

EXODUS

THE GOD WHO REDEEMS

SESSION OBJECTIVE: EXODUS 20:4-6

To understand more about the second commandment and its implications for us today.

Window Smashers

The Reformation-era is often oversimplified to a singular movement, when in actuality it could be said that there were “Protestant Reformations.” What took place in Wittenberg through Martin Luther inspired a number of reformations, one of which took place in Scotland through the efforts of the fiery preacher, John Knox. After preaching a sermon about Jesus clearing the Temple of the moneychangers in St. Andrew’s Cathedral, and then likened the moneychangers to the papacy, and advocated that Christians ought to do everything in their power to remove such corruptions in their midst. Scottish Historian Thomas M’Crie wrote, “On the three following days he preached in the same place; and such was the influence of his doctrine, that the provost, bailies, and inhabitants, harmoniously agreed to set up the reformed worship in the town: the church was stripped of images and pictures, and the monasteries pulled down.” The example in St. Andrew’s inspired similar actions all throughout Scotland, with M’Crie noting, “the houses of the monks were overthrown, and all the instruments which had been employed to foster idolatry and image-worship were destroyed.¹ The smashing of so-called “image worship” was, of course, based on the firm conviction that the second commandment prohibited the use of stained glass windows, especially in a holy place of worship.

Read the Text:

“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 or 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 the fourth generation of those who hate me, 6 but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.. (Exodus 20:4-6, ESV)

Study the Text:

No Other Gods

The first commandment established the importance of recognizing the LORD and Him alone as God above all things (Ex. 20:3). The second commandment follows this by prohibiting two different but closely related actions: 1. No making of “carved images,” and 2. No “bowing down or serving them” (Ex. 20:4-5). While the first commandment is all about recognizing the LORD as the only true God, the second commandment is all about rightly worshipping Him. In contrast to the first commandment, which was short and to the point, the second commandment is one of the longer of the ten commandments. It’s also interesting, as John Frame points out, that “the commandments expressed at greatest length in Scripture (the second and fourth) are the ones whose meaning is most debated in the church today.”² The debate stems from a variety of interpretive

¹ Thomas M’Crie, *The Life of John Knox* (New York: Eastburn, Kirk, & Co., 1813), 116-117.

² John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life, A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 450.

questions. Does the prohibition of carved images entail every being other than God? Or does it entail all beings, including God? Does the prohibition only include carved images? Or does the prohibition entail all images regardless of how they are forged (carving, painting, sculpting, etc.)? Again, we will consider what some of the historic confessions have said about this commandment, with some additional commentary on the practical implications of this commandment for us today.

WESTMINSTER LARGER CATECHISM

We look again to the Westminster Larger Catechism to better understand how some Christian communities have historically understood the second commandment. It asks first (Q. 108): “What are the duties required in the second commandment?” It answers: “The duties required in the second commandment are, the receiving, observing, and keeping pure and entire, all such religious worship and ordinances as God hath instituted in his word; particularly prayer and thanksgiving in the name of Christ; the reading, preaching, and hearing of the word; the administration and receiving of the sacraments; church government and discipline; the ministry and maintenance thereof; religious fasting; swearing by the name of God, and vowing unto him: as also the disapproving, detesting, opposing all false worship; and, according to each one’s place and calling, removing it, and all monuments of idolatry.” It’s clear, especially in the last line concerning the removal of monument of idolatry, how John Knox and other Reformed thought influenced the Westminster Larger Catechism, which came roughly a century after John Knox died.

As we learned last week, the larger confession is, if anything, not short-winded. It asks the follow-up question (Q. 109): “What are the sins forbidden in the second commandment?” The answer is longer than necessary, but I will highlight a portion I think is helpful for this study: “The sins forbidden in the second commandment are, all devising, counseling, commanding, using, and anywise approving, any religious worship not instituted by God himself; tolerating a false religion; the making any representation of God, of all or of any of the three persons, either inwardly in our mind, or outwardly in any kind of image or likeness of any creature whatsoever; all worshipping of it, or God in it or by it; the making of any representation of feigned deities, and all worship of them, or service belonging to them.” Notice that the focus is squarely on worship, and the necessity to worship God only in ways prescribed or *regulated* by Scripture. This idea of regulated worship has become a major dividing point between denominations for centuries.

REGULATIVE VS. NORMATIVE

The Westminster interpretation of the second commandment led to the development of something known as the regulative principle of worship. The regulative principle states that worship practices should be limited to what is *clearly prescribed* in Scripture, a principle adopted by most Reformed churches and Presbyterian traditions. Contrary to this understanding is the normative principle of worship which states that any worship practices are permissible as long as they are not explicitly *forbidden* by Scripture. The normative principle is championed by Anglicans, Lutherans, and most evangelical traditions. Have you ever wondered why some denominations have such drastically different looking worship services? Or why some Christians believe we should only sing hymns? Or Psalms? Or use limited or no instruments? These decisions generally (although not always) come down to whether or not the church adheres to a regulative or normative principle of worship. And these principles stem largely from how the second commandment is interpreted.

ARE ALL IMAGES BAD?

John Frame writes: “A literal reading of verse 4 in typical English translations suggests that the commandment forbids the making of any image at all, of anything. On that understanding, the commandment forbids all

representative art, as is the view of Islam.”³ This is the conclusion of The Heidelberg Catechism. Question 98 asks: “But may not pictures be tolerated in churches as books for the people?” This would include stained glass windows, framed art, and even illustrations in Bibles used simply to *teach*, not to be worshiped. The answer is straightforward enough: “No, for we should not be wiser than God, who will not have His people taught by dumb idols, but by the lively preaching of His Word.”

But is this correct conclusion? Or is the second commandment more interested in the worship of images than the images themselves? Consider God’s command to Moses just five chapters later in Exodus 25:18-19: “And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work shall you make them, on the two ends of the mercy seat. 19 Make one cherub on the one end, and one cherub on the other end. Of one piece with the mercy seat shall you make the cherubim on its two ends.” If the second commandment prohibits any image of “any likeness of anything that is in heaven above,” then God surely contradicts Himself by commanding Moses to fashion images of angels. Frame points out additionally: “The hem of the priest’s garments contains images of bells and pomegranates (Ex. 28:33–34). Solomon’s temple was even more embellished, with cedar “carved in the form of gourds and open flowers” (1 Kg. 6:18). The temple also included images of cherubim in the inner sanctuary (1 Kg. 6:23–28).”⁴ It seems that the issue of the second commandment is not as much about images as it is image worship.

Case in point, one of my favorite stories in the Old Testament (and used as an illustration by Jesus in the New Testament) is the bronze serpent that Moses fashions in order to bring healing to the venomous snake bites that afflicted Israel because of their murmuring against God (Num. 21:6-9). The command to fashion an image after a serpent would violate the second commandment if we understand it to be more concerned with the image itself, but the bronze serpent is actually an instrument of salvation to some extent. Because of its rich redemptive history, it was kept and preserved by the people of God until the days of Hezekiah, king of Judah. 2 Kings 18 recalls the ways in which Hezekiah brought reforms to Israel by removing objects of idolatry. 2 Kings 18:4 states: “He removed the high places and broke the pillars and cut down the Asherah. And he broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it (it was called Nehushtan).” The bronze serpent, a physical image once used as an instrument for physical salvation was destroyed only when it became an object of idolatrous worship.

What About Now?

While we may not conclude that the second commandment forbids all images of God or heavenly beings (as evidenced by the examples above), we should not treat such images carelessly. Often pictures of Jesus are passed around on social media in a funny or joking manner, and I’m not sure this reflects the heart of an individual who takes seriously the second commandment. Further, we ought to be very careful about how we emphasize popular media that depicts Jesus (e.g. *The Chosen*, *The Passion of the Christ*, etc.). While artistic mediums are important, they can sometimes become objects of affection that border worship, which is strictly prohibited by the second commandment. If you find yourself more interested in a TV show about the Bible rather than reading the actual Bible, maybe you need to reconsider your order of priorities. And while songs are not themselves images, it might be worth mentioning that sometimes specific worship songs or styles become the object of my affection over and above the God worshipped in those songs; this should be

³ Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 451-52.

⁴ Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 452.

rejected as well. Songs and styles can become idols. Be careful to not limit the worship of God to contemporary or traditional categories. God is bigger than all of it.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Exodus 20:4. What does this verse strictly prohibit?

2. Read Exodus 20:5. What does this verse prohibit? What are the consequences of violating this commandment?

Day Two

1. Read Exodus 20:6. What does God do for those who obey the commandment?

2. Read the Westminster Larger Catechism selections (p.1). How does the WLC understand the second commandment?

Day Three

1. Do you think the regulative principle or the normative principle is more biblical? Why?

2. Read 25:18-19. What does God command Moses to fashion? How does this correspond to the second commandment?

Day Four

1. Read Numbers 21:6-9. Why does God punish Israel? How does He bring remedy to their affliction? What is Moses commanded to do?

2. Read 2 Kings 18:4. What does Hezekiah ultimately do with the bronze serpent that Moses fashioned? Why does he destroy it?

Discuss the Text!**Week 49 Discussion: Images**

The second commandment focuses on images of God and other creatures, specifically in the context of worship. Any image that is made, even if it is of God Himself, should be destroyed if it is used for the purposes of worship. To worship the image is to not worship God, which violates both the second commandment and the first commandment. Talk as a group about the importance of images in your life as you study the Word and grow in your relationship with Christ.

1. Icebreaker: Are you a visual person? Do visual aids help you as you learn?
2. Do you think there is a place for visual images of Jesus Christ?
3. How do you feel about stained glass in churches? What is the purpose of them? Why do some churches have them?
4. Are you a fan of popular Christian media (e.g. *The Chosen*, *The Passion of the Christ*)? Why do you think these shows and movies are so popular among Christians? How can they become a violation of the second commandment?
5. What is your favorite *style* of worship? How can a strong opinion on worship style violate the second commandment?

Takeaways:

1. The second commandment is about graven images, specifically as it pertains to worship.
2. There are other examples in Scripture where images were commanded to be fashioned, but not for worship.
3. In instances when those images became objects of worship, they were destroyed.