

(Devotional #24) *Christian Liberty and the Law – The Ten Commandments:
God’s Demand for Exclusivity in Worship – Part 2*
(Exodus 20:4-6)

You shall not make for yourself an idol or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them – Exodus 20:4

God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth – John 4:24

The Hebrew word translated ‘*idol*’ is **פֶּסֶל** (pronounced ‘*pesel*’) – It comes from a word that means, ‘*to carve, hew, or shape.*’ Consistent with this, we usually think of an idol as the physical representation of a pagan god – *and certainly this is true in some cases* – but this commandment also prohibits using an idol as a medium of worship, *i.e.* any ‘*thing*’ that is believed to *enhance* one’s access to God is forbidden. In worship this can mean, ‘*using a material object as a medium, i.e., as a point of access to God*¹.’ Judges Chapter 17 tells the story of a man, whose mother gave silver to an artisan to make an image of Yahweh that she could worship in the household of a man named Micah. Even though she would claim the idol was a mere *representation* of Yahweh, what she did was forbidden by the Second Commandment.

THE SUBSTITUTION PRINCIPLE:

Underlying the practice of all **IDOLATRY** is the principle of **SUBSTITUTION**. Idolatry involves ‘*substituting something in the created universe for God.*’ The reason substitution is a problem has to do with **God’s Transcendence**. In the ancient world, the gods of the Sumerians, the Babylonians, the Egyptians, and the Canaanites were nothing more than personifications of the natural world. By their very natures, these pagan gods and goddesses were **TRAPPED** within the universe; they were ‘*bound by it*’ – and in fact, **THEY WERE THE UNIVERSE PERSONIFIED**. The ancient gods were nothing more than the forces of nature to which were attributed artificial personalities. But the Holy One of Israel is *qualitatively different*. He is not bound or trapped within the universe; the universe cannot contain Him because He is its Creator and His creation obeys His every command. As such, nothing in the creation can be substituted for the Creator.

Idols can be tangible objects, or they can be intangible. Money, fame, and position in society are examples of ‘*intangibles*’ that can become ‘*gods*’ to us if we are not focused on **the One True God** and His self-revelation in Scripture and in the person of Jesus Christ. The worst form idolatry can take is the worship of self.

We must consider the breadth of meaning of the commandments pertaining to idolatry; they encompass everything in the created universe, including nature and the earth itself. Simply put, the commandments forbid using idols (1) for the purpose of substituting the idol (*something made*) for God Himself (*the Creator*), they forbid (2) exalting anything man-made above the Creator, and they forbid (3) the use of idols in any way in association with Israel’s worship of Yahweh.

The story of Israel reminds us how prone human beings are to idolatry. After giving Israel the Ten Commandments², God reiterates the importance of steering clear of idolatrous practices:

¹ Does using Rosary Beads enhance one’s relationship with God? Rosary beads do not provide forgiveness of sins, they do not give relief from divine punishment, and they do not impart grace. If any one of these things is assumed, then the use of the beads could be considered a form of idolatry; however, if they are used simply to remember a sequence of prayers, then perhaps it is the ritual itself and not the physical beads that has become ‘idolatrous.’

² The Ten Commandments are recorded in Exodus 20:1-17. Exodus Chapters 21:1 – 23:33 provide examples to Israel of how the Law was to be applied in the daily life of the nation.

Then the LORD said to Moses, thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, you yourselves have seen that I have spoken to you from heaven. You shall not make (other gods) beside³ Me; gods of silver or gods of gold, you shall not make for yourselves – Exodus 20:22-23.

The Mosaic Covenant is ratified in Exodus 24:1-6, then in verse 7, Moses reads to the people the words of the book of the covenant, and the people respond by saying, “...**we will be obedient.**” After this, according to verse 18, Moses goes up on Mount Sinai. But Israel’s commitment was short-lived! For less than thirty-days later, Aaron made a golden calf and proclaimed it to be “**our god**.” How quickly the people descended into idolatry! And they did so without any pressure from ‘*a pagan culture.*’ R. Kent Hughes writes: “*Israel’s debacle establishes for all time the abysmally infinite tendency and capacity of the human heart for idolatry – even among fresh recipients of God’s grace*.”⁵ The irony is, we read about this calf and marvel at the absurdity of it, not realizing that most of our 21st Century idols simply are ‘*good things*’ that have taken over the controlling interest in our lives. In this, we are no less guilty than the calf-worshipping Israelites.

The commandments forbidding idolatry stand as **A FIRST PRINCIPLE** in the Decalogue. They form the context for the remaining commandments, for ‘*God alone is worthy of worship and adoration, and He alone sets the rules for life in the universe He created.*’

Here is a paraphrase of the Second Commandment:

You shall not commit idolatry by making any likeness of any god or creature in heaven above, or on the earth beneath, or in the water below the earth; you shall not worship them or serve them, for I alone am God.

Verse 5 gives practical instruction to Israel regarding the consequences of disobeying God’s commandments against idolatry. God’s instruction to Israel is: “**DO NOT BOW DOWN TO IDOLS OR SERVE THEM.**” Israel understood better than most this idea of ‘*servicing.*’ They had ‘*served*’ the Egyptian taskmasters in the mud pits of Egypt for generations. Now there is a subtlety in the Hebrew text that is not apparent in our English translations. The Ten Commandments originally were written using only Hebrew consonants⁶. Later, when a system for writing vowels was devised, the vowels that were written with the consonants of the word, ‘*serve*’ in Exodus 20:5, are not the vowels for that word at all, but rather the vowels for the word ‘*shame*’! This subtle message by the scribes asserts, ‘*servicing idols does not even rise to the level of the slave-service Israel paid to Pharaoh in the brick yards of Goshen*’! To serve an idol in Canaan would be a step down from Israel’s former status as a slave nation.

In addition to the practical instruction God gave to Israel in verse 5, He also warned Israel of the consequences of disobedience.

For I, Yahweh your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the sons, on the third and fourth generations of those who hate me – Exodus 20:5

³ The sense of the term **בְּיָדָי** ‘beside’ (not ‘besides’) is, ‘you shall not make or set other gods alongside of me.’ Yahweh alone is to be the object of Israel’s worship, without substitutes or aids to His worship.

⁴ See Exodus 32:1-10 for the story of Israel and the golden calf.

⁵ *Disciplines of Grace*, by R. Kent Hughes, Pg. 44.

⁶ This is known as ‘the consonantal text.’ At the time Moses wrote the Pentateuch, there was no system for writing vowels. It may surprise you to discover that the Hebrew vowel system was not developed until around 1000 A.D., ca. 2,400-years after Moses wrote the Book of Exodus.

God describes Himself as ‘a jealous God.’ The word translated ‘jealous’ is נָקִיף – (pronounced *qana*). Often in Scripture, God is depicted as *Israel’s husband*, and as such, He is jealous for the loyalty of *His wife*.⁷ *Idolatry is spiritual adultery*, and God responds to it the way any husband would ... He detests it. Idolatry was considered so egregious that it warranted the death penalty.

We may think this has little application to the church, yet according to Ephesians 5:25-27, **the church is ‘the bride of Christ.’** As such, Christ is to be our primary love. Just as I cannot be married to Linda and tell her I love her, and then go out with other women, so also the church cannot belong to God as his bride and go out with other suitors. It is an exclusive relationship that demands, and is honored by, complete and total commitment.

The Hebrew term, ‘jealous,’ has two meanings: (1) a person can have zeal for his own property, or (2) he can have zeal for the property of his neighbor. One use is righteous, and the other is a sin – (cf. the Tenth Commandment: “**YOU SHALL NOT COVET what belongs to your neighbor.**”) God’s zeal for Israel is grounded in His love for Israel and the covenants He made with His elect nation, and therefore, His is ‘a righteous zeal.’

God’s assertion that He ‘visits (punishment for) **the iniquity of the fathers upon the sons,**’ may seem troubling at first glance, but a few observations may help to clarify the statement. First, the third and fourth generations (*children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren*) are the descendants a father may have the opportunity to influence over the course of his life. Second, as mentioned in our last lesson, Bruce Waltke calls attention to a distinction between (1) *a Religious Statement*⁸ and (2) *a Theological Statement*⁸. Can we find an example of Waltke’s ‘Theological Statement’ elsewhere in Scripture that will illuminate this passage? I believe we can see such a statement in Ezekiel:

The person who sins will die. The son will not bear the punishment for the father’s iniquity, nor will the father bear the punishment for the son’s iniquity; the righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself” – Ezekiel 18:20.

So how do we square Exodus 20:5 with Ezekiel 18:20? I believe the answer lies in the ‘**YOU REAP WHAT YOU SOW**’ PRINCIPLE. God’s punishment is not always immediate, but the father is taught a painful lesson when he sees his own wickedness at work in the lives of his sons, grandsons and great-grandsons. Ask any man who has seen his own sins repeated by his children and he will attest to a sense of loss and despair.

Also notice the closing words of verse 5: “**of those who hate me.**” This indicates further that God’s judgment is upon *the line that continues in the sins of the father*. Not only does seeing the spiritual failure of his sons punish the father, but the sons are punished for *continuing* the sins of their fathers in their own generation. The question addressed in Ezekiel 18 is “**Why are we (the sons, grandsons and great-grandsons) in exile for the sins of our fathers**”? Ezekiel’s answer is: “You are **not** in exile for your fathers’ sins; you are in exile for continuing those sins in your own generation.”

But the converse also is true; notice verse 6:

⁷ Joshua repeats the same analogy of divine jealousy in Joshua 24:19, and most of the Book of Hosea is built around ‘the marriage metaphor.’

⁸ Waltke defines a ‘Religious Statement’ as relating solely to what men believe, which may or may not be true, while a ‘Theological Statement’ is declarative in nature and is a statement of theological truth.

But showing covenant-love to thousands (of generations) to those who love me and keep my commandments – Exodus 20:6

God's generosity and His goodness grow out of His infinite love for Israel. Those who carry forward the faith of Abraham will receive God's blessings for a thousand generations. The ultimate answer to the question of moral responsibility lies with God Himself, for it is after emphasizing His claim to Israel, and it is after warning the Israelites of the dangers of idolatry, that God turns to His own faithfulness. He promises 'covenant-love' to thousands of generations, who love Him and show that love by keeping His commandments.

1 John 5:18 tells us not to love God in word only, but "*in deed and in truth.*" So how do we know we are loving God "*in deed and in truth.*"? Jesus answers that question in John 14:15, where He states, "***If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.***" (1 John.5:3 also reminds us that Christ's commandments are not burdensome.)

Our obedience to Jesus is not in order to get something from Him, but to thank Him for what He has done. One reason we struggle with obedience is a lack of appreciation for what God has done for us. This stems from our failure to see the depth of our sin – our total depravity,⁹ and that apart from the grace of God, we have no righteous standing before Him. It is only by His grace we are saved and have the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. Our obedience is simply '*a way to say thank you*' for all Jesus has done for us¹⁰.

Overcoming idolatry, whether the idol is a piece of stone or self-serving pride, is an issue of the heart. This is why true worship is depicted in Scripture as worshiping with '*a circumcised heart.*' It is under the New Covenant¹¹ that the Moral Law is written, not on tablets of stone, but on the hearts of men. And it is under the New Covenant that Christian freedom and the Moral Law of God intersect. No longer can the Law condemn us, for "***God made Christ, who is without sin, to become sin on our behalf, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him***" – 2 Corinthians 5:21.

In Christ, we have been set free from the law of sin and death. This freedom is not self-serving; it is a calling to serve one another¹². It is a principle that applies to the entire Moral Law of God – we serve God and worship Him alone – as an expression of our love for God.

As believers in Christ, by being identified with His death and resurrection, we are freed from the Mosaic Law as a governing system, but also as believers, we are by the Law made aware of the moral character of Christ – and we are responsible to follow Him in action and in thought, by having the mind of Christ implanted in us by the Word of God and the Spirit of God.

The first commandment reminds us to put God first and not to worship other gods. The second one warns us not to make images for worship. Our focus must be on God alone, without spiritual substitutes. Why is this significant? Because we become what we worship. When we worship God in all His fullness, with no substitutes, we become like Him (*which is the goal of the Christian life – to be conformed to the image of Christ*). But if we worship substitutes, tangible ones or intangible ones, we become like them – selfish and diminished.

So, keep this focus: there is but one God and He alone is worthy of our worship.

⁹ See Romans 3:10-13 and Ephesians 2:1

¹⁰ Romans 12:1-2 instructs us in the appropriate human response to God's grace.

¹¹ See Jeremiah 31:31-33 and Matthew 26:28

¹² See Romans 8:2^B and Galatians 5:13