

## **The Second Commandment – No Carved Images**

*4 "You shall not make for yourself a carved 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;  
5 you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me,  
6 but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments. (Exo 20:4-6)*

On the inside of a bulletin of a megachurch in America is a listing of the various services they hold, with a description of each. You can choose one of six services. This is what they say. You can come to the 'traditional' service which 'focuses on participation through hymn singing. Second you can come to the service described as 'an exhilarating, come as you are service using contemporary music and practical messages.' If you prefer, there is the Saturday night service which is touted as 'a relaxed atmosphere where you feel right at home'. Another of the Sunday services is 'a contemporary service, using dynamic music, dramas, and life-related messages.'

When you read that, you might conclude that worship is really like your choice in radio station: whatever appeals to your personal preference is the one you go to. It presents a very attractive, but nevertheless false idea: that the outward form of worship is nothing more than a style, like choosing a colour for your car, or curtains for your house. That worship all about what I intend, and what I mean, not at all what we actually do or say.

That would be true, if worship was all about us. If worship was about achieving a certain feeling in myself, then I should find what I like most, and do it in the name of Jesus, and find as many people as possible who share my likes, and we could all please ourselves together in the name of Jesus.

But what if worship is actually about pleasing someone else? What if worship is actually about what God likes? What if worship is actually about what suits Him? If so, then we might find that all our preferences have to conform to His preference. How do we know?

We do find some answers to this question in the second of the Ten Commandments.

Just like the first commandment, we are tempted to read it superficially, and feel that we have easily passed the test on this one. "I have never bowed down to a carved image in my life." So we place another big green tick next the second commandment. But just as we found with the first, there is more to it than meets the eye. The second commandment is not merely telling you to not worship wood or stone. The second commandment is forbidding all false worship of the true God.

The first commandment is, do not truly worship a false god.

The second commandment is, do not worship the true God in a false way. God is not merely repeating Himself in the second commandment. The second assumes you understand the first – no other gods. Once that is squared away, God then says that you shall not worship Him according to your own way.

And that has massive implications for you and me in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We are living in a time of worship wars. Massive disagreements exist not only over music, but over what the sermon should be like, how the pastor or people should dress, who should participate, who should lead, what kinds of technology should be used, who should be the target, whether it should be primarily for the unsaved or for Christians, whether the tone should be serious, glad, heavy, happy, or a combination. While some disagreements are simply disagreements over peripheral circumstances, some of the disagreements reflect very deep and fundamental differences over who God is, and how we should approach him.

The second commandment will give us amazing clarity, if we will listen to it and understand it. The second commandment really tells us two things about worship. The first thing we will see is it forbids worshipping according to the world's ways, that is, don't imitate. The second thing we will see is that it forbids worshipping according to our own invention or imagination, that is, don't innovate. Don't imitate, and don't innovate.

Let's consider those two.

### **First, do not imitate the world in your worship.**

4 "You shall not make for yourself a carved 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;

God knew that Israel had lived in a highly religious culture for 400 years – Egypt. They were now moving into a land absolutely bursting with religions.

The worship of the Canaanites was developed and connected with the land they farmed. They needed rain to water their crops, so they had Baal, and Ashtoreth. The way it worked was that if Baal and Ashtoreth came together, it rained. But in order to arouse Baal and Ashtoreth, you would go to the highest places, and there perform all kinds of acts of sexual immorality, which would please these perverted gods, and you would get rain. You can see how religions like this came straight out of sinful hearts. We want illicit pleasure, we want good crops, so let's find a way to link them all in our worship.

*29 "When the LORD your God cuts off from before you the nations which you go to dispossess, and you displace them and dwell in their land, 30 "take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed from before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, 'How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.' 31 "You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way; for every abomination to the LORD which He hates they have done to their gods; for they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods. 32 "Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it. (Deu 12:29-32)*

Now you can imagine as Israel moves into the land, they begin to see how the world around them worships. They see how much fun they get out of it.

Not only so, but they have lived in Egypt for 400 years, they are used to making images to represent gods.

And here is the great temptation, to make an image of Yahweh. Conform the worship of Israel's God after the pattern of the world around them. In fact, when Moses had received the Ten Commandments, and he went down the mountain, what did he find?

*4 And he received the gold from their hand, and he fashioned it with an engraving tool, and made a molded calf. Then they said, "This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!" 5 So when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow is a feast to the LORD." 6 Then they rose early on the next day, offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play. (Exo 32:4-6)*

Throughout Israel's history, what did they keep doing? They kept mixing Canaanite worship with the worship of God. The Canaanites had used the high places, with stone altars, under the shade of trees. Israel co-opted those places, supposedly to worship Yahweh, but inevitably, they began imitating the evil practices of the Canaanites. They began marrying foreigners, and allowed them to bring their gods with them, and gave them some space at the table.

In the end, it fell to the all time low of Molech worship, with child sacrifice.

God's instruction to them was, do not worship me the way the other nations worship their gods.

Now living in Johannesburg in the 21<sup>st</sup> century does not tempt us to make stone or wood images of our God. But like we saw last week, our culture worships. It has gods – sports, sex, food, movies, money, cars, houses, status, fame, power, success, knowledge.

And when our culture worships its gods, it worships in a way that suits its gods. Our culture worships money so consumerism is the way it worships. Everything is a product we can buy, a worshipper is a purchaser, we buy our happiness. Our culture worships its movie stars and sports heroes, so entertainment is the way it worships. Our culture worships self, so the way it worships is with me-therapy, and self-hugs.

Is it possible to turn Sunday morning worship, of supposedly the one true God, into an entertainment extravaganza? Is it possible to make the man in church feel like he is a consumer, consuming a really great product? Is it possible to make the experience of church very much like the experience of being in a mall, or a rock concert, or a movie theatre? Is it possible to change the preaching, the music, the singing, the very architecture and lighting and dress so as to communicate that this is familiar, this is casual, this is all about you?

In name, the worship is supposedly directed towards the God of Scripture, but the method, the action, is the way the world worships its gods. You can tell what the chief goal is: entertainment, familiarity, casualness. I go onto church websites, and I read again and again this statement, “You can expect a relaxed, informal environment.” When Moses saw God on Sinai, was it a relaxed, informal environment? When Isaiah saw God in the Temple? How about when John saw the risen Christ on the Isle of Patmos? Where did we get the idea that worshipping God ought to feel relaxed, casual and informal? We didn't get that from the Bible, we got that from our culture that said, “If you want a secular man to come to you, you make sure it is relaxing and informal.”

The Christian church is a called-out people. We have new natures. We have a new covenant. We have a new citizenship, We have a new family. We have a new destination. We have new priorities. Our God is not a product. He is not a movie. He is not a really great therapist, or the ultimate rock star. He is holy. He is other. So when we come to offer Him our love, adoration, and admiration, it really should look nothing like what the world does with its gods.

Yes, we can use things from the world, but the world system that is hostile to God should not feel at home in our worship service. Our times of worship are family affairs, they are not evangelistic outreaches.

An unbeliever should feel that this is odd. They should not feel unwelcome or unwanted. But they should feel a tad uncomfortable. Didn't Paul tell us in 1 Cor 2:14 that the unsaved man does not receive the things of the Spirit, for they are foolishness to him?

Since Cain and Abel, the Bible has described two families in the world. The world, the family of the devil, and the church, the family of God. The Bible told us to expect enmity and hostility between these families. We are not trying to make our worship of our father acceptable to people who do not yet know him.

Nothing wrong with the mall at the mall. Nothing wrong with marketing and buying products in the marketplace. Nothing wrong with entertainment in those venues and on those media designed to entertain. But don't bring them into the church in an effort to make it more relevant and seeker-

friendly.

Instead of consuming a product, we are offering something to God. Instead of being passively entertained, we are engaging with God. Instead of it being all about me, it is actually all about God. And instead of everything being accessible, it is elevated. Most of all, it is holy. It is unique. It is experiencing what is eternal, sinless, perfect. There's nothing casual, familiar, or everyday about it.

Over 100 years ago, Charles Spurgeon said, "A time will come when instead of shepherds feeding the sheep, the church will have clowns entertaining the goats." This is the first thing the second commandment teaches us – don't imitate the world when you worship God.

## **Second, Do not worship according to your own way. Do not innovate.**

I picture the conversation between The Canaanite and the Israelite. The Canaanite says, you know, my god has the head of shark. Look at my image of him. Isn't it beautiful? So, what does Yahweh look like? The Israelite says, "We haven't seen Him." "What? What do you mean?" "He has revealed Himself to us, but we are not to make an image of Him." "You mean, you worship an invisible god?"

You've got to imagine how natural, and how almost irresistible it was for the Israelites to want to make some kind of carved image of their God. It made sense. It made worship easier. It made it more accessible, more tangible.

*9 "Only take heed to yourself, and diligently keep yourself, lest you forget the things your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. And teach them to your children and your grandchildren, 10 "especially concerning the day you stood before the LORD your God in Horeb, when the LORD said to me, 'Gather the people to Me, and I will let them hear My words, that they may learn to fear Me all the days they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children.' 11 "Then you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, and the mountain burned with fire to the midst of heaven, with darkness, cloud, and thick darkness. 12 "And the LORD spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of the words, **but saw no form**; you only heard a voice. 13 "So He declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to perform, the Ten Commandments; and He wrote them on two tablets of stone.*

*14 "And the LORD commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and judgments, that you might observe them in the land which you cross over to possess.*

*15 "Take careful heed to yourselves, **for you saw no form** when the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, 16 "lest you act corruptly and make for yourselves a carved image in the form of any figure: the likeness of male or female, 17 "the likeness of any animal that is on the earth or the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, 18 "the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground or the likeness of any fish that is in the water beneath the earth. (Deu 4:9-18)*

God says to Israel, you did not see a form of Me, so do not try to represent Me. That is what the idolaters of foreign nations do – they claim to know the form of their gods and represent them in stone or wood, do not do that.

God says to them, Don't innovate. Don't do what makes sense to your mind. Don't do what seems practical, or useful or familiar. Don't introduce into worship creation and innovations of your own making, simply because they seem sensible to you. Making some kind of representation of God seemed to make sense to Israel, but God reminds them they saw no form, and were not to come up with one. They were not to innovate. Only the Incarnation of Christ could ever properly put a form on God.

Every generation faces the temptation to innovate, and introduce into worship what seems to make sense to them, but which God Himself did not command.

But surely, if we're sincere, and mean well, and want to please God, then it doesn't really matter what we do or don't do, right? I want you to see another incident in Israel's worship history that will give you the answer to that.

*1 Chronicles 13:6-12 And David and all Israel went up to Baalah, to Kirjath Jearim, which belonged to Judah, to bring up from there the ark of God the LORD, who dwells between the cherubim, where His name is proclaimed. <sup>7</sup> So they carried the ark of God on a new cart from the house of Abinadab, and Uzza and Ahio drove the cart. <sup>8</sup> Then David and all Israel played music before God with all their might, with singing, on harps, on stringed instruments, on tambourines, on cymbals, and with trumpets. <sup>9</sup> ¶ And when they came to Chidon's threshing floor, Uzza put out his hand to hold the ark, for the oxen stumbled. <sup>10</sup> Then the anger of the LORD was aroused against Uzza, and He struck him because he put his hand to the ark; and he died there before God. <sup>11</sup> And David became angry because of the LORD's outbreak against Uzza; therefore that place is called Perez Uzza to this day. <sup>12</sup> David was afraid of God that day, saying, "How can I bring the ark of God to me?"*

Now look at the various elements you have present here.

You have a worship event going on. This is something being done to and for the glory of God. You have a good thing going. It is a good thing to bring the Ark to Jerusalem. You have the glory of God as the motive. There is a celebration of God going on here. You have a lot of preparation. A preparation worthy of the thing being done. You have full agreement by the leaders. You have a whole nation of people united for this event. No one, that we know of, is opposing it. You have excellence in execution. You have full sincerity. You have a godly king, and the appointed Levitical priests on hand around the ark.

Providentially, one of the oxen stumbles. The Ark is about to tumble and unceremoniously crash to the ground. Uzza acts to stop that humiliating event, and puts out his hand to stop it from falling. God strikes him dead. And all that celebration comes to shocking, disturbing halt.

Now what went wrong? You have sincerity here, don't you? You have a very high view of God's glory, don't you? You have a priest who is trying to help, not harm. You have zeal, commitment, devotion, sincerity, unity, good motives, the glory of God as the end goal - all in one.

What did they do wrong? Well, David would have been asking himself that question.

In the beginning of chapter 15, we see that David has come to the answer.

*1 Chronicles 15:2 Then David said, "No one may carry the ark of God but the Levites, for the LORD has chosen them to carry the ark of God and to minister before Him forever."*

*1 Chronicles 15:12-15 He said to them, "You are the heads of the fathers' houses of the Levites; sanctify yourselves, you and your brethren, that you may bring up the ark of the LORD God of Israel to the place I have prepared for it. <sup>13</sup> "For because you did not do it the first time, the LORD our God broke out against us, because we did not **consult Him about the proper order.**" <sup>14</sup> So the priests and the Levites sanctified themselves to bring up the ark of the LORD God of Israel. <sup>15</sup> And the children of the Levites bore the ark of God on their shoulders, by its poles, as Moses had commanded according to the word of the LORD.*

David realised the problem was that they had worshipped God in a way that He had not commanded. They had transgressed a written prescription for worship.

**"we did not consult Him about the proper order."**

**as Moses had commanded according to the word of the LORD."**

David is saying – there was Scripture on this matter which we did not follow. This is the indispensable necessity of worship. **We worship according to what He commands us to do in worship in His Word.** You cannot replace this with sincerity, with worthy preparation, with zeal, with excellence.

They violated two prescriptions. 1) The Ark was to be carried on the shoulders of the priests, not on an ox-cart. 2) The Ark was never to be physically touched. What's amazing is that these prescriptions take up just two verses out of 23 000. David had two verses, and a violation of them overturned all the rest of the preparations.

Certainly there were pragmatic reasons why Israel had done this. The Ark could be better seen if on a cart. Maybe they were just copying the Philistines, who had sent it to Israelite territory on an ox-cart. We don't know the reasons, however sincere they may have been. Apparently, sincerity, pragmatism, good intentions, unanimous joy does not mitigate disobedient worship. Doing a good thing, for God, with unanimous human approval, with great excellence and expense, even if there has been a successful precedent for the thing is not sufficient.

You see, God does not have to accept worship simply because we offer it in his direction. He does not have to accept our worship simply because we mean well. He does not have to accept our worship because we have sincere motives. He does not have to accept our worship because we had sensible, practical reasons for doing it the way we did. If God has prescribed and commanded how He is to be worshipped, to do it any other way is disobedient, arrogant and ultimately idolatrous.

So let's ask it this way. What if we made up our minds to only do in our services the things that please God? How would we know what pleases God? We would know what pleases God in worship by doing only what He has positively commanded us to do in His Word. The principle of sola Scriptura logically leads to the principle of God's Word prescribing positively what we must do in worship. If He has not called for it, we do not do it. If He has called for it, we have no business omitting it. If God is silent on it, we take it that He doesn't want us to do it. Now once again, God did not forbid carrying the Ark on a cart. He did not have to. By stating how He did want it carried, He necessarily outlawed all other possibilities.

So what does the New Testament prescribe for us in terms of worship?

If we go through the New Testament commands to His church, we find six things that God has told us to do in corporate worship, and they all revolve around His Word. We are to read the Word publicly (1 Tim 4:13). We are to preach the Word publicly (2 Tim 4:1-2). We are to sing the Word (Col 3:16). We are to pray the Word (1 Tim 2:1-8). We are to display the Word in the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:23-26) We are to give in gratitude for Christ the living Word (1 Cor 16:1-2).

Why don't we have puppet shows? Because God has not told us to do that. Why don't we have a magician on Sunday morning? Because there is no Scriptural warrant to do so. Wouldn't it be exciting if we had the deacons do a gymnastic demonstration? God is silent on that. What about strong men bending iron and crushing ice in the service? God didn't call for it. Why don't we have some drama, some skits, some plays? Because God has not commanded their use in New Testament worship. I think we should have some banner and flag-waving ceremonies in church. Show me the prescription from God, and we'll do it. How about a time where we all laugh in the Spirit, or have a barking revival? Chapter and verse, please. Let's have Marmite sarmies and Coke for the Lord's Supper. What does Scripture call for?

Now is there a place for puppet shows? Yes, but not in corporate worship. Is there a place for strong men breaking ice with their foreheads? I suppose so, but not in corporate worship. Is there a place for skits and plays? Outside of corporate worship.

And certainly there are many others things a church does in its life together as we make disciples.

But when we gather in the name of the Lord Jesus to worship, we do these six things, because they are what we find he has prescribed.

Some feel that that this principle of doing only what God prescribes is a kind of legalistic straitjacket. But in truth, there is nothing more freeing than limiting our expression under authority. The man with the limitation of a parachute, and a shortened time of freefall, enjoys it because those limitations protect him. The man who skydives without a parachute might seem more free, but his apparent freedom is actually his destruction.

Now there are various ways we implement those six things, and that is where wisdom comes in. We might differ on the order, or the arrangement, or the length, or the age of the songs. And here we begin to use judgement and wisdom to do what Scripture describes in 1 Cor 14:40: 'everything decently and in order.'

But we do not have the biblical right to innovate, and introduce into the worship of God, whatever seems to make sense to us, or seems practical, or seems popular, or seems useful. That is the road to breaking the second commandment – worshipping the true God in a false way.

Worshipping the true God in a false way. Think of Cain. Think of the sons of Aaron – Nadab and Abihu. Think of Israel on the high places. Think of Saul, acting in the place of Samuel. Think of king Uzziah, burning incense as a priest, when he was not permitted to. Think of the priests in Malachi who presented blind and lame and diseased animals. Think of the Pharisees who honoured with their lips but their hearts were far from God. Think of some of the churches in Revelation, who were all but dead, lukewarm, hosting Jezebels. It's possible to worship the true God in a false way.

Today, you'll hear people say in the name of tolerance "You worship Him your way, we'll worship Him our way." No, the correct statement is, you worship Him your way, we'll worship Him His way.

What is His way? Worship Him as a holy, set-apart people. Don't imitate the world or try to re-fashion Christian worship to be like the world – some kind of entertainment, another product to consume, another form of escapism, some kind of inner-therapy. No, retain the holy, and unique character of worshipping a holy, unique God. It must be different.

Don't innovate. Don't go beyond what is written. Worship Him only with what He has told us to do.

The Father seeks true worshippers – people who worship in Spirit and in truth. Let us always do so.