

## **How to Worship God (Lord's Day 35)**

**Reading:** Deuteronomy 4:15-31

Today, we want to look at our grateful response to God's grace and goodness in terms of obedience to the second commandment.

God says to us,

(Ex 20:4-6) "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments."

The first commandment says, "you shall have other god's before me."

One thing that is evident is that it is very difficult to separate the 2<sup>nd</sup> from the 1<sup>st</sup>.

It could read like a re-stating of the 1<sup>st</sup>.

As a result of that, the Catholic Church and Lutherans have not differentiated them, but consider them to be one commandment.

But that would leave you with only 9 commandments if you combine the first two.

So what they do is split the last commandment.

The 9<sup>th</sup> commandment reads: 'you shall not covet your neighbour's wife'.

The 10<sup>th</sup> then reads: 'You shall not covet your neighbour's goods'.

So while they see now difference between the 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> commandments, they do see a break in the 10<sup>th</sup>.

So when the Catholics talk about the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment which, for them, deals with adultery, for us it would be the 7<sup>th</sup> commandment.

So what's the difference?

Why do we split the commandments as we do?

Aren't the idols talked about in the 2<sup>nd</sup> commandment just other gods?

No, the central issue of the second commandment is NOT idols but, rather, worship.

God forbids idols in the context of worship.

God's concern in the second commandment is how we worship.

### **What the Commandment Forbids**

So, in the first command the Lord forbid all other gods.

His people were to find their happiness in him alone; serve him alone.

But in their service of the one true God they were to make no image of God.

In the words of LD 35: "We are not to make an image *of God* in any manner."  
And, it says "God cannot and may not be visibly portrayed in any way."

God says in the Bible, "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below."

An older translation of the Bible tells us we are not to make a "graven image."

The Hebrew word translated as "graven image" or "idol" means to "cut" or "carve."

We are not to have or worship an engraved or carved out image of God.  
We are not to have any physical representation of God.

But why do people worship before a carved image?  
There is something within man that makes him yearn to see God.  
We want a visible God.

Even God's covenant people were this way.  
It didn't take long for the people of Israel to break this commandment.

*[Turn to Exodus 32]*

Scarcely a month after the Lord had given the Ten Commandments to His people, and while the cloud and smoke were still over the mountain, the people wondered if God had deserted them.

For "Moses delayed coming down from the mountain" – was he dead?  
And to be alone in the desert without this God – how terrible!

So Aaron, under the pressure of the people, makes the golden calf and announces, 'Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord'. (32:5)

In other words, we are going to meet, we are going to worship the Lord, by means of this image.

It was not having another god before Him...there is no other God.  
But by means of this image we are going to worship the only true God.  
They were convinced they had God with them again.

But in the second commandment God says, "I don't want that."

See God's response!

V7: "Go down, because your people whom you brought up out of Egypt have become corrupt."

Notice the word 'you' and 'your'.

God *disowns* this people, doesn't call them 'My people' anymore, but "yours".  
Further, He says to Moses in v10 to "leave Me alone, that ... I may destroy them."

In the second commandment God had said he was "a jealous God,"  
and here He displays it.

If the people treated Him like those bumbling heathen gods that don't really exist?  
If the people think they can influence God, carry Him around,  
he would destroy them.

It's only because Moses intercedes for the people that the Lord turns from His holy  
anger and spares them.

Aaron didn't think he was choosing another god;  
he thought he was merely giving visible form to the one true God.

Jeroboam made a similar mistake when he erected golden calves in Bethel and Dan;  
he didn't think he was choosing another god;  
rather, he thought he was merely giving visible form to the one true God who  
led the people out of Egypt (I K 12:25-33).

Sin against the second commandment became Israel's downfall.  
Sin against the second commandment became the downfall of the Roman Catholic  
Church too.

The church of Rome started off with statues and images of Jesus, Mary, saints, and  
other creatures.

But their reason was not to worship these images;  
they would be the first to tell you that.

They do not worship Mary, they do not worship the saints,  
they worship God by *means* of Mary, and by *means* of the saints.

They were set up merely as representations or images for the people to see.

It wasn't long, though, before the people were actually praying to and worshipping  
before the statues and images.

It's wrong, because God will not be served by these graven images,  
not by any kind of an image, not any likeness, none whatsoever.

Anyway, you are not able to make any likeness of God because He is spirit and how are you going to draw that which is a spirit.

You can't make any likeness.

We can bring the matter much closer to home still.

A warped perception of God occurs not only in church.

Think about this: when we tell a dirty joke, where, to our minds, is God?

Beside us?

No.

In practice we deny His omnipresence;

subconsciously we've removed God from the picture  
and act as if He didn't hear that dirty joke.

Again: we know that God hates sin.

But, we tell ourselves, God hates *that* brother's sin more than *my* sin.

And actually: *he* ought to repent;

But me, well, God understands..., so leave me alone....

Again, here we've made an image of God in our minds that does not agree with God's revelation about Himself

as if He easily turns a blind eye to *my* sin but not to *his* sin.

While we won't say it out loud, in fact we bring into our thinking a perception of God that breaks the 2<sup>nd</sup> commandment because we have a mental image of God that does not agree with his revelation of himself.

That's why we need to know how much such mental images provoke God's jealousy! It's what He said in the second commandment, it's what He displayed in Ex 32.

But images and symbols have an important place in the life of God's people. Remember the twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan that was set up on the West bank?

These stones were meant as a "memorial" to forever remind the children of God how "the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord" (Joshua 4).

Think too of Israel's calendar of feasts and festivals...

the Passover, Firstfruits, Feast of Weeks, Feast of Trumpets,  
the Day of Atonement, the Feast of Tabernacles, the Year of Jubilee...

All designed to commemorate different aspects of God's great work of salvation; These feasts were filled with vivid images and symbols:

blood, unleavened bread, trumpets, tents, candles, and so on.

We too have our symbols and images.

I think of things like the Lord's Supper table, the baptismal font, the pulpit, and the cross.

There is nothing wrong with symbols as such.

This doesn't mean that the 2nd commandment should not concern us.

We always need to be careful that we don't allow something to represent God.

We always need to be careful that we don't turn anything into an object of worship – whether it be an organ, piano, pulpit, Lord's Supper table, baptismal font, church building, or whatever.

How do we know if something has become an idol;

after all, no one here would actually bow down and worship them?

The best way to tell if something has become an object of worship is to measure reactions if it is ever taken down or moved away!

The history of Israel tells us what can happen with symbols and images.

Think of the bronze snake we read about in Numbers 21.

The Israelites were punished by God with an attack of poisonous snakes because they spoke against God and Moses.

Many who were bitten died.

When the people repented of this sin, God permitted Moses to make a bronze serpent and to place it on a pole

"Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived" (Num 21:4-9).

But what do we see centuries later?

The people of Israel were worshipping the bronze serpent.

So King Hezekiah had to destroy the snake (2 Kings 18:4).

### **What the Commandment Requires.**

In telling us how to worship God, the second commandment also has a positive teaching.

When we want to say what the positive teaching is we usually quote John 4:24:

"God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."

What does it mean to worship God "in spirit and in truth"?

Our worship of God must not consist of mere rituals or rely on objects.

Our worship must be inward, spiritual, sincere, and according to God's revealed truth.

It is the job of parents to model this kind of worship to their children.

Experience has shown that parents who don't model sincere and heart-felt worship cannot expect their children to attend worship once they are grown up.

What a tremendous responsibility rests on us, that if we don't worship right, then our children's children are going to suffer.

As a rule, children see God through the eyes of their parents.

So we need to give a right teaching about God to the next generation.

Most of us will admit that our concept of God has to do with the way God was experienced by our parents.

So a sickly or false idea of God becomes a scourge of generations.

But a pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus (2 Tim 1:13) can endure among our children's children.

That we learn our faith from our parents may not be used as an excuse for the spiritual poverty of the next generation.

It remains the responsibility of every generation to rediscover God and Christ by the Word and Spirit.

We do not freewheel on the momentum of former generations.

To worship God "in spirit and in truth" means more than sincere, heart-felt worship.

It especially means to worship God in and by and through Christ and His Spirit.

Worship that is "in spirit and in truth" is worship that has Jesus at the centre.

Worship that ignores or denies Christ is not acceptable.

That's why our worship – our songs, our prayers, our sermons, our Bible readings – have so much to say about Jesus.

In teaching us the positive requirements of the second Commandment the Catechism says we are to worship God only as He dictates.

We are not to "worship him in any other way than he has commanded in his Word."

The Catechism continues by telling us God "wants his people instructed by the living preaching of his Word."

That is the central part of worship!

The message is clear, isn't it? Not us, but Christ, must be central to the church's fellowship, worship, and service. Not our growth but His Kingdom's growth, not our needs but His Gospel's needs, not our wishes but His Word, must guide our life, our service, our worship.

## **Conclusion**

We live in different times than Israel did in the Old Testament.

The God who established His covenant with Israel at Mt Sinai has sent His only Son into the world to reconcile sinners to Himself.

This Son was the perfect image of the Father, showed mankind exactly what the Father was like – in all His love, holiness, wisdom, justice and grace.

During all the time He lived on earth, the Jesus Christ obeyed the second commandment perfectly, never permitted in His mind an understanding of God that differed from His holy revelation.

Even when the Father rejected the Son on Calvary, the Son did not make an image of God, in an attempt to get God to do what He wanted Him to do.

Always He remembered *who* God was, what He was like, and so served Him not as was easy and attractive but as was pleasing to God.

Through His perfect obedience to the second commandment, the Son of God has paid for the sins of God's people – including our sins against the second commandment.

More: through His obedience the Son of God has obtained for us the life-giving Spirit

That Holy Spirit dwells in our hearts, and that's to say that the Lord our God is *always with us – Immanuel*.

More: this God –our Father in Jesus Christ- *speaks to us*.

How?

He speaks to us through His Word, and so through the preaching of that Word.

Getting our understanding of God right is the best way to safeguard against breaking the second commandment.

We are thankful that our Lord Jesus Christ knew His Father so well, had His doctrine of God *right*.

That's our salvation.

In gratitude for His redemption, we stay busy with the Scriptures, always striving to listen humbly to God's revelation, and so to serve Him not as suits us but as He has revealed.