her appearance in a few different ways? Then how much more might she be hurt – how much more would she feel a righteous jealousy, even though the husband could argue that technically, the images he's looking at are of her?

And, of course, this dynamic need not be visual. It may be a matter of the images of our spouse's personality or character that we craft in our hearts and then project onto them.

Something that can be particularly lonely in a marriage is when one person feels that their husband or wife has an image of them – of what they think they are like – that's static, or over simplistic, or just false – that their spouse is projecting onto them. It doesn't matter, on some level, as to whether the image is idealized or derogatory – either way, they can feel like their spouse is relating to someone in their hearts who is not really them. And a righteous jealousy can emerge in a combination of anger and a sad longing to be known as they really are by the person who should know them most. That pattern can be a threat to any marriage.

The second commandment reminds us that it can be a threat to our relationship to God as well. We each are tempted to construct our own images of God that are over simplistic, or static, or just wrong, and then to project them onto God – even as we claim that the one we are worshipping is the God of the Bible.

And when we do this, there are several categories of false images of God that we might project.

What does that image tend to look like for you?

One common form this can take is that we craft and project an image of God as a “Stepford God.”

I talked about this a few years ago in more detail¹, but the image comes from Tim Keller, and draws on the 1972 book *The Stepford Wives*. The premise of the book is fairly straightforward: Joanne Eberhart, her husband, and their two kids move from New York City to Stepford, Connecticut. And once there she is amazed and confused by the women there. As she gets to know them, she begins to learn that none of the wives in Stepford have any interests of their own ... or any opinions of their own ... or any thoughts of their own. They do housework, they care for their families, and they agree with whatever their husbands say. And what strikes Joanne as so odd is not primarily that they are focused on their families, but that they seem so two-dimensional. When you talk to them, they don't seem like real people.

And as the story unfolds, she finds out that there's a good reason for that: the women are not real people. Instead, every man's wife has been replaced by a robot built in the image of his wife. It turns out that a number of the men in Stepford have past experience in computers and animatronics. And they've gotten together to combine their skills. And now, every man who moves to Stepford is given the offer to replace his wife with an animatronic robot who will look like his wife (though modified to the husband's specifications in certain ways), and who will then do whatever her husband wants, and agree with whatever he thinks. Then, when the robot version is ready, a switch is made, and the actual wife is eliminated.

Peter Straub points out that many people have misread *The Stepford Wives*. They've read it as a satire of women who focus on homemaking – that's how the phrase “Stepford Wife” has entered our language. But Straub points out that it was actually the Stepford *husbands* who were being satirized and critiqued – the pathetic picture of men who would prefer a robot to a real-life woman. [Straub, “Introduction,” x-xii]

And yet, Tim Keller points out, we can have that same tendency with God. We too can construct, in our minds, a Stepford God – a god who may resemble the God of the Bible in certain, superficial ways, but a God who has been gutted of his depth and independence. A Stepford God doesn't think for himself, but he agrees with whatever we think. He likes what we like, and he hates what we hate. He never contradicts us, but to whatever we say he replies “Yes, dear.”

If, in your mind, God never contradicts you, he never disagrees with you, he never surprises you with an action or an opinion or an assertion that you didn't see coming, then you may have crafted an image of a Stepford God for yourself. You may be bowing down to it in your heart, rather than bowing down to the true God.

Of course others tend in the opposite direction. To others the idea of a Stepford God may seem laughable. But they may go to the opposite end, and craft for themselves a Stern God. If the Stepford God is always smiling at his worshiper, the Stern God is never smiling. He always looks at least mildly disapproving. He's always ready to catch a fault. He always lets you know what you did wrong, but he never has a word of encouragement. He has little interest in your troubles, except to point out how you could have responded to them better. He's not a source of comfort, but only of guilt and shame.

¹ My sermon “Recognition Failure: Stepford Gods & Spiritual Amnesia” preached on March 3, 2019: <https://www.faithta.coma.org/john-nicoletti/recognition-failure-stepford-gods-and-spiritual-amnesia-john-16-13>

If that sounds familiar to you, you may have crafted a Stern God for yourself. And you may be bowing down to that image of god, rather than the true God of the Bible. Because while the God of the Bible is, indeed, stern *at times*, one cannot read the Bible and conclude that such sternness is the entire emotional range that the God of the Bible has.

If the Scripture's claims about God rejoicing over you with singing [Zephaniah 3:17], of his gathering you close to himself like a mother hen [Matthew 23:37], or of his running to you and embracing you, and kissing you [Luke 15:20] – if those biblical images of God leave you scratching your head, then you may have crafted an image of a Stern God in your heart.

For others, God is neither gushing support nor exclaiming disapproval. He is far too detached for such responses. He's a Stoic God. He set the world spinning, he may still be, in some abstract sense, sovereign. But doesn't get emotionally involved. He certainly isn't emotionally invested in you. He remains cold and aloof.

But of course the Bible is so filled with God's engaged and impassioned responses to his people, that one must quickly realize that the Stoic God fits far more comfortably in a philosophy textbook than he does in the Christian Scriptures.

And so if your God never delights in his children, nor rails against injustice – if he neither loves nor hates, then you may have crafted an image of a Stoic God for yourself. You may be bowing down to it in your heart, rather than bowing down to the true God.

For others, the image we craft is of a Secretary God. We see ourselves as the main character in the story of our lives, and God has a merely supporting role. He's like our cosmic personal assistant. We let him know what our plan is, and we expect him to then help us carry it out – to manage the details that we cannot. But this too is a wildly different picture of God than what the Bible tells us.

I've mentioned it before, but Tim Keller tells a story that gets at just a bit of this. He says: "In July 1970 at a Christian camp in Colorado, a woman Bible teacher [...] gave an illustration that changed my life. She said: 'If the distance between the earth and the sun (92 million miles) was reduced to the thickness of a sheet of paper, then the distance between the earth and the nearest star would be a stack of paper 70 feet high. And the diameter of the galaxy would be a stack of paper 310 miles high – that's how big the galaxy is. And yet the galaxy is nothing but a speck of dust, virtually, in the whole universe, and the Bible says that Jesus Christ holds this universe together with the word of his power – his pinky, as it were.' she said. And then she asked the question: 'Is this the kind of person you ask into your life to be your assistant?'" [Keller, 36:40]

If you have done that, then you may have crafted an image of a Secretary God for yourself. You may be bowing down to it in your heart, rather than bowing down to the true God.

What is it for you? What image do you tend to craft and to project onto God?

Whichever it may be, the problem with these images is that they are over simplistic, they are static, and they are often just wrong.

First, they're over simplistic. And we see this in the fact that none of these gods: neither the Stepford God, the Stern God, the Stoic God, or the Secretary God – none of those gods will ever surprise us. We always know what they will do. They are far too simplistic.

But second, they're also static. It's true that sometimes the God of the Bible is supportive and affirming, a bit like the Stepford God. Other times, the God of the Bible rebukes and corrects us, a bit like the Stern God. Still other times, the God of the Bible seems silent, and we cannot sense his presence, a little like the Stoic God. And then other times, the God of the Bible helps us in the goals we are pursuing in this life, a little like the Secretary God. The God of the Bible can, at times, be all those things. But he is not statically stuck as one of them. He relates to us differently at different times and in different situations. The God of the Bible is not a static image, but he is a Living God, whose way of relating to us can change in different moments, even as the relationship is always rooted in his love and grace towards us in the gospel.

Finally, each of those images are wrong, because the God of the Bible is more than any one of those images, and also more than all of those images combined. And so none of those images are truly accurate.

Which is why we need to reject the false images that we tend to craft, and project onto God in our hearts.

That's the first thing for us to consider about what's at the heart of the second commandment: The problem of projecting a false image onto God in our hearts.

The Call to Receive a True Image from God

The second thing is that we need to see that we are called to receive the true image from God.

And for that we need to ask first, how do we find it? and second, how do we hold it?

And what we see in the Bible is that we find the true image of God when we look to the Scriptures, for Jesus, with the help of other people.

So first, we need to look to the Scriptures.

Carved images can neither speak nor act. The same is true of the images of God we make in our hearts ... even if they do speak or act, they only speak the words that we give them, and only act in ways that we determine. They are puppets at best.

But the living God speaks and acts. If you want to know a person, it's good to pay attention to their words and their actions. And the place where we can hear God's words and see his actions most clearly are the Christian Scriptures. That is where God has revealed himself to us – recording for us his words and his deeds. There he tells us, in his own words, who he is.

So first, we need to look to the Scriptures.

Second, we need to look to the Scriptures for Jesus.

Because it is in Jesus that God has especially revealed himself. The Bible itself tells us that Jesus is “the image of the invisible God.” [Colossians 1:15] It tells us that though no one has ever seen God, Jesus, God the Son, has made God known [John 1:18]. It tells us that if we want to know God the Father, then by looking to Jesus – to God the Son – we can know what the Father is like [John 14:8-9].

And so, if we want to know God as he is, then we need to look to the Scriptures for Jesus.

And just to be clear, this does not limit us to only certain portions of the Bible. The entire Bible points to Jesus. The Bible tells us that it was Jesus who created all things in Genesis one and two [Colossians 1:16]. It was Jesus who rescued Israel in the Book of Exodus [Jude 5]. And, in fact, Moses, and the Prophets, and the Psalms, and the entirety of Scripture point to Jesus [Luke 24:27,44-47]. That does not flatten out the Scriptures, but rather, it provides incredible depth to the portrait of Jesus, and of our Triune God, given to us in the Scriptures.

We need to look to the Scriptures for Jesus.

Third, we need to look to the Scriptures for Jesus with the help of other people.

In his book *The Four Loves*, C.S. Lewis points out that other people help us better know and understand our friends. Often a mutual friend can draw out and reveal to us an aspect of a friend that we, on our own, might have missed.

And, Lewis points out, the same is true of God. On our own, looking at God, even as he is revealed in Christ through the Scriptures, we will miss things. We will have blind spots. We will fail to notice or draw out certain aspects of who he is. But others can help us. They can notice what we miss. And if we allow them – if we invite them – they will help us see God, as he is, more clearly. [Lewis, 246]

This means looking at and discussing the Scriptures with others. It means hearing sermons from different preachers. It means discussing God with other Christians – especially Christians who are different from us. It means we need one another if we are going to see things about God that we ourselves might miss.

And so, if we want to receive the true image of God – if we want to know God as he is, then we need to look to the Scriptures, for Jesus, with the help and insights of others.

But once we do that – once we are receiving God’s image that way, how are we to hold that image in our minds, and in our interactions with others? Let me say three things about that, briefly. We need to hold that image with authority, with modesty, and with an expectation of incomprehensibility.

First, we need to hold it with authority. Anything we are told directly about God in the Bible – about his nature, about his character, about his likes and dislikes – anything that we are told clearly in the Scriptures, we need to hold onto with authority. Not with authority in ourselves, but we need to hold it as authoritative because it comes from God – from God’s self-description in the Bible. We should not apologize for it, nor should we try to modify it for others – because that is again

the path towards making images of God in our hearts and minds. Instead, whatever God has revealed clearly, we must embrace as received by his authority.

But then, for those things that are not as clear in the Bible ... for those things about God that require more deduction or reasoning on our end ... especially anything about which Christians often disagree – those things we should hold with modesty.

Now, we are called to deduce from Scripture what God would have us believe and do on a range of topics not directly addressed in the Bible. And we can't avoid that. But we should be aware that for every step of our own reasoning that we need to add to what God has revealed, we should hold our conclusion with a bit more modesty – a bit more humility.

Theologian Herman Bavinck has pointed out that when we place too much confidence in our reasoning, or in our own logic, or in our theological system, so that we speak with too much confidence where the Scriptures do not speak directly, then we risk making our reasoning or our system into an idol. And so Bavinck asserts that a true theologian must be predisposed to modesty the more that human reasoning is part of the process. [Bavinck, 44-46]

So we must hold to the image of God we receive with authority when it comes to what Scripture says, with modesty when it comes to our own deduction and interpretation of Scripture, and then, third, we should have an expectation of incomprehensibility when it comes to the true image of God. There is much we can know about God that he has revealed about himself. But we should expect to struggle when it comes to wrapping our minds around all of what we are told.

We should expect to be confused sometimes. We should expect to be unable to fully comprehend the image of God that is revealed in the Scripture through Christ. We should expect to struggle to understand some aspects of him. We should expect to be confused about how different attributes of God are both true at the same time.

This expectation is not rooted in any belief of contradiction in God, but the truths of God's depth and our limitations.

The fact is that we cannot even fully comprehend other human beings. They can always still surprise us. They can always still confound us. In fact, we surprise and confound ourselves – we can't even comprehend our own hearts. How much more should we expect God to be beyond our comprehension?

And so when in the Bible we see a picture of God that we cannot fully wrap our minds around, we need not be alarmed, but we can rejoice that the true God – so different from the images we craft in our hearts – the true God is beyond our ability to fully comprehend him.

The Gift of Delighting in a Fuller Image of God

And that fuller picture of God is a gift to delight in. That's the third and final thing we need to appreciate here. We should delight in how the God revealed in Scripture is both more real and more good than any image we could construct.

He is more real. Just as a real person is better than a picture or a robot, so relating to the real God is a far deeper and richer experience than relating to any image of our own making. We can have a true relationship with the real God. In Christ, we can draw close to him and know him.

Of course, in some ways it can be a lot more work to relate to a real person than to an image or a robot. But the work is worth it. Because it's real. And when it comes to God, it's deep beyond our wildest imaginings.

And with that, there is also far more goodness in the true God revealed in the Christian Scriptures than any image we can construct. He is more holy than the Stern God. He is more loving than the Stepford God. He is more powerful than the Stoic God. He is more close to us than the Secretary God. He is both immanent and transcendent. He is both holy, and loving.

This God is far more than you, or I, or any human being could have come up with – far better than any image we could craft. This God is glorious. And this God wants to know us, and he wants us to know him.

And so, let us put away our false images of him, and let us spend our lives – both now and for eternity – seeking to know this God as he truly is, in all his glory, and in all his goodness.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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