

God's Answer to Your Greatest Struggles
Our Struggle with Worship
Exodus 20:4-6

Several years ago I saw the Walt Disney film, "Honey, I Shrunk the Kids." You'll recall that the movie was about a rather nerdy, hard-luck inventor who devised a machine that would shrink objects. But fortunately, it would also allow them, at the push of a button, to be 'reanimated' or enlarged back to their original size. The whole concept is quite intriguing. I thought the other day – imagine the savings at the airlines if luggage could be shrunk down to microscopic size, carried in your hand and then enlarged when you reach your destination. That would have saved me one big headache with lost baggage on my recent trip to France!

As you may recall, however, this ingenious device was fraught with problems from the outset. In the film, it turns out that in testing and working with the device, the inventor inadvertently shrinks his own children! Now for some, that may not sound like a bad idea. It could also be a rather ingenious way to lose weight...or at least to *look* like you've lost weight. But in this case, once the kids were shrunk, the machine couldn't 'reanimate' them, restoring them to their original state. He finally had to admit to his wife, "Honey, I shrunk the kids!"

I believe that this is not too unlike what we tend to do with God...and what we do with worship. We "shrink" God, fashioning him according to our own perceptions, our own preferences, or our own human imaginations. And this seems to be the problem that the second commandment is concerned with. Notice with me what it says:

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; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments. Exodus 20:4-6 NASB

I don't think that any of us are resisting the temptation to rush home after this service, run into our garage and chisel away at a piece of wood to be used as an object of worship. As a result, we might tend to dismiss these words as having any relevance to our daily lives. We might reason that what is written here is fine for those who live in a bygone day of a plethora of gods, idol worship and pagan thought. But they really have little relevance to my life in the 21st Century.

Just what is this commandment talking about and how does it relate to our lives? To put it all in context I would remind you that commandments 1-4 are about our relationship to God, and commandments 5-10 are about our relationship to others. So here's the principle: We have a Maker to love before we have a neighbor to love.

But it is here that we run into difficulty. Our tendency is to devise our own "images" of who our Maker is. And whether this "image" is material or mental, it can easily lead us astray from the true God as revealed in the Bible. To embrace God exclusively (the first commandment) is to embrace God as He is (the second commandment).ⁱ The second commandment is then a test of our obedience to the first commandment. If your God is simply fashioned according to your desires, wants, hopes and aspirations – your own "images" of God – then you have placed a god of your own making *beside* Yahweh.ⁱⁱ And that is the essence of idolatry.

Augustine has defined idolatry this way: Idolatry is worshiping what should be used and using what should be worshiped. This is, in summary form, what the second commandment is talking about. We tend to worship what should be used. And we tend to use what should be worshiped. And both of these tendencies “shrink” God, placing him neatly within our own man-made paradigms. Essentially, both give us a very small god. And when we have a small god, we have big problems. But when we have a big God – as revealed in the truth of God’s Word – our otherwise big problems become much smaller.

IDOLATRY IS WORSHIPPING WHAT SHOULD BE USED.

Left to ourselves, we tend to worship what should be used. The second commandment reads this way: “You shall not make for yourself an idol (i.e. a graven image) in the form of anything...”

Our word “idol” comes from the Greek word *eidolon* which means “something to be seen.” It refers to something hacked or chiseled into some likeness. These idols in the Ancient Near East would normally be of wood or stone and covered with some precious metal.

An image of any type brings God down to a more manageable position. We become the creator, Yahweh becomes the created thing. We also face the tendency to confuse the image with God. All such images “shrink” God down to the point where man can manipulate God.

While in Paris the other day, I had several extra hours before checking into a hotel. I decided to go to my favorite museum, the Louvre. As I perused the Babylonian and Egyptian antiquities, I was fascinated by the number of idols on display. All had been found, of course, in archeological digs. They were of all shapes and sizes, representing birds, animals, fish, stars, and planets. I even saw a miniature golden calf like the one that Aaron made as detailed in Exodus 32. Once the object of worship, they are now neatly encased in a museum for all to see. It all reminded me of the sarcastic – but very true – words of Isaiah the prophet:

- ⁹ How foolish are those who manufacture idols.
 These prized objects are really worthless.
 The people who worship idols don’t know this,
 so they are all put to shame.
- ¹⁰ Who but a fool would make his own god—
 an idol that cannot help him one bit? ...
- ¹² The blacksmith stands at his forge to make a sharp tool,
 pounding and shaping it with all his might.
 His work makes him hungry and weak.
 It makes him thirsty and faint.
- ¹³ Then the wood-carver measures a block of wood
 and draws a pattern on it.
 He works with chisel and plane
 and carves it into a human figure.
 He gives it human beauty
 and puts it in a little shrine.
- ¹⁴ He cuts down cedars;
 he selects the cypress and the oak;

he plants the pine in the forest
to be nourished by the rain.
15 Then he uses part of the wood to make a fire.
With it he warms himself and bakes his bread.
Then—yes, it’s true—he takes the rest of it
and makes himself a god to worship!
He makes an idol
and bows down in front of it!
16 He burns part of the tree to roast his meat
and to keep himself warm.
He says, “Ah, that fire feels good.”
17 Then he takes what’s left
and makes his god: a carved idol!
He falls down in front of it,
worshiping and praying to it.
“Rescue me!” he says.
“You are my god!”
18 Such stupidity and ignorance!
Their eyes are closed, and they cannot see.
Their minds are shut, and they cannot think.
19 The person who made the idol never stops to reflect,
“Why, it’s just a block of wood!
I burned half of it for heat
and used it to bake my bread and roast my meat.
How can the rest of it be a god?
Should I bow down to worship a piece of wood?”
20 The poor, deluded fool feeds on ashes.
He trusts something that can’t help him at all.
Yet he cannot bring himself to ask,
“Is this idol that I’m holding in my hand a lie?”
Isaiah 44:9-20 NLT

We may laugh at the ignorance of idol makers as they worship what is intended to be used. But don’t we do the same thing? Whether it be music, career, sports, sexuality, family, country, possessions, or traditions ... whatever is important to us can subtly begin to take the place of God. To that degree, that thing becomes an idol. And as the idol maker in Isaiah’s day, we are “trusting in something that can give him no hope at all.”

We all have a pyramid of values. And whatever is at the apex of that pyramid is the god we serve. Paradoxically, even an atheist can be an idolater, because he has placed a materialistic worldview at the apex of their pyramid of values. As A.W. Tozer once said, “Unbelief is nothing but perverted faith, for in unbelief we put our trust not in the living God but in dying men.”

For many, even for many Christians, idolatry is the value placed on sinful actions of a sexual nature. That’s why Paul says: “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, *which is idolatry*” (Colossians 3:5).

For others, idolatry can take a rather strange twist. An increasing number of teen-age girls these days worship the goddess “Ana.” Who is Ana? Ana is a reference to anorexia, the potentially fatal eating disorder. She’s a role model to some, a goddess to others—the subject of drawings, prayers, and even a creed. She tells them what to eat and mocks them when they don’t lose weight.

“People pray to Ana to make them skinny,” says Sara, a 17-year-old in Columbus, Ohio, who was an avid organizer of Ana followers until she recently entered treatment for her eating disorder.... “I guess I was attention-starved,” she now says of her motivation. “I really liked being the girl that everyone looked up to, and the one they saw as their ‘thinspiration.’ But then I realized I was helping girls kill themselves.”ⁱⁱⁱ

We can even place very good things at the apex of our values, things such as family, or a spouse, or the *desire* to have a family or a spouse. This too is a subtle form of idolatry. Even what we *do* for God can become more important than God himself. Or how about this: even our *worship* of God can become a form of idolatry. Style, music, tradition, or cultural ways of approaching God can subtly become more important than God himself. Authentic worship is not about art, but about the heart.

God gives to you and me a very stern warning about even the most subtle forms of idolatry. Verse 5 says: “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.”

For the believer, any form of idolatry is essentially spiritual adultery. The Bible presents all believers as being in a marital relationship with God. The people of God are depicted as the wife of God in the Old Testament, and as the bride of Christ in the New Testament. When you became a Christian, you stood at the altar and took Christ as your husband. You are his bride. Jesus made a covenant with you, saying “I Jesus, take you, sinner, to be My Bride, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, for time and eternity.” And you responded, “I do.”

And God is jealous of that love relationship. When you place anything or any person or any desire or aspiration before God in your life, you are like adulteress wife, turning elsewhere for companionship, intimacy and fulfillment.

Men, how would you feel if you found your wife in the presence of another man in an intimate setting? It would break your heart. It is the same with Christ, whose bride we are. Our idolatry breaks God’s heart, for idolatry is spiritual adultery. We are essentially saying, “God, who you are and what you provide for me is not adequate. I need to have my deepest needs met elsewhere.”

These potential idols must be dethroned in our lives. One way we do this by reminding ourselves of what their purpose is. Take our sexuality, for example. God created sexuality as a means of both procreation and the expression of love and intimacy in the confines of marriage. As such, it can be engaged in as an act of worship to the very God who gave us this gift. But when misused – as in promiscuity or pornography – it quickly begins to take the rightful place of God in our lives. Or take marriage as another example. Marriage, though mutually satisfying, is intended to be a relationship that models the relationship of Christ to his church. When we see marriage in its

proper light, it will keep us from making of marriage an idol that takes the place of God in our lives. Or it will keep some from making the desire to be married a god in their lives. For God is a jealous God, and does not want to be in competition with any image which at best can only *partially* symbolize the true character of God.

IDOLATRY IS USING WHAT SHOULD BE WORSHIPPED.

Idolatry is not only worshipping what should be used, but also attempting to use the One who alone deserves our worship.^{iv} What do I mean by that?

Man innately wants a god or gods that he can manipulate. This is not unlike the way people in ancient times approached their many gods. Rarely – if ever – were the gods worshipped for their intrinsic value. They were worshipped rather for what they could do for the worshipper. They were viewed as a means to a desired end. Some were worshipped to appease their anger. Others were worshipped for the benefits they could produce. In fact, that’s why the pagans had so many gods. No one god could provide all the benefits that he worshipper desired. So they were constantly in search of new gods. Bottom line, pagan worship was and is pragmatic. The gods are worshipped for what they can do for me.^v In true worship, however, God himself is our reward.

To illustrate this, C.S. Lewis in his book, *The Screwtape Letters*, describes the different ways in which we use the word “my” in various expressions that take us all the way from *ownership* (what is to be used) to *worship* (what is to be adored and served).

For example, I might speak of “my shoes.” Maybe their stylish, maybe they’re not. But they exist for my comfort, use and pleasure. They keep my feet comfortable, warm and dry. But at the moment they fail to do that, I’ll throw them out and get some others.

Or I might speak of “my dog,” named Belle. Some of you have met my dog, and you don’t want to meet her again. She’s a good friend to me, though not to strangers. She guards my house and is loyal to her family. Though I own my dog, I would never treat her the same way I treat my shoes.

I can also speak of “my wife.” Any man who can’t tell the difference between “my wife” and “my shoes” is in serious trouble. And yet the reality of many marriages today can be traced to that very problem. For some, a wife is as disposable as a pair of shoes.

And then we speak often of “my country.” Here we move further away from ownership to the idea of being owned. Neither I nor you own our country. It is far bigger than us. And our citizenship demands a certain loyalty and service to our country.

And finally, as C.S. Lewis points out, we can speak of “my God.” Here we have not simply a relationship of love, loyalty and service, but of worship. But here’s the problem. For many, there is little difference between “my God” and “my shoes.” When the god of our imagination doesn’t meet our expectation, we fabricate another god after our own likeness.^{vi}

There is a subtle tendency in all of us to want to *use* God more than we want to *worship* God. God becomes merely a means of getting what we want. We have a long shopping list of what we

want God to do for us: healthy bodies, successful careers, thriving families, easy circumstances. Our image of God in America today too often resembles the materialistic, health driven obsessions that pervade our culture and our churches.^{vii} But all of these things are the mere product of our human reasoning about God – who He is and how He operates in our lives.^{viii}

God is far bigger than our puny perceptions of who he is and what he should do for us. God reminds us (again through the prophet Isaiah):

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD.
“As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways and
my thoughts than your thoughts. Isaiah 55:8-9^{ix}

Idolatry then is placing God at my disposal. Worship is placing myself at God’s disposal.

The question remains, however: How do we cultivate a true image of God?

God has not kept us guessing as to his character. There is no need to devise material or man-made mental images of God. He has spoken to us both in His Word^x and once-and-for-all in His Son, Jesus Christ. “We don’t know God by cultivating our imagination, but by believing his revelation.”^{xi}

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. Colossians 1:15

The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. Hebrews 1: 3

Martin Luther has said, “Anything that one imagines of God apart from Christ is only useless idolatry.” The second commandment not to make any image of God is given because the only true image of God is found in the person of Jesus Christ. All in the Old Testament points to him. And all in the New Testament looks back to him. You and I obey this command to avoid idolatry by looking to the true image of God, Jesus Christ, and making him and him alone preeminent in our lives.

The apostle John puts it this way:

And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding so that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son, Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life. *Little children, guard yourselves from idols.*
1 John 5:20, 21 NASB

To reject the true image of God in Jesus Christ is also a form of idolatry. Have you received him as the forgiver of your sins and as the leader of your life?

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ⁱ This is emphasized in the reason given for the avoidance of idolatry: "...for I, the LORD your God..." Here, the LORD translates the Hebrew term Yahweh, meaning "I am who I am." He is not necessarily who we want him to be.

ⁱⁱ The First Commandment in verse 3 prohibits the worship of a false god. It deals with the *object* of our worship. The Second commandment, however, prohibits the worship of the true God in a false way. It addresses the *means* of worship.

ⁱⁱⁱ Martha Irvine, "Cult-Like Appeal of 'Ana' Attracts Anorexics," Associated Press (5-30-05); submitted by David Duquette, Reading, Pennsylvania and clipped from www.preachingtoday.com.

^{iv} Worshipping what should be used focuses on material images of God. Using what should be worshipped focuses on false mental images of God.

^v In pagan religions, people fashion gods after their own likeness. That's why the gods are notorious for deception, jealousy and outright immorality. They're too busy fighting their own battles to ever be a source of comfort to anyone.

^{vi} Adapted from Colin Smith, *The Ten Greatest Struggles of Your Life* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2006), 29-31.

^{vii} Douglas Taylor-Weiss, rector of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Dayton, Ohio, has proposed a new set of Ten Commandments based on his observations of our culture:

1. Have a good day.
2. Shop.
3. Eliminate pain.
4. Be up-to-date.
5. Relax.
6. Express yourself.
7. Have a happy family.
8. Be entertaining.
9. Be entertained.
10. Buy entertainment.

He forgot one more:

11. Get in touch with your feelings.

Cited by Martin Marty in Context (Feb. 1, 1992). *Christianity Today*, Vol. 41, no. 3. Clipped from www.preachingtoday.com

^{viii} Charles Spurgeon once remarked: "I believe a very large majority of churchgoers are merely unthinking, slumbering worshipers of an unknown God." Charles H. Spurgeon in *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Vol. 11. *Christianity Today*, Vol. 40, no. 1; clipped from www.preachingtoday.com.

^{ix} Cf. Isaiah 40:18 "To whom, then, will you compare God? What image will you compare him to?" (NIV). To the degree that any image fails to convey the full truth of God's character, to that degree the image will limit our worship.

^x Deuteronomy 4:12-20. The warning against idolatry here is based on the fact that the people of Israel saw no form of any kind when God spoke to them. They only heard his word.

^{xi} Colin Smith, 29.