

# Session 2

## THE UNDUPLICATED IMAGE

*Exodus 20:4-6*

### Memory Verse

*<sup>4</sup> Do not make an idol for yourself, whether in the shape of anything in the heavens above or on the earth below or in the waters under the earth. <sup>5</sup> Do not bow in worship to them, and do not serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God*

– EXODUS 20:4-5A, CSB



## The Unduplicated Image

**THEOLOGICAL THEME:** In the Ten Commandments, we're forbidden to make idols picturing God. Why? God has already created humans in His image and, ultimately, Christ is the revealed image of God.

In the introduction of his book *Counterfeit Gods*, Timothy Keller writes of the tremendous danger of idolatry in today's culture. Because the topic needs some definition, Keller seeks through numerous examples to depict the destructive nature of idols that are left unchecked in a person's life. After multiple examples, Keller entitles a subsection of the introduction, "How to Make a God." Under that heading, he offers this helpful insight for diagnosing the reality of idolatry in the surrounding culture.

*What is an idol? It is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give. . . . A counterfeit god is anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living. An idol has such a controlling position in your heart that you can spend most of your passion and energy, your emotional and financial resources, on it without a second thought.<sup>1</sup>*

Idolatry has always presented itself as a formidable opponent to God's people. However, because the forms in which idols appear have historically changed, the effectiveness of idolatry's allure has continued to increase. As God Himself warned Moses on Mount Sinai, the consequences of unexamined worship and the persistence of idolatry can be incredibly dire. Still, where the temptation of sin exists, there is a greater hope found in the right worship of the only One to which it is due.

❓ Describe a time when, after much planning and work, you achieved something only to realize its joy was fleeting. What did you feel in those moments immediately after the achievement was complete?

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❓ What signs do you imagine you would observe in a person who was unwittingly allowing something in his or her life to become an idol? How might their behavior change?

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❓ What impact do you think regularly participating in corporate and personal worship has on warding off idolatry in a person's life?

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## Session Summary

In this week's session, the writer of Exodus highlighted the second word/commandment of the Ten Commandments. This commandment focused on the danger of idolatry to the covenant relationship between God and His people. While the forms may have changed over the centuries, the danger of idolatry is as much of a threat today as it was for those believers led by Moses at the base of Mount Sinai.

### 1. Accept No Substitutes (Ex. 20:4-5a)

The Ten Commandments were ten words that God gave to Moses as the Law that constituted the people of Israel into a nation. The commandments were to govern how the people lived in covenantal relationship with God, as well as with one another. The first five of the commandments addressed how the people were to be faithful to Yahweh.

The second of the commandments outlawed any sort of idolatry, regardless of form or substance. As familiar as the Ten Commandments have become, even to those with only basic information of the Bible, the commandment against idolatry should not be a shock to most. In fact, it would be plausible for many to view idolatry as an ancient practice of worshiping carved statues that ceased to be relevant millennia ago.

However, given the definition supplied in the text, the nature of the offense of idolatry was not in the form of the image made, but in the willingness of God's people to worship something other and less than Him. In the most inclusive of terms, the commandment forbade the creation of anything that would be placed as something to be worshiped in place of God. Considering the Israelites' recent past, it would seem unthinkable that they could worship anyone or anything other than the One who had brought them out of Egypt, preserved them throughout the plagues, made provision for them by moving the Egyptians to give the Israelites all their valuables, and then parted the Red Sea to save them, once again, from the clutches of Pharaoh's army. Still, even as the modern reader reads this passage, one cannot help but think of the golden calves that lay ahead in Israel's near future.

Understanding the nature of idolatry at the time offers significant insight. In part, the making of idols of various images ensured, it was believed, the worshiper of the chosen deity's presence. Scholar Douglas K. Stuart explains, "When a statue of a given god was carved and certain ritual incantations spoken over that statue to cause the essence of the god to enter it, the statue was then understood to become a functioning conduit for anything done in its presence from the worshiper to that god . . . ancient people believed that the offerings they brought before an idol of a god and the prayers they said in the idol's presence were fully and unfailingly perceived by the god whom the idol represented."<sup>2</sup> However, because the idol was fashioned by the hands of the worshiper, the idol was more controllable than the god it represented. It was worship on man's terms.



When you think of idolatry, what images come to mind? Do you think of ancient or contemporary things?

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Application: What practices or priorities do you see as drawing people's devotion or allegiance in our community?

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The beginning of verse 5 underscores the practical implication of idolatry. Bowing in worship had to do with ultimate devotion. Serving the graven images applied the ultimate devotion to the idol to the priorities on one's daily life. Idolatry, then, subversively changed the focus and purpose of a person's life. Instead of covenant faithfulness to Yahweh, being holy as He is holy, the worshiper fell victim to worship on his or her own terms. Such worship repeatedly looked conspicuously similar to satisfying one's fleshly desires.

## 2. God Is a Jealous God (Ex. 20:5b)

In one of the more misunderstood passages in the Bible, God followed the second word with an explanation of why idolatry was such an abomination to Him. Specifically, God referred to Himself as a jealous God. The problematic aspect of this verse is that jealousy is depicted in the Bible as sin. How is it, then, that God would refer to Himself that way when He is perfect? The key is the nature of the one who is jealous. In those texts, such as Paul's letters, in which jealousy was proclaimed as evidence of the flesh, the jealous parties were men whose fallen natures cast jealousy for their own gain, benefit, or desire. When God refers to Himself as "a jealous God," that for which He is jealous is His own creation: "God the Creator is worthy of all honor from His creation. Indeed, His creatures (humanity especially) are functioning properly only when they give God the honor and worship that He deserves. God's jealousy is therefore also His zeal for His creatures' well-being."<sup>3</sup>

God's jealousy, then, is not the same as the self-absorbed, self-serving jealousy of humanity. Rather, God's jealousy deals with the rightness of humanity's worship being focused on Him. Because a person becomes like what he or she worships, the right worship of God was critical for the people to live in covenant faithfulness with God, being holy as He is holy. For humans to focus worship on anything else is to his utter and ultimate destruction.

**?** How have you heard God’s jealousy explained in your conversations with others? How does it impact your understanding to know that you are a beneficiary of God’s jealousy?

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**?** Application: In what ways have you seen or experienced the manner in which a parent worships impact or shape the way their children worship? If you are a parent, how have you seen this in your own life?

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Following the statement regarding His jealousy, God continued with an additional physical ramification of His jealousy, which has also historically caused Bible readers difficulty. God stated of Himself that He punishes “the children for their fathers’ iniquity, to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me.” Part of the historical difficulty has been the default reading of this verse being based on the notion that these third and fourth generations were innocent apart from the sins of their fathers. If that were the case, it would contradict passages such as Deuteronomy 24:16 mightily. However, “this oft-repeated theme speaks of God’s determination to punish successive generations for committing the same sins they learned from their parents. In other words, God will not say, ‘I won’t punish this generation for what they are doing . . . because . . . they learned it from their parents who did it too.’”<sup>4</sup> Instead, if the generations persisted in the sins of their idolatrous fathers, they would suffer the same punishment. The abuse and perversion of worship is a sin that grows deep and sinister roots.

### 3. God’s Desire Is for Covenant Love (Ex. 20:6)

God’s greatest wish was made clear, somewhat mathematically. Contrasting those who would persist in idolatry—thereby robbing God of the worship to which He is rightly due—with those who love God, the passage demonstrated the greatest numerical contrast in the Bible. Those who gave themselves over to idolatry were enumerated at three to four generations, who would be punished. However, those who would live in covenant

faithfulness with God were enumerated in thousands of generations! God's greatest wish was that His people would dwell with Him faithfully in right worship and enjoy the blessing of His covenant with them.

The use of "love" and "hate" in verses 5 and 6 are idiomatic in nature. This theme appears repeatedly in the Bible. While the natural understanding of these words would include emotional attitudes, strong passion of favor or disdain, and their accompanying sentiments, that is not the force in this use. Here, love and hate are used to address loyalty. Therefore, when the passage spoke of "those who hate me," the manifestation of their hatred was choosing idolatry over God—their loyalty was to the idol they created. Those who loved God, though, showed that love by keeping His commands. This was one of the same ways Jesus identified during His farewell discourse in the Gospel of John by which people could identify His disciples (John 14:15).

**?** Does the depiction of God desiring to show love and bless those who are faithful line up with your perception of God in the Old Testament? How does His command not to create images actually give His people freedom?

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**?** Application: How have you seen the connection between loving God and being obedient to His commands in relation to discipleship? Read John 14:15. How did Jesus link the two?

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In John 14:15, Jesus was in the midst of preparing His disciples for what their lives would be like after His death, burial, and resurrection. The work of the gospel would fall to them. Jesus promised that those who believed in Him would do even greater works than they witnessed Him doing. He continued to explain that after He left, the Father would send the Holy Spirit to lead them and be with them forever. In the midst of that conversation, Jesus linked obedience and love. So too, in Exodus, the love of God was linked with following His commands. Obedience was not a checklist by which God would be pleased with them; He had already chosen them! Obedience was the way God's people could demonstrate their loving loyalty to Him.

## Conclusion

The Ten Commandments are one of the best-known passages of Scripture. This passage is one of the first Bible stories that children are taught because of its continued relatability to daily living. Particularly as it pertains to idolatry, then, there are important considerations for application to the Christian's daily life.

First, idolatry still threatens biblical worship because things still seek to unseat God from His rightful place at the center of the Christian's life. Statues and carvings have given way to other forms, but the list of things that seek to make themselves more important to Christians than God is always growing. Some of the things are noble: ministry service, the use of spiritual gifts, a reputation for helping others, and the like can all become an idol if allowed to become misaligned in our priorities. Other forms can include close relationships, children, jobs, wealth, entertainment, sports, prestige, and personal security. Regardless of what shape or substance the potential idol comes in, if it competes with God for primary importance, it must go. There is simply too much at stake to allow them to exist unchecked.

Second, the manner in which a Christian monitors his or her own personal worship impacts more than just him or her. Consider the influence with which God has entrusted each believer. If the manner in which a person worships can have an impact on others three to four generations away, then having accountability in place to challenge and encourage the Christian who may drift toward idolatry from time to time is critical. If idolatry creeps into a Christian's life, every important relationship in his or her life is impacted.

Third, God's desire for worship to be rightly centered on Him is for the Christian's benefit. One of the critiques from skeptics about the Bible is that God is a self-centered egomaniacal being. That slanderous assertion is based, to some degree, on the faulty interpretation of passages like this that do not give significant consideration to what it means for God to be jealous. God's jealousy certainly includes the worship to which He is rightly due. However, it also reveals the heart of a loving Father for His children, longing to save them from unwitting destruction at their own hand because they worshiped something sinister and less than Him.

❓ How do you best guard your heart from those subversive idols that would challenge God for ultimate importance in your life? Who have you given permission to hold you accountable and ask you hard questions in that regard? How real of a threat do you consider idolatry to be?

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❓ Who have you learned the most from in terms of what it means to be a worshiper? Why was that person so influential? Who might you have a similar impact on? What do you think they would see in the way you worship?

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❓ How would you explain God's jealousy? What does it mean for Him to be jealous for you? Why do you think it's so detrimental to worship wrong things? Can you give an example?

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**CHRIST CONNECTION:** Christ is the perfect revealed image of God.

**MISSIONAL APPLICATION:** The world has always sought after a great many idols, seeking to replace Yahweh with a less demanding, more controllable god of their own choosing. Believers, then, must be fixed on pursuing the one true God and, as a result, point others to Him as well.



# FOR NEXT WEEK

## The Ultimate Image

### Main Passages

- Colossians 1:15-20

### Session Outline

1. The Image of God in Creation (Col. 1:15-16)
2. Christ Governs All of Creation and the Church (Col. 1:17-18a)
3. All God's Fullness in Christ (Col. 1:18b-20)

### Memorize

*<sup>4</sup> Do not make an idol for yourself, whether in the shape of anything in the heavens above or on the earth below or in the waters under the earth. <sup>5</sup> Do not bow in worship to them, and do not serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God*

- Exodus 20:4-5a, CSB

### Daily Readings

- Monday - Exodus 20:4
- Tuesday - Psalm 135:15-18
- Wednesday - Romans 1:20-23
- Thursday - Psalm 115:1-8
- Friday - John 14:7
- Saturday - 1 Corinthians 8:6

### References

<sup>1</sup>Keller, Timothy. Counterfeit Gods. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2009.

<sup>2</sup>Stuart, Douglas K. Exodus. NAC. Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2006.

<sup>3</sup>ESV Study Bible. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011.

<sup>4</sup>Stuart.