"A Holy Jealousy for a Holy God"

Exodus 20:3-6

March 23, 2025

Last week we looked at the first of the 10 commandments in Exodus 20: "*You shall have no other gods before Me*"—a command that was given in the context of God revealing His *holiness* and reminding Israel of His *grace*. I hope that this last week you have been more conscious of what controls your heart as a sign of what you are inclined to worship. God has made us to worship—we must worship—if not God, then some false god as a replacement. So how do we know what our hearts worship?

There are three basic tests to determine what or who your heart is set on worshiping:

1. ***The Love Test***: We know that the first commandment and all the commandments are fulfilled by loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mt 22:37-40). But sometimes we wholeheartedly love other things above God. To paraphrase the early church father, Origen, whatever you honor, admire, and love above all else, is your god of choice. [1] So ask yourself: What preoccupies your mind? What do you desire most—to the point it controls you? What do you love above all else? What are you obsessed with? Twenty-one times, the Bible uses the phrase "with all your heart" and every time God alone is the object of what we are called to desire, do, or love with all our heart! We're not even supposed to love our kids with all our heart, but rather with a wholehearted love for God. What we love most is our God.

2. ***The Trust Test***: Where do you turn first when trouble arises? God? Yourself? Other people? Money? Some form of escape? Martin Luther said, "*Whatever thy heart clings to and relies upon, that is properly your God*." Puritan Thomas Watson said it this way: "*To trust in anything more than God, is to make it a god*."[2] What tends to replace your confidence in God? What do you turn to for security, confidence, hope? What we trust in practically and ultimately, is our God.

3. ***The Fear Test***: Deut 6:13 says, "You shall fear only the Lord your God; and you shall worship Him and swear by His name**…**" We don't typically think of things or people we fear as false gods or idolatry, but when something dominates our heart with fear, we have lost sight of God's greatness and view other things, people, or circumstances as bigger and more powerful. What makes you fearful, anxious, stressed? How do these things reveal your need to enthrone God in your thoughts, desires, and life? For many, the *fear of man* is a snare that undermines trust in God (Prov 29:25). *Fear of failure* reveals that confidence God's providence has been replaced with a belief in self-performance. *Fear of circumstances* reveals that God has been dethroned in our eyes. This doesn't mean there aren't legitimate things that cause fear or anxious thoughts in our hearts. But what we do in response to those fears either enthrones God or replaces Him with a false security.

What do you love, trust, and fear most? This will reveal the most important data about your heart. *The purpose of the first commandment is to set your heart on loving, trusting, and fearing (revering) God above all else so that secondary things will not hinder His grace and blessing in your life.*

The reason I've taken time to review the first commandment today, is because it is foundational to every other commandment. If God is not in His rightful place in the affections of your heart and the priorities of your life, it's impossible for you to obey Him with an undivided heart on any other matter.

Let's turn our attention to the second commandment **[vs. 3-6]**. At first, the second commandment can seem almost redundant with the first. No other gods; no idols. But there is an important distinction between the two.

First Commandment – not worshiping false gods (who)
Second Commandment – not worshiping the true God falsely (how)

The first commandment is a prohibition against worshiping false gods—it deals with *who* we worship. The second commandment is a prohibition against worshiping the true God falsely—it deals with *how* we worship.

[1] Philip Ryken, *Exodus* (Preaching the Word), pg. 524

[2] Ibid.

Obviously, any idols that represented false gods were to be eliminated by the first commandment. But even worshipers of Yahweh were not to use carved images in their worship of the true God because carved images of any kind to represent the likeness of God lie about the true nature of God.

It may be helpful to keep in mind that idols were not considered actual gods themselves. They represented gods or were sometimes thought to be inhabited by gods. This helps us understand why Yahweh is not to be worshiped through the medium of carved images. In the words of Isaiah 40, "*To whom will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare with Him?*" (context idolatry—carved images).

Here's the problem with using carved images in the worship of God:

- Graven images distort the distinction between the Creator and the creation.
- God is uncreated; idols are created.
- God is all-powerful; idols have no power
- God is omnipresent; idols are local
- God is infinite; idols are finite
- God is eternal; idols are temporary
- God is spirit; idols are material
- God is holy; idols are common
- God is invisible; idols are visible
- God is living; idols are lifeless
- God speaks, hears, and acts; idols are mute, dumb, and inactive

Idols misrepresent and lie about every attribute of God. Carved images reduce God to something less than He truly is. It inverts the relationship between the Creator and the creature because the sculptor 'creates god' in a likeness of his choosing rather than recognizing that he is created in God's likeness.

Now we are tempted to think that we don't have to worry about the second commandment because how many of us have statues of carved images that we bow down to because we consider them to be a representative of Yahweh? But consider two things. First, as we saw last week our hearts are inclined toward idolatry. We can make false gods of anything from food to careers, status, children, cars, intellectualism, even self. In our fallen nature, we are prone to giving other things supremacy in our affections, and allowing those desires to control our lives. Idols of the heart can subtly take control if we are not guarding our affections and yielding them to God.

Second, we must be aware of the heart struggle behind idol worship. We don't need a carved image to reduce our view of God to our likeness. We don't need a graven image to attempt to control or manipulate God to do what we want Him to do. We must do everything we can to avoid our tendency to reduce God to our likeness or to blur the distinction between Creator and creature.

Now, to take a more careful look at the second commandment, let's investigate four aspects of this commandment.

1. **The comprehensive nature of the 2nd commandment** (Ex 20:4).

[vs. 20] Nothing in the heavens, nothing on earth, nothing in the oceans beneath basically covers any possible created thing. Why? Because God is holy, distinct from His creation in a category of His own. There is nothing that can be legitimately compared to Him. No created thing can replicate God. Any attempt to represent God by a material object misrepresents God entirely. Nothing created can stand in place of the Uncreated One.

By the way, the second commandment prohibits the use of graven images *in worship*. It does not forbid works of art, like sculpture that are not used in worship. Two things lead me to this conclusion. First, Exodus 20:4 is clearly in a context of instructions on worship. Vs. 4 is immediately preceded by the first commandment (to worship Yahweh alone), and is immediately followed by the clarifying statement in vs. 5: "*You shall not bow down to them or serve them…*" Second, we know this is not a prohibition against works of art because God Himself designed the temple to contain sculptures that were *not* used as objects of worship or representations of God. For example, the holy of holies contained two Cherubim of sculpted gold to hover over the mercy seat (Ex 25:18). The pillars of the temple and the priestly vestments contained sculpted pomegranates (Ex 28:33; 1Kings 7:18). The second commandment is not prohibiting artistic sculpture, but using any material thing to as a medium for God's presence because it would profoundly misrepresent Him.

2. **The reason for the 2nd commandment** (Ex 20:5a).

Ex 20:5: "*You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God*…" Typically we think of jealously in a negative light, as resentful feelings toward another person because they are a rival or because they are more successful. Jealousy is often driven by envy. This is sinful jealousy. But there is a holy jealousy in which a person defends the honor or character or affections of something that is pure. For example, holy jealousy is a husband protecting his covenant of marriage with his wife, unwilling to share that intimacy with anyone else.

God has a holy jealousy that defends His honor, upholds His character, and calls for our affections to be undivided toward Him. Simply put, God is not willing to tolerate any rivals to His throne or share His glory. Nor will He bless sharing our primary affections with something or someone other than Him. God's jealousy is intolerant of rivalry or unfaithfulness.

In one sense it is proper to think of God's jealousy as a declaration of His love for us and His unwillingness for our love of other people and things to compete with our love for Him. That is, God wants the affections of our heart to be undivided toward Him because He has entered into a covenant relationship of love with us. This jealousy is seen in His judgment of those who hate Him in vs. 5 and His promise of blessing toward those who love Him in vs. 6. The key phrase in vs. 6 is "showing steadfast love." Steadfast love translates the Hebrew word *chesed*, which represents God's covenant faithful love toward us.

Yet God's jealousy displayed in His love toward us is secondary to His primary jealousy for His own glory. Keep in mind the context here. "I am he Lord your God…You shall have no other gods before Me" (2-3). You shall not misrepresent Me or diminish My glory by bowing down to graven images. I judge those who hate Me and defame My glory, but I will bless those who love Me because loving Me with all your heart is the best way to glorify Me.

This is an important corrective because God's love for us is not man-centered, but God-centered. If God was man-centered, He would be an idolator. But God is God-centered, meaning that He does all things for His glory as His highest motivation. So God's unspeakable love for us is not an end in itself, but a means of displaying the matchless glory of God.

Sometimes the idea of God being God-centered makes people uncomfortable because when a human being is self-centered, it is repulsive, utterly selfish, and in fact evil, because he has made an idol of himself. But when God does everything for His glory it is not selfish; it is loving because our highest good is to find our purpose, joy, and satisfaction in God who is the best and purest delight upon which we can feast our souls. It is not idolatrous for God to be jealous of His own glory because there is nothing of greater worth that His glory is secondary to.

3. **The warning of the 2nd commandment** (Ex 20:5b).

[vs. 5] The warning is that there will be a multi-generational impact of judgment for idolatrous worship. This does *not* mean that God punishes the innocent for someone else's sins. Deut 24:16 says, "Fathers shall not be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their fathers; *each is to die for his own sins*."[3] So we should not assume that the children in Exodus 20:5 are innocent. They share in their father's guilt. Beware that idolatry, false worship, and inaccurate views of God are infectious, especially in families.

It's also important to note that the love and hate language in vs. 5-6 is an idiomatic way of speaking of *loyalty*.[4] Those who "hate" God are those who are disloyal to Him. Those who "love" God are those who are loyal to Him. You may not *feel* hatred toward God, yet disloyalty to Him through false worship provokes His judgment. Furthermore, loving God is not merely emotional but a heart of loyalty to Him. This leads us to the beautiful promise of the 2nd commandment…

4. **The promise of the 2nd commandment** (Ex 20:6).

God's warning about bringing judgment for idolatrous worship is now powerfully contrasted in vs. 6 with His promise to show steadfast love—covenant faithful love—to thousands of generations of those who love Him

[3] Cf. 2Kings 14:6; Ezekiel 18:4, 20a

[4] Douglas Stuart, *Exodus* (NAC), pg. 454.

and keep His commands. The idea here is that God's love and blessing is unending to those who love Him with undivided loyalty. And loving God with your whole heart has a generational impact. This by no means suggests that children of believers are saved because of their parents' faith, apart from their own personal faith. But blessed are those children whose parents set before them a true vision of the living God and love Him with all their heart in undivided loyalty.

The conclusion we must draw from the 2nd commandment is that ***Our heart posture toward God is the most important thing about us. The loyalty or disloyalty of our heart will determine whether we love or hate God and whether we stand under His blessing or judgment.*** Can I just say to parents, what could be more important for the sake of your kids than for you to pray that God will help you love Him with all your heart, soul, mind and strength; and then pray that He will do the same for your kids. This has been the very core of my prayer life for my kids over the last 25 years and it will be the same for my grandkids in the years to come.

Our heart posture toward God is the most important thing about us. This is why the first 4 commandments directly address how we honor God.

- We put no other gods before Him.
- We don't make graven images that devalue Him.
- We honor His name and don't take it in vain.
- Finally, we prioritize our worship of God as holy. For the Israelites, this meant setting aside the Sabbath, and for NT believers it means whole-life worship that finds our rest in Jesus.[5]

The first 4 commandments reveal that the primary issue of life is worship. Do you have a heart of worship that delights in God has supreme and worthy of your undivided loyalty and affection?

The last 6 commandments focus on our relationships with people. Perhaps there are more that deal with our relationships because relationships are the nitty gritty of daily life. Yet even these horizontal commandments indirectly address how we are to honor God through our relationships with one another. Do your relationships with others reflect your love and loyalty to God as supreme?

There's another reason why six of the ten commandments deal with our human relationships. People are image-bearers of God which means that how we relate to one another reveals our attitude toward God. Think about this in light of the second commandment. We are not to make lifeless, graven images to represent God in worship because we are to live out His image on this earth—meaning *all* of life is to be an expression of worship. And though sin has deeply marred how we reflect God's glory, Jesus, the sinless One, is the perfect image of the invisible God (Col 1:15). He lived out the true character, will, and purposes of God in human flesh. Hebrews says, "He is the radiance of God's glory and the *exact representation* of His nature" (1:3). Jesus is the truest, and only pure reflection of God on earth. And He has come to restore the sin-marred image of God in His people.

Let's conclude our study this morning by applying our gospel principles for the 10 commandments.

What does the 2nd commandment reveal about God's character and how to live for His glory? **God is jealous for His glory and will not tolerate being reduced to the likeness of mere creation. He will punish those who misrepresent His character and minimize His glory. But He will lavish His love on those who delight in who He truly is. We live for His glory by honoring Him for who He is and conforming our lives to a true vision of God.**

What does the 2nd commandment reveal about the greatest struggle of our hearts? **We want a God that we can control and manipulate, so we will be tempted reduce God into an image of our making**. Beware anytime you hear someone say, "I prefer to think of God as…" [a woman; tolerant; only loving without wrath; loving me as I am and not requiring me to change; others think of God as only angry or vengeful].

Sin has distorted our view of God, and we are tempted reduce or worship to a to humanly redefined distortion of God. Friends, this is why *you* must read the Bible—to see God has He is and as He reveals Himself to be even

[5] Romans 12:1-2; Hebrews 4

when it makes you uncomfortable. Because true and lasting comfort will only be found in knowing and loving the God who truly is.

How does the 2nd commandment point to the full extent of Jesus' perfect obedience? **Jesus lived every moment of His life in response to a pure and undiminished understanding of His Father. Every decision, every thought, every desire, and every relationship perfectly reflected an authentic life of worship.** He never sought to exercise control independently of His Father. He never tried to manipulate the Father for personal ease. Even at the hardest juncture of His life, Jesus' loyalty to the Father was supreme: "*Not My will but Yours be done*."

How does the 2nd commandment point to the full extent of Christ's atonement for us? **Jesus' death covered our every attempt to take control and seek to manipulate God. His death covered every degree of our distorted view of God (for every attribute), and every slight of false worship.** Even the imperfections of our worship in the last 30 minutes. [We know that God loves us, yet we struggle to accept the fullness of it. We know that God is holy, yet we struggle to embrace its fulness.]

A.W. Tozer prayed, "*O Lord God Almighty…may I express Thee unblamed? They that know [You] not, may call upon [You] as other than [You are], and so worship not [You] but a creature of their own fancy; therefore, enlighten our minds that we may know [You] as you [are], so that we might perfectly love [You] and worthily praise [You].*"[6]

[6] A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy,* pg. 1.