

The Ten Commandments of Love

Preface

Does the Christian world need another book on the Ten Commandments? I doubt it. Great and godly Christian writers have been writing books for twenty centuries, and the Ten Commandments aren't exactly niche.

Then why this book? Quite simply, I knew it would be good for me, and I thought it could be edifying to some of the Lord's people. The discipline of writing will help me be more articulate on this fundamental portion of Scripture, and a closer inspection of these ten laws could help some saints love God and neighbor more - they are laws of love.

This book is little more than the output of sermons preached to Sovereign Redeemer Community Church in Youngsville, NC in the first half of 2020. Preaching those sermons helped me. I trust hearing those sermons helped our church. And I hope you are refreshed, encouraged, and maybe occasionally reproved by the book.

As the preaching and writing has progressed, I am more and more aware of how much more could be very profitably said. Those looking for a comprehensive commentary will be disappointed. I know that, but I hope to have approached the heart of the matter with each commandment in a helpful, useful, and memorable way. However much you choose to read of it, I hope it enriches you.

Chapter 1 The Bible's Framework for the Commandments

Launching immediately into a commandment by commandment study is a recipe for failure, because it leads so naturally to *moralizing*. Instead, the better approach is to *erect a biblical framework* for an overall understanding of what the Ten Commandments *are* and *aren't*. Otherwise, it too easily becomes "Do this," "Don't do that," "Work harder," "Stay away from more." And with that mentality, we either crumble under the weight of the never-ending requirements, or we never grasp the truth that we haven't actually obeyed the commands at all. Not as we should have. Not from the heart. So the right beginning point is to build a framework from how the Bible itself positions the law of God.

Let's begin with the number one principle of Bible interpretation: The Bible interprets the Bible. Matthew Henry is wonderful, eminently quotable, and the preacher's friend, but the best commentary on Scripture is *always* Scripture. So we will begin with Jesus, the center and pinnacle of Scripture. Often the words of Jesus get to the heart of things even better than

other portions of Scripture. That doesn't make His words more true than other places in Scripture, but Jesus *is* the Word, and He is the ultimate revelation of God.

I would like to draw out six texts of Scripture to erect our framework. Five of the six will be from the New Testament, but I want you to know that all the points could have been made from six Old Testament texts, or from six New Testament texts, making exactly the same points. The whole Bible presents a *unified perspective* on the law of God. The whole Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, Old Testament and New, presents a unified perspective on the law. What is the law of God? The whole Bible agrees on the answer to that question. What can the law of God *do* and *not do*? The whole Bible agrees on the answers to those questions too. So pitting Old Testament against New is a fool's errand. Pitting Moses against Jesus is a fool's errand, because Moses was simply Jesus' mouthpiece for the Old Testament law.

1. The first text for erecting our framework is Matthew 22:34-40.

34 But when the Pharisees heard that He had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. 35 Then one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, and saying, 36 "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" 37 Jesus said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' 38 This is the first and great commandment. 39 And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

Jesus is teaching that **the law makes it clear what it means to truly love God and to love people**. The question put to Jesus is which is the great commandment in the law. Which is the foremost commandment? Which one is the most important? Which is the most representative of what God desires when he commands people, requiring certain things of his creatures? In answer, Jesus simply quotes Deuteronomy 6:5. This is another reason why it is madness to pit Moses against Jesus. Jesus quotes Moses because Moses was inspired by God to give the law. It isn't Moses' law. It is God's law given through Moses. Jesus is God. He is quoting Himself! Then, as the second greatest commandment, Jesus quotes Leviticus 19:18b, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." So Jesus quotes the Old Testament, Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19. He is not overthrowing anything. He is *framing* how we ought to think about the law. Jesus is erecting a framework through which we view how to truly love God and people.

Jesus makes this breathtaking statement: "On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets." That means I don't understand any commandment - I'm ignorant of every commandment - until I understand how it is an expression of love. Until I understand how the keeping of a commandment is an expression of love, I don't understand it at all. This is intensely *internal*. This is law-keeping according to Jesus. It is an expression of something which begins in the heart. *Affection in the heart*, the starting point of all true law-keeping.

This is the structure which Jesus gives us. Commandments show us how to express love for God, or to express love for people. And this is actually easily discernible in the Ten

Commandments. The first four have to do, primarily, with loving God, and the final six have to do, primarily, with loving people.

So in 1 John 5:3, when John says, “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome.” - John is only affirming what Jesus taught. Think about that. Keeping the commandments is an expression of genuine affection in the heart for God, and therefore it is not burdensome. And real love is not identified by profession, but by demonstration. Real love expresses itself by the keeping of the commandments. Real love leaves tracks. So the commandments aren't burdensome to the believer, because obeying them is simply *loving God*. When put it in those terms, it ceases to be a burden.

Now, how do we think of this? We have warm feelings towards it, don't we? We cheer Jesus on for His answer. Which is the great commandment? Love God. Which is the second? Love people. No wonder we have warm feelings towards those answers! Who doesn't want more love? Who doesn't want to become more loving?

But our unconquerable problem is this: Jesus says my love for God must be *all consuming*. All my heart. All my soul. All my mind. Affection at full intensity in every part of my being. It cannot be played at. It is full-on love. In another place, Jesus says, “If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple.” (Luke 14:26). Now, is Jesus overthrowing the rest of Scripture, which says you should actually honor and love your father and mother? No, Jesus isn't not overthrowing. It is *comparative*. If the affection in your heart for your father, your mother, your wife, your children, your brothers, your sisters, is on the *same plane* with your affection for God, your love for God fails the test. You are not a disciple! You cannot be.

The affection of your heart, for the God in heaven who made you, must be so preeminent, it must so clearly have the place of honor, that *by comparison*, your love for your spouse seems like hatred. This might as well be Deuteronomy 6 again - all the heart, all the soul, all the mind. An *all consuming* love is the standard for loving God. How can I stand against this standard? It is all well and good to say the great commandment is to love God. But when the standard for loving God is that it must be full-on love in every part of my being, and then I compare myself to that standard, I'm a million miles away. And so are you. That, friends, is our problem. So I understand coming to Jesus' answer and having warm feelings about it. I do want more love. And I do want to become more loving. But understand the problem, the unconquerable problem. The standard is all consuming love, and so often, you know that your heart is cold and hard.

And my love for people has to rise to the level of the love I have for myself, which hardly ever takes a break. I find myself so self-loving, so self-serving. But the standard is to love my next door neighbor that way, love my siblings that way, love my co-workers that way, love my spouse that way, even love strangers that way. Oh, my love for all of those categories of people falls so far short of the *intensity* and *persistence* of my self-love! I can't stand against that standard.

Those standards create a devastating problem for me. Love God. Yes, that sounds like a good idea. Okay, love Him with all the heart, soul and mind. Oh. Love neighbor. Yes. We all want to live in a world of love. Love your neighbor as you love yourself. Oh. We have a massive problem.

So what does the law do? It *defines* and *describes* love in *concrete terms*. If your idea of love doesn't transcend a sentiment which may or may not work its way outward, you aren't talking about Bible love. Sentiment which goes nowhere doesn't meet the standard for Bible love. Bible love is defined and described in concrete terms. The Ten Commandments simply command us to love, so breaking them is actually a failure to love. It is a violation against love, either not loving God or not loving your neighbor, and often it is both, all rolled into one.

2. The second text for erecting our framework is Deuteronomy 10:12-13.

12 "And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, 13 and to keep the commandments of the Lord and His statutes which I command you today for your good?"

In each one of these six texts, there are many very profitable things being passed over to simply focus on a few points which are relevant for the task at hand, and such is the case here, as I pass over everything else to get to the final phrase, "His statutes which I command you today *for your good*."

The commandments are for our good. ***The law is our friend, not our enemy.*** These are God's laws, and what He requires of us actually reflects His *kind intentions* towards us. The law is not our enemy. It is for our good. Our appetite for sin is the problem, not the law.

Think about the garden. God creates. There is no inclination in His creatures - in Adam and Eve - towards sin. They were completely free to obey, and completely free from an inclination towards disobedience. The command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was *for their good*. In the garden narrative we learn that God is not holding us back *from* good things, He is holding us back *for* good things. But we have to train our minds to think that.

What happened in the garden? "It's beautiful fruit." "It's desirable to make me wise." "I'm being held back from something good." "God is stingy and is holding out on me." Eve believed that lie. She ate the fruit. Adam did too. The rest is history. And to this day, we often feel like God is holding us back from something good. That's not true. It is the old lie. God is holding me back for something good, but if I plunge myself into disobedience, even though it looks desirable to me, I will essentially be walling myself off from the things which are *actually* good.

The commandments are for our good. They are our friends. They are not our enemies. We aren't being held back *from* good things, we're being held back *for* good things. It is God's kindness that he requires these things of us.

3. The third text for erecting our framework is Matthew 5:21-30, from the Sermon on the Mount.

21 “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.’ 22 But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire. 23 Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. 25 Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. 26 Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny. 27 “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ 28 But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29 If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.

In this passage, we learn that **mankind has become absolutely expert in shrinking the law.**

Jesus gives us two cases which both follow the same formula: “You have heard that it was said of old... but I say to you...” The first case involves the Sixth Commandment, the commandment against murder. You have heard that people who unjustly take a human life are in danger of the judgment. But Jesus says that there is *heart murder* and *lip murder*, and they also make you worthy of hell. The second case involves the Seventh Commandment, the commandment against adultery. You have heard that it is against the law of God to have sex outside of marriage. But Jesus says that if you *envision* those interactions *just in your thoughts*, only within your mind, you are guilty of breaking that same command. And just envisioning that also makes you worthy of hell, so much so that you must not spare anything which leads you into those thoughts, because those thoughts can and will drag you into hell!

Now, what is Jesus doing here? He is *not* changing the law. He is saying what was always true, all the way back to when Moses gave the law and before. He is correcting a prevalent but wrong, law-shrinking, law-minimizing understanding.

It was always a violation of the law against murder to *hate* and to *speak evil*. It was always a violation of the law against adultery to *lust* and to *envision* those interactions which are only to be enjoyed in marriage. And those violations were always enough to make you worthy of hell. All of that didn't *become true* with Jesus saying it in Matthew 5. It was always true, and He is correcting this wrong understanding which shrinks the law. Jesus is waging war against a

minimalistic view, a law-shrinking view which makes law-keeping *manageable* and *doable with only externals*.

That is what we've become so good at - shrinking the law so that we can say we have kept it and think that we're righteous. The law of murder is whittled down to just physically taking the life of my neighbor, while I put myself at liberty to hate him in my heart and speak evil of him. I'm innocent. I kept that law. I can withhold myself from physically having sex outside of marriage, while I put myself at liberty to let my mind run wild. I'm innocent. I kept that law. I can think of myself as righteous. But Jesus is teaching that the law has always transcended external conduct to include the thoughts of the heart and the words of the mouth.

How else do we so expertly shrink the law? Well, there are things which God commands us *not* to do. *Don't* murder. *Don't* commit adultery. *Don't* lie. But there are also things He commands us *to* do. He expects us to do good. So it breaks the commandments to do things which God said, "Don't do that." But it also breaks the commandment *not* to do good to your neighbor. You have the opportunity to do good, but you bypass that opportunity. This is often referred to as sins of *omission*. God told you to do good to your neighbor, but you passed by on the other side. You held back from doing good which God said He expected of you.

Jesus addresses sins of omission in Matthew 25. There Jesus describes the day of judgment. The sheep are on His right hand, and the goats are on His left. The sheep are those who feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, take in strangers, clothe the naked, visit the sick and go to prisoners. In short, they are doing good to their neighbors. And the goats are those who don't do those things. They could have but didn't. They passed by their opportunities to love their neighbors. Jesus is not teaching that law-keeping makes you fit for heaven, having *earned* heaven. Jesus is simply teaching that there is real evidence in the lives of people who actually have a new heart. They they do things because they have *new affections* when God gives them a *new heart*. There is nothing to be afraid of in that chapter, as if those sheep have earned heaven through doing things. They simply have evidence in their lives that God has given them a new heart.

All of this is devastating even to the most expert law-shrinkers. Law-breaking isn't just external in actions which the eye can see, but extends to your thoughts and your words. And law-breaking includes not only doing things God told you not to do, but also *not doing good* which you could have done to love your neighbor as yourself.

So Jesus has something to say to law-shrinkers who have whittled the law down to something very manageable and externally doable. He blows up their system of externals and forces them to think of all the things imagined in their minds which are defiled, to think of all the words they've said against their neighbors, to think of all the good they could have done and should have done but didn't. Jesus presses on them that each of those things was a violation of the commandments, worthy of eternal separation and punishment.

4. The fourth text for erecting our framework is Matthew 23:23.

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone.”

In this verse, we learn that **there are weightier matters of the law which undergird individual laws**. There are fundamental foundation stones which undergird and support individual laws.

In Matthew 23, Jesus is pronouncing a series of woes, a series of warnings and condemnations against hypocrites, against people who *teach* one thing while they *do* the opposite. And in verse 23, He says it is hypocrisy to give careful attention to very specific minutia, the little stuff, while ignoring the heart matters, the big stuff, which are the point of the laws. What are the heart matters, undergirding and supporting the individual commandments? *Justice and mercy and faith*.

Why do we tithe? God said to. Yes. Okay. But underneath God’s saying to is *justice*, and *mercy*, and *faith*. God has people He wants to set aside to give attention to serving and teaching and leading His people, and this tithe will provide for them. This tithe will make it possible to set them aside for these things. It is *just* to give the laborer his wages through the tithe. And it is *mercy* to give the poor tithe, so that those who don’t have what they need will have resources to draw on. Giving that tithe is intended to be an act of mercy. And your tithe should be an act of *faith*. It is intended to be an expression that all that you have come from God, as you give back just a fraction. It should be an expression of gratitude, and that you recognize that it came from God.

But it is *very* possible to comply with the individual law, down to dotting the i’s and crossing the t’s - you can go out to the garden and tithe on the spices! - and pass right over *justice and mercy and faith*. And consider yourself righteous. And consider yourself to have kept that law.

Is Jesus teaching anything new? Not at all. Micah 6:8 says, “He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?” Jesus is practically quoting Micah 6:8.

So the the scribes and Pharisees were meticulously tithing, down to the garden spices, while at the same time cheating widows, and jockeying for positions of honor, and abandoning *justice and mercy and faith*. They weren’t keeping the commands. They might have been giving painstaking attention to the minutia, but they were not keeping the commands. They abandoned the weightier matters which are at the heart of the individual laws.

5. The fifth text for erecting our framework is Galatians 3:10-14, 19-25.

10 For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.” 11 But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for “the just shall live by faith.” 12 Yet the law is not of faith, but “the man who does them shall live

by them.” 13 Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”), 14 that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith... 19 What purpose then does the law serve? It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was appointed through angels by the hand of a mediator. 20 Now a mediator does not mediate for one only, but God is one. 21 Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not! For if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law. 22 But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. 23 But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. 24 Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. 25 But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.

In this precious section of Scripture, we learn that **the law teaches you who God is in His perfect righteousness, and who you really are as a transgressor of the law, not how to be saved.**

Verses 10 and 11 destroys law-keeping as a means to be justified before God. What exactly is Paul saying in those verses? That if you want righteousness through law-keeping, you must continue in all the works of the law, ad infinitum. *Forever*. Do *all* the works of the law *all* the time. That is righteousness through law-keeping, the absolute absence of guilt from law-breaking, with a single breach ruining the whole scheme, because of the utter holiness of God.

I hope when you read that, you know with the greatest certainty that the hope of righteousness through law-keeping was obliterated so long ago in your life. Even if only today counted, you would have obliterated that scheme of righteousness more times than you even suspect. The just live *by faith*, and only by faith.

Paul condemns law-breakers and then sets forth Jesus as one willing and able to bear your curse. There is one who has offered Himself as a willing and able curse bearer. Jesus will hang on the tree for you, or you will bear your own curse because you haven't continued in all things that are written in the book of the law. But He *did* continue in *all* things that are written in the book of the law, so Jesus is not only *willing* to bear the curse of all who come to Him by faith, He is also *able*.

In verses 19-25, Paul declares the law to be devoid of power to give life. Look again at the second half verse 21, “... if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law.” The implication is that there is no law which can impart life. Then what is its function? Not to give you life, but to teach you that you deserve death for your crimes, so that sin might appear to us to be what it truly is - *exceedingly sinful* (Romans 7:13).

You have rebellion ingrained so deeply in your heart. You are filled with constant self-love and self-serving. The law is a mirror. It says, "Look! Look at you!" It is the perfect standard of righteousness, forcing you to look at yourself as you really are and begging the question, "Now what?" "Now what, now that you've earned hell?" You did this! Loving yourself, serving yourself, in rebellion to the God who is infinitely worthy of your love and your service, not just *acting* contrary to Him but *being* contrary to Him in your thoughts and words and deeds, doing the things He told you not to do, and not doing the things He expects you to do. Day in and day out. Now what? The law *throws you upon Jesus* for mercy! It is designed to *chase* you to Christ!

Before salvation comes by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, the ministry of the law is a ministry of condemnation. Its job is to convince you that you stand condemned. It is a tutor to drive you to Jesus, just as verse 24a says, "Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ..." It is a teacher that sends you to the Savior, that you might be justified through faith in His saving work.

So the law doesn't exist to justify, but to teach us of our desperate need, so that we will run to Christ, having forsaken the false hopes. It doesn't give us a scheme by which you can be righteous, *self-righteous*, before God. It convinces us of our desperate need, so we will abandon every false hope of self-righteousness, and run to Christ out of that desperation. And when we abandon all false hopes and run to Him, we find Him a willing Savior who washes away every last stain of defilement.

6. The sixth text for erecting our framework is Romans 7:22-25.

22 For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. 23 But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. 24 O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? 25 I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin.

Paul is speaking of the *internal warfare* which seasoned Christians know well, the warfare between the redeemed spirit and the not-yet-redeemed flesh.

In these verses we learn that **the law has irreplaceable value for the believer, who is nevertheless no longer under the law**. If you are a believer, you aren't done with the law. It is better than gold to you (Psalm 119:72), and sweeter than honey and the honeycomb (Psalm 19:10), even though you are no longer under the law. This is not about reverting back and trying to law-keep your way into anything. It is about the continuing instruction, help, and benefit of the law in the lives of the redeemed.

Though much could be said about this text, let me focus in on one phrase in verse 22, "I delight in the law of God". Only a Christian can do that. Paul writes elsewhere, in 1 Corinthians 2:14, that the natural man cannot receive the things of the Spirit of God, so this cannot be an unbeliever. This is Paul, in his believing state - and more sanctified than you -

saying these things. He delights in the law of God in the inward man, but he also finds another law at work in his flesh.

There is a war happening, all day, every day. This is Paul, born again, but still inhabiting a body of death, with its remaining corruptions. Paul has been *spiritually reborn*, but he is still *physically* in a body with remaining corruptions, so there will be a war until the end of his life in this body. Then there will be a physical resurrection, and both spirit and body will be free of all corruption, and he will be free from this war, enjoying heaven. Praise God! Paul knows that the Lord Jesus can and will rescue him from this body of death, but he is still experiencing the current reality of war. He is looking to Christ. Who can free him from this body of death? Jesus.

In spite of the war, Paul can say what the Psalmist, “Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day.” (Psalm 119:97). Paul isn’t turning his back on the law, as if it is something to be regretted. In his inward man, he delights in the law of God, *because it reflects the righteousness of his Savior!* Paul doesn’t despise the law, he delights in it, even though he finds it is at war with the corruptions in his members.

The Psalmist wasn’t one of those professing believers who says, “I am born again by faith, so now the law has nothing to do with me.” Paul wasn’t one of those either. Professing believers who say that the law has nothing to do with them are commonplace now, but their view was foreign to Paul. That is not what he believed or how he felt. That isn’t what we should believe or how we should feel. Both the Psalmist and Paul found the law of God revealing the God of the law to them. They relished that. They wanted to know Him, and be conformed to Him. “Teach me about Yourself!” was their cry. “Reveal Yourself to me!” “I love the vision and beauty of Your righteousness!” “Make me more like You!” So they didn’t despise being brought face to face with their remaining corruptions, because it made them gaze on their Savior and rejoice. Hopefully, as we work our way through the Ten Commandments, we will gaze on our Savior and rejoice.

Here is a summary of the framework we have erected for understanding the commandments:

1. The law makes it clear what it means to truly love God and to love people. (Matthew 22:34-40).
2. The law is our friend, not our enemy. (Deuteronomy 10:12-13).
3. Mankind has become absolutely expert in shrinking the law. (Matthew 5:17-30).
4. There are weightier matters of the law which undergird individual laws. (Matthew 23:23).
5. The law teaches you who God is in His perfect righteousness, and who you really are as a transgressor of the law, not how to be saved. (Galatians 3:10-14, 19-25).

6. The law has irreplaceable value for the believer, who is nevertheless no longer under the law. (Romans 7:22-25).

As we now undertake a commandment by commandment study of the Ten Commandments of love, a pattern will become apparent. A systematic approach will be utilized in an attempt to access the depth and breadth of what each commandment is meant to communicate. As few as four words comprise a commandment (“You shall not murder”), yet the brevity of the command should not satisfy us with just skimming the surface, missing the breathtaking depth and breadth of each commandment. They truly reveal the beauty and righteousness of the eternal Law-Giver, the God of Scripture.

Here is the pattern which will be followed, more or less:

1. What the commandment requires. Most of the commandments are *framed negatively* (“You shall not...”). They tell us what we *must not do*. However, those negatively framed commandments also encompass things which are *positively required*, because love requires much more than *not doing*, and these are commandments of love.

2. What the commandment forbids. God is an utterly holy God, so His creatures are commanded to flee from everything that defiles. This God, in His kindness, keeps us *from* things to keep us *for* the best things.

3. What the commandment teaches about God. The commandments reveal the Law-Giver to mankind. His eternal character is displayed in what He loves and what He hates, and those things are set forth in the commandments. This is theology - the study of God - at its best. As we study the Ten Commandments, our prayer should be, “Show us Your glory!”

4. How we have failed to keep the commandment. A study of the commandments is a dry, academic exercise until we peel back the layers and attack our own self-righteousness. By expanding the law to include what it has always included - our thoughts, our motives, our words - we can own our breaking of His perfect commands, repent, and grow in Christlikeness.

5. How the Lord Jesus has perfectly kept the commandment. Finally, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. The Lord Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God. He *is* God’s righteousness. We should take time to revel in His perfect law-keeping on our behalf, qualifying Him to take the place of sinners, and winning our salvation. Watching Him perfectly keep each of the commandments in the gospel accounts gives believers a pathway to growing in Christlikeness.

On to God’s own preface to His Ten Commandments of love, found in Exodus 20:1-2.

Chapter 2

The God Who Spoke All These Words

Exodus 20:1-2

1 And God spoke all these words, saying: 2 “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.”

I hope the time spent soaking in the Ten Commandments shifts our view towards seeing the law of God as something beautiful and sweet as honey, not as an unbearable burden which is destined to grind us to powder. On the other side of the cross, having embraced the Lord Jesus Christ as our only hope for righteousness, the law of God can be sweet and good and an expression of God’s love for us. He wants our good. He intends our good. The law *isn’t* destined to grind the Christian into powder. No. Christ gives us His righteousness, and then we can obey God’s law as we become more like the Lord Jesus. The law can be an expression of His love to us. He is nothing like a cruel taskmaster.

The title of the chapter is “The God Who Spoke All These Words,” because the first two verses of Exodus 20 is essentially God’s own preface to His Ten Commandments. Before He delivers commandments to us, God introduces Himself and who He is as the Law-Giver.

The Ten Commandments are found in Exodus 20, so Chapter 19 obviously sets the context, and Exodus 19:1 gives us this time marker: “In the third month after the children of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on the same day, they came to the Wilderness of Sinai.” So in Chapter 20, when God speaks of His great deliverance of Israel from the land of Egypt, they are only a few months from having been a people in bondage. Their bondage and their deliverance would have all been so very fresh in their minds. And then in 19:5-6a, God tells the people this: 5 “Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. 6 And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation...” God redeemed this people out of bondage to be His prized possession in all the earth. That is the context for the beginning of Chapter 20.

This is how Exodus 20 begins, “And God spoke all these words, saying” (verse 1) - and then He says exactly and only what He *wants* and *means* and *planned* to say. We are told who it is who is saying each and every one of these words. The source of every word of the Ten Commandments is the subject of this verse: God.

The Old Testament law is often called “the law of Moses,” even in Scripture, sometimes even by Jesus. But Exodus 20:1 makes it clear that the Ten Commandments, every word of them, is the law of *God*. In that sense, “the law of Moses” is a misnomer. Recall that Moses was actually a reluctant prophet. As he stood before the burning bush, just a handful of chapters earlier, he pleaded with God to find another spokesman. This is not the law of that man. This is the law of God. Moses relayed some of the Old Testament law, but all of Israel

actually heard God speak these Ten Commandments with their own ears. Every word was a word spoken directly and audibly to the whole nation.

Moses' recollection of these events throws light on our text, so let's consider that from Deuteronomy 4. Deuteronomy means *second law*, and the book is named that because God directed Moses to give the law to Israel a second time at the conclusion of their forty years of wilderness wanderings, just before they entered the Promised Land. They are to have God's law fresh in their minds as they go into the land where they are to be a distinct, God-loving, obedient people. Deuteronomy Chapter 5 is the second listing of the Ten Commandments, so it is in Deuteronomy 4 where Moses recounts the lead-up to God speaking from Mount Sinai. Let me bring out several sections from that account.

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 1 "Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I teach you to observe, that you may live, and go in and possess the land which the Lord God of your fathers is giving you. 2 You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you."

When God speaks, we *must* listen. We often make light of each other's words, but whoever else's words we discount, we must *never* do that to *God's words*. We must never *add* one single word to His words. We must never *take away* one single word from His words. You and I should have a *special kind of listening* just for His words. Yes, we should pay attention to the words of our friends, of others who have something to say to us, certainly of people who are in authority over us, but we ought to have a *distinct* and *special* kind of listening for the words of the God who rules in heaven. When He speaks, we must earnestly listen. When He speaks, we must give *careful, reverent* attention to each word, not adding anything, not taking away anything.

Deuteronomy 4:11-13, 11 "Then you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, and the mountain burned with fire to the midst of heaven, with darkness, cloud, and thick darkness. 12 And the Lord spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of the words, but saw no form; you only heard a voice. 13 So He declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to perform, the Ten Commandments; and He wrote them on two tablets of stone."

All the people heard the Ten Commandments directly from the mouth of God. You can't really discern that in Exodus 20. You are left wondering if everyone heard it, or if Moses heard it and related it to the rest. But in Deuteronomy it is crystal clear. God spoke the Ten Commandments, and all the people heard it. With the rest of the law, God spoke to Moses and then Moses related it to the people. The giving of the Ten Commandments was *very different* in that sense. All the people heard the voice God, out of the midst of fire and cloud. And God wrote these commandments on the two tablets of stone.

Question: Was the law the law before it was written on stone? In other words, did God judge murder before Exodus 20? Yes. Cain murdered his brother, and God judged him for it. Did

God judge idolatry before Exodus 20? Yes. People who engaged in the worship of false gods were guilty before the one true God prior to Exodus 20. The law was and is written on the heart. This is the argument that Paul makes in Romans 2:15, where he says that the Gentiles “show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness...” God has made us with an *internal sense* that the things which violate the Ten Commandments are wrong.

But since Genesis 3, when sin entered the world, the heart is *warped* and *distorted* and *deceptive* and *bent towards sin*. What does that mean? It means you’ll talk yourself out of all the commands, even though you know in your heart of hearts that murder is wrong, adultery is wrong, lying is wrong, cheating on your spouse is wrong, and on and on. God made you knowing that wrong is wrong, but given *time* and *practice*, more and more you’ll make your conscience shut up. Because you want to be God. Because you don’t want to be constrained or governed. This is the natural man. The heart is warped, and more warped over time, as you get better at practicing how to escape those internal promptings. The heart is distorted, and more distorted over time, deceptive, and more deceptive over time, as you practice sin and get dull to the pangs of conscience. You can make it be quiet, to some extent, over time. So God writes it in stone and then has it kept in the Ark of the Covenant. We need that. It is written on our hearts, but we need it etched in stone, where we can’t distort it or erase it to suit our own inclinations. We need it etched in stone because of what happened to human nature in Genesis 3. We need to be *forced to know* that these are God’s unchangeable words.

Deuteronomy 4:32-36, 32 “For ask now concerning the days that are past, which were before you, since the day that God created man on the earth, and ask from one end of heaven to the other, whether any great thing like this has happened, or anything like it has been heard. 33 Did any people ever hear the voice of God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and live? 34 Or did God ever try to go and take for Himself a nation from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, by wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by great terrors, according to all that the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? 35 To you it was shown, that you might know that the Lord Himself is God; there is none other besides Him. 36 Out of heaven He let you hear His voice, that He might instruct you; on earth He showed you His great fire, and you heard His words out of the midst of the fire.”

Moses identifies this as *unique in human history* up to that point. He invites you to go from one end of heaven to the other. Start at creation, ask anyone who has ever lived if God has ever dealt with a people like this, God speaking directly to a nation, *en masse*, all together, with these great accompanying signs. You will find that this has never happened before or since. This is unique.

Matthew Henry says this of the Ten Commandments: “They were not only spoken audibly... but with a great deal of dreadful pomp.” In other words, this was not a still, quiet, unaccompanied voice. This was God from heaven, coming in cloud and thick darkness and

fire, speaking to the people and with the warning, if you even set foot on this mountain, you must die, because the holy God is here, *commanding*.

God did speak before Exodus 20, but not like this. He almost always spoke to someone who then relayed what He said. God did give revelation before Exodus 20, but never by writing it on stone with His own finger. Think of the permanency which is communicated by God, writing it Himself on stone, and then commanding that an ark be made to preserve it. So when we read, "And God spoke all these words, saying: ...," understand all that is behind that. God is speaking in a unique way. God is not speaking the Ten Commandments through a mediator. God came in fire and spoke directly to the people. God Himself made sure there could be no misunderstanding about whose words these were. You have to come away from this text knowing that God left no room for doubt in the minds of this entire people. Hundreds of thousands of people. God spoke to them, and not one of them could doubt. "Are these God's words? Did Moses relay them rightly?" They could never ask those questions. God did something very unique here when he spoke all these words. So we are not free to take or leave these words. It is God who spoke them. We are bound to receive them and obey.

Consider James 2:10-11.

10 For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all.
11 For He who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.

James speaks of the law as *a unity*. What does that mean? It means that no individual law is sacred *per se*, just for its own sake. It is *God* who is sacred. The Law-Giver is sacred. So the law can never be a menu off of which you obey all except one. Violating one law is treason against the Law-Giver. It is an act of *unholiness* against the *holy, holy, holy* Law-Giver. It is not a *partial credit* test, where there are ten laws, and if you obey nine of them, you get a score of 90%. It is a *pass/fail* test, where all the laws hang together. You obey them as a *unified whole*, or you fail, and what lies behind that is the holiness of the Law-Giver. *He* is what is sacred. The laws aren't an exaltation of moral principles. They are an exaltation of the character of God, who expresses Himself through the commandments. The Law-Giver is sacred, and that makes the laws meaningful, valuable, important, *inescapable*.

Now consider Exodus 20:2, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." Here we have the self-identification of the Law-Giver. "I am the LORD." Capital L, capital O, capital R, capital D. LORD. This is how you will find it in most Bibles. That isn't because the Hebrew word is in all caps. That isn't how Hebrew works. It is that the translators are looking for a way to cue you, to identify that this is a very specific word for God. The Hebrew word *transliterated*, meaning not simply translated from one language to another by word meanings, but brought over letter by letter from Hebrew letters into English letters, is something like *Jehovah*. Jehovah literally means "the existing one."

That takes us right back to the burning bush. "I'm sending you to liberate these people, Moses." "What do I tell them if they ask who sent me?" "Tell them 'I AM' sent you." (Exodus 3).

The existing One. Not like I exist and you exist. God exists, and *only because God exists*, I can exist. All life comes from Him. All reality is rooted in Him. No God, then no anything else. Everything finds its life and existence in Him, but God doesn't find His existence in anything outside of Himself. You and I need food and water and sleep and all sorts of things to continue to exist. He needs nothing but just being Himself to exist - He exists, period. This is a very deep well. Our minds don't have rope enough to even approach measuring the depths of it. My existence, my life is rooted in Him. I exist because He is the existing One. He is Jehovah. All life is in Him and only in Him.

Jehovah has the ultimate claim on me as my Life-Giver. And so, because He is my Life-Giver, He asserts his right to be the Law-Giver. Life-Giver is Law-Giver. Argue with that logic. Try to deny the one who gave you your life the right to give you your laws. "You made me. And You have given me every breath I have ever breathed. *But You will not govern me!*" Try that logic on for size. That shows the madness of rebellion against God, the Life-Giver and Law-Giver. Who can say that it's wrong for the Life-Giver to be the Law-Giver. No one. All must concede that is *perfectly right*. He gave me my life. He has the right to *govern* me, the right to *rule* me, the right to *command* my obedience, and to tell me how I ought to spend this life He has given.

Continuing in verse 2, "I am the Lord, *your God*." If we transliterate that Hebrew word rendered "God," bringing it over letter by letter from Hebrew to English, we get something like *Elohim*. Overwhelmingly it is simply translated "God" in the Old Testament, but it literally means "ruler," "judge". God as the supreme as ruler. God as the supreme judge. As such, He gives these Ten Commandments.

But notice, this isn't *generalized*. "I am God, I am Ruler, I am Judge, I give you these laws." That would be sufficient. But God goes much further: it is *particularized*. "I am *your* God. You are a distinct people and I am your God." This is wonderful! Consider to Isaiah 43:1-4.

1 But now, thus says the Lord, who created you, O Jacob, and He who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; you are Mine. 2 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, nor shall the flame scorch you. 3 For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior; I gave Egypt for your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in your place. 4 Since you were precious in My sight, you have been honored, and I have loved you; therefore I will give men for you, and people for your life.

God says to this people, "You are mine!" "I created you. I formed you. I am the LORD. I am the existing One out of which comes your existence, and I redeemed you. *I came and got you! You are mine!*"

Thomas Watson says this: "... 'thy God,'... This, though a preface to the law, is pure gospel."

“I am the Lord, *your God*.” God is introducing His law, but that is gospel! What right do you have to this? God is holy. You are *not* holy. Yet He says, “Fear not, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by your name. You are Mine.” Think of how sweet those phrases are! These are gospel words! Jehovah Elohim has laid claim to this people for their good, because He loves them. It’s right here in Isaiah 43. He redeemed a people because they were precious in His sight. He *honored* them. He *loved* them. He tells them not to be afraid. “I have redeemed you. I bought you back. You were slaves, but I bought you back. You are mine.”

So, yes, God has claimed this people. But what is implied is that *this also gives this people a claim on Him!* “You can call me your God. You can cry out to me in your time of need. I am your God. You can lay claim to the privileges of having Me as your God.” Because this people belongs to God, they have a rightful claim. This purchased people and God belong to each other. He is their God, and they are His people. You see that language repeatedly in the Old Testament. “I will be your God, and you will be My people.” He claims them, giving them the right to claim Him. Here it is, the gospel in the preface to the law. His people have a claim on this God.

Meanwhile, while this is happening at Mount Sinai, God is overwhelmingly passing over the other nations, the other peoples of the earth. Not comprehensively, but overwhelmingly. God was letting them chase whatever they loved and then giving them whatever that deserved. And that is what it means for God to pass over you. It means for Him to just let you be governed by your very own inclinations, to let you chase everything you find pleasing and love, and then to give you whatever that deserves. It is a broad road that leads to destruction when God passes over you. He leaves you to prove what you love by the things you pursue, and then He simply gives you the paycheck for that. Romans 6:23a, “For the wages of sin is death...” God, at this time in history, was overwhelmingly letting the nations chase their lusts into destruction, but not Israel, not *His people*. He went and got them and said, “I’m your God. I’m not just going to let you chase your lusts over the cliff. I love you. And I am going to constrain you *as an act of love*.”

That brings us to the final two phrases: “...who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” (Exodus 20:2b). This was a people living in Egypt, a land where idolatry reigned, and all the wickedness that inevitably accompanies idolatry. When you abandon God in order to chase after false gods, you end up with wickedness of every kind. This is where they lived. Thomas Watson says, “You will sooner be corrupted by idolaters, than they will be converted by you.” That is simply the proverb, “bad company corrupts good character,” on a national scale. It is people living right in the middle of unchecked idolatry, surrounded by all the wickedness which travels with idolatry. By and large, with exceptions wrought by the Spirit of God, you’ll sooner be corrupted by the idolaters than they will be converted by you.

God wanted Israel to be a peculiar people, a separate people, a holy people set apart for Him. He wanted a people He was making to be like Him. So he brought them out of Egypt, where they were drowning in idolaters all around, and in the wickedness that idolatry nurtures. This was a people living in bondage, subjected to cruel taskmasters, with Pharaoh the greatest and cruelest of all. They were subject to unending toil, and when their taskmasters became

afraid of how God was multiplying them and making them strong, their taskmasters forced them to kill their male children. Moses came out of this part of their history. By the hand of God, Moses survived when so many of the Jewish male children didn't. And when God led Moses and Aaron to liberate Abraham's descendants, Pharaoh said: "I'll teach this idle people who don't have enough to do, so they ask to go worship a foreign god! I'll increase their labors. Same amount of bricks, but now no hay. Find your own hay. I used to give you hay for making the bricks. Now get your own hay and make the same number of bricks!" (Exodus 5). He was crushing them. No mercy. No rest. And God said "Enough! I'm claiming these people. I'm bringing these people out. Enough of the cruel taskmasters. I have heard their cries. I will be their Master."

Calvin says this of the commandments: "...it would not be enough for men to be compelled by servile fear to bear its yoke, unless they were also attracted by its sweetness, and willingly endured it... in order to bind them the better to Himself, He reminds them also of their former condition; for Egypt was like a house of bondage, from whence the Israelites were delivered. Wherefore, they were no more their own masters, since God had purchased them unto Himself." What is Calvin saying? We *ought* to obey the commandments. They're good. They're right. But just fear that God will judge us is never enough for us. So God, in His mercy, does what He has no obligation to do: He accompanies the commandments with *sweetness*. God reminds the people, "I'm for you. I brought you out of bondage. Not from under one cruel taskmaster just to be under a new taskmaster - I love you! My intentions towards you are kind intentions."

God adds sweetness to commandment-keeping. He introduces the law by reminding us that we used to be under the bondage of a cruel taskmaster. He is the deliverer, not the new taskmaster. He loves us! His commands are for our good. God adds sweetness to obedience. He entices us to obedience, though we have no right to expect enticements, and He has every right to command without extending them. It is simply His goodness, His kindness, His graciousness, His mercy towards us. The commandments are an expression of love from a kind Master who has delivered us from a cruel taskmaster! He wants us to remember, so He reminds us in His preface. He positions the commandments as an expression of love from a kind Master who has delivered a people from a cruel taskmaster. At the very beginning of the Ten Commandments, God reminds us that this Law-Giver is our *deliverer*.

This all makes me think several things.

First, God should be worshiped for speaking to us, and giving us a written record of what He has spoken. Was He obligated to reveal Himself? Did He *have to*, or *need to*, take us for His own? No, but He *has* spoken, and He *has* written, so that our bent towards self-deception and wiggling out of it could be stopped in its tracks by having His words in black and white. We should be thankful for that. We need that. You without your Bible is not the same as you with your Bible. God designed it that way. He gave us something immovable, unchangeable, to help us anchor ourselves, so we wouldn't just drift away through self-deception.

Second, and most importantly, understand that God bringing the Israelites out of slavery is a *picture of greater things*. God bringing Israel out of their bondage is a picture of *spiritual realities* which have been fulfilled by the Lord Jesus. The Exodus was real. Egypt was real. Israel was real. The bondage was real. The deliverance was real. But it was actually a picture of a greater spiritual reality, that spiritual slaves, slaves to the devil, would be liberated by the Lord Jesus Christ. Exodus 20:1-2 must have been very sweet to Old Testament Israelites, bringing them to a remembrance that God had delivered them from their bondage. How much sweeter should it be for the Christian, who lives in the reality which the Exodus merely pictured, *who had an infinitely greater bondage!* As bad as the bondage in Egypt was, as cruel of a taskmaster as Pharaoh was, it was *the lesser bondage* by far. Spiritual bondage is the highway to *eternal agony*. As sweet as it must have been to Old Testament Israel to hear of their redemption, it should be so much sweeter to hear that Jesus Christ has been sent from heaven to be a great Redeemer, our great Savior.

Finally, having been born again, I want to *consciously offer obedience as an expression of my love for God* - Father, Son, and Spirit. My Maker and my Redeemer is the LORD. Capital L, capital O, capital R, capital D. He is the existing One. I have a life because, and only because, He exists. He made me, and His claim on me - and my obedience - is absolute. But I haven't obeyed, and instead of passing over me, He redeemed me. *He came and got me*. I want to consciously offer obedience as an expression of love to Him. My lusts are clamoring to be served. I can say "no" to my remaining corruptions, because the work of Jesus not only breaks the *penalty* of sin, it breaks the *power* of sin. And when I say "no," I want it to be a fragrant offering, not just a lifeless gesture which reflects nothing more than the doing of duty. "You made me. You redeemed me. You love me. Thank You. I love You. Please give me the grace to obey You." This is growing in Christlikeness. Jesus always obeyed because He loved - and loves - His Father.

His ways *are* lovely. Let's walk in them and reciprocate His love.

Chapter 3

One God to Worship

Exodus 20:3

"You shall have no other gods before Me."

The first two verses of Exodus 20 comprise the *inspired preface*, meaning God's own preface to the Ten Commandments. "And God spoke all these words, saying: 'I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.'" God lays claim to being God, and to being *their* God. He lays claim to them, essentially saying, "I went and got you. I claimed you, and you have a claim on Me." God has *asserted His right* to be the Law-Giver, and it is a double claim. The first claim is that their existence comes entirely from Him. They exist because He is the existing One. Their Life-Giver is their Law-Giver. This is completely logical. What you create, you have the inherent right to govern. The second claim

is that He redeemed them, He bought them out of the enslavement of a cruel taskmaster. They are not their own. He bought them at a price, and they belong to Him.

Now we embark on a commandment by commandment study of the Ten Commandments, and as it was set forward in Chapter 1, we will generally follow this pattern:

1. What the commandment requires.
2. What the commandment forbids.
3. What the commandment teaches about God.
4. How we have failed to keep the commandment.
5. How the Lord Jesus has perfectly kept the commandment.

Each commandment will normally have two chapters, the first covering one through three, and the second covering four and five.

The 1st Commandment: “You shall have no other god’s before Me.” (Exodus 20:3).

There are no other gods. God stands by Himself, utterly alone in His Godhood. He alone is worthy, and He is *so* worthy. No one except Him deserves ultimate allegiance, affection, or trust. This commandment exists, yes, so that we would identify our idols and smash them, but it *more fundamentally* exists so that our eyes would be fixed on the one true God, that our hearts would be captivated by His ultimate beauty and worth. There *is* a God to be worshiped, a God who *ought* to be worshiped, and we should take it as the great privilege of our lives to worship Him and be His people.

What the 1st Commandment requires

I want to begin by going back to a critical point from Chapter 1, because *Jesus’ view of the law should be my view of the law*. I don’t think there is any controversy there. However it is that Jesus conceives of the law, views the law, holds the law, is how *I* should conceive of, view, and hold the law. In Matthew 22, answering the question as to which is the great commandment in the law, Jesus said this:

37 Jesus said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ 38 This is the first and great commandment. 39 And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40 On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

Love is the fulfillment of the law. So even though the 1st Commandment is *framed in the negative* - it is a “You shall *not*,” “*Don’t* do this” - the 1st Commandment, maybe more than any other commandment in all the Bible, is a restatement of the great commandment to love God with all the heart, soul, mind, and strength (the parallel account in Mark adds “strength”). This is the real issue at hand. Is there affection for God in your heart? Do you love him? You *must* love Him. This is what the 1st Commandment says. There is a God in heaven who is worthy of every ounce of your affection, and you *must* love Him. If you only come away thinking in

terms of what you must *not* do, you will have a half-truth at best. It would be tragic if we came away from the 1st Commandment with no more than “Don’t do this,” “Don’t do that.” This is about a glorious God who is worthy of all your affection, and the Bible says you must worship Him.

As we work our way through all ten of the commandments, we’re going to find that each of these coins has two sides. Some will say *do this*, but those will imply to *not do* other things. Others will be framed in the negative, saying *don’t do this*, and those will imply to *do* other things. Each commandment, whether framed in the positive or framed in the negative, has a set of things we are being commanded to *do*, and also a set of things we are being commanded *not to do*. So the 1st Commandment is framed in the negative, but there is another side of the coin, and we know that because Jesus says on these two laws - love your God, love your neighbor - hang all the Law and the Prophets. The implication is that as we come to the 1st Commandment, “You shall have no other gods before Me,” we must ask how it relates to love for God.

God is keeping us *from* something in order to keep us *for* something. He is holding us back from something in order to preserve us for something that is truly good, truly worthy. There is a greater objective in His mind than just the *absence* of something. It is the *presence* of something, true, authentic worship of the one true God, which is at the heart of the 1st Commandment. Though it is framed in the negative, it implies that I *do* take the one true God as my God. “You shall have no other gods before Me, but you *shall* have Me as your God, as the great affection of your heart!”

To truly take God as your God involves far more than just signing on to some external patterns, “I go here on Sunday,” “I have a checklist with a little Bible reading and prayer on it.” Praise God for church attendance, Bible reading, and prayer. I don’t mean to diminish those things and make them seem unimportant. *We should* go to church, read our Bibles, pray, and more. All of that is important. But there is meant to be a *heart* behind all of those things, and you can do all of those things *without the heart*. This is what we always have to keep in view.

In John 4, Jesus says that “true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him.” (John 4:23b). God is seeking people who worship Him in spirit and in truth. *Truth* means worshipping Him as He has revealed Himself to be (not as we imagine Him to be), and according to how He has said He desires to be worshiped. So yes, there are patterns for our worship prescribed by God Himself. God cares about those, but it is *spirit and truth*. Joined with truth must be *an overflow of affection for God from the heart*. That is what is meant by *spirit*. True worship is love for God expressed in the patterns of worship He has prescribed. The hearts of true worshipers are never disengaged when they worship. Worship is never just *form* and *formality* for them. Their hearts are *bearing down to express love* for God. They are bowed down in humility and overflow of love for God. What Jesus says in John 4 is about what worshipers *do*, not just what worshipers *refrain from doing*. They are embracing something, not just refraining from something. Yes, we must forsake idolatry, but the 1st Commandment is more fundamentally about who we are to

embrace: God, who is worthy of all of our love, all of our trust, all of our allegiance, all of our worship.

These worshipers who worship in spirit and in truth *attack all rival affections*. They sense rival affections in their hearts and they *wage a holy war* against them. All competing affections have a target on them, because their hearts have been captured by the beauty of the King. He has captivated them. His beauty and worth has captured their hearts. God is their God. God alone is their God, and when they sense a competing affection, they wage a holy war against it, because they know that not only is God their God, they are part of His beloved people. "My God loves me, so I'm rooting out competing affections *to love Him as I ought*." When you take the one true God as your God, He has your affections and your trust. You love Him and you throw yourself upon Him as your only hope. In our wedding vows, almost all of us said something like this: "I take you, forsaking all others, till death parts us." The 1st Commandment is the spiritual equivalent of that. "God, I take You as my God, forsaking all others, and even death won't part us!" You forsake all others in order to take Him as your God. You *must* forsake all others in order to take Him as your God. He can't endure rivals. He can't endure competing affections, and when He sees them in the hearts of His people, *He* wages a holy warfare on them too.

What the 1st Commandment forbids

All other gods are forbidden. That the 1st Commandment is framed in the negative should tell you something. There is a strong bent in your heart to direct your affections and your trust to other things. God would not have framed it in the negative, saying "You shall not," "Don't do this," "Watch out for this," unless there was a strong inclination in your heart towards redirecting your affections and trust away from Him to other gods. No one has a household rule to tell the kids not to eat the slime in the gutters. You don't need a rule for that. No one has a bent towards that. The reason the 1st Commandment is framed this way is because *we need a warning*, because there's something in our hearts that will, since sin enter the world, redirect our affections and our trust. Other "gods" have an attraction.

Let's deal with the actual words of this verse, first with an important and interesting distinction which is lost in English: "You" is singular. It isn't, "You, all as a group, shall have no other gods before Me." It is, "You (eye contact), and you (eye contact), and you (eye contact), and you shall have no other gods before me." God speaks the Ten Commandments to the *nation*, but He addresses the commandments to the *individual*. *You! You* shall have no other gods, and *you* shall have no other gods, and *you*, and *you*. God has come, and He is speaking to hundreds of thousands of people, a great multitude, but the constraint is given to *you* and *you* and *you*.

Consider to Deuteronomy 13:6-9.

6 "If your brother, the son of your mother, your son or your daughter, the wife of your bosom, or your friend who is as your own soul, secretly entices you, saying, 'Let us go and serve other gods,' which you have not known, neither you nor your fathers, 7 of the gods of

the people which are all around you, near to you or far off from you, from one end of the earth to the other end of the earth, 8 you shall not consent to him or listen to him, nor shall your eye pity him, nor shall you spare him or conceal him; 9 but you shall surely kill him; your hand shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people.”

When there is a *corporate obligation*, one shared by us together, there is a sense in which you feel safe if you just run with the pack. Deuteronomy 13 absolutely contradicts that, highlighting that this is the obligation of the *individual*. If the *closest person to you*, if your spouse, or your brother, or your mother, or your father comes and says, “Let’s go serve a false god,” you cannot conceal them, or protect them, or even ignore them. *You* must lead the congregation in administering justice, and the justice required is death. *You* must cast the first stone, as the witness against that loved one. With the 1st Commandment, “You shall have no other gods before Me,” just running with the pack is never acceptable. Going with the flow is never an acceptable excuse. Never, never, never. Obviously, to God this is an offense of the first order. The wages of every sin is death, but with some sins, God doesn’t want to wait to pay the wages. This is one of them, and we should pay attention when God counts a sin to be so devastating that He doesn’t want the wages of death to be delayed.

As in verse two, where the same Hebrew word was rendered “God,” the word rendered “gods” here in verse three can be transliterated *elohim*. It is overwhelmingly translated “God” in the Old Testament, which is a perfectly fine translation, but it literally means *ruler* or *judge*. God is king. God is ruler. God is judge. He has already laid claim to that title - *Elohim* - before He even begins giving the commandments. “Elohim is *Me*.” “Elohim is *no one else*.” “I claim this word, this title. You shall have no other gods, no other rulers or judges in the ultimate sense - no other *elohim* - before Me.”

The phrase “before Me” is *spatial*, not *preferential*. What does that mean? It means it isn’t, “You shall not *prefer* any other gods to me - make sure I’m your favorite,” but rather, “You shall have no other gods *in front of* Me.” The Hebrew word literally means “face”. “You shall have no other gods *in my face*.” God does not simply want to be our favorite god, to simply have preeminence among our gods. God wants to ensure that you bring no other gods before His face. The implication is that no matter how secretly you give away God’s place, it is actually done in front of him. “You shall have no other gods before me in my face.” You thought you hid it, that you had cultivated your idol in the secrecy of your own heart, but it was always before Him, always in His face.

No matter how secretly you give away God’s place, it is in His face. Several of the commentators I studied equate it to adultery in front of your spouse. Shocking. Unthinkable. You recoil from the thought of it. Why would the commentators say that? Because idolatry is called adultery over and over and over again by the Old Testament prophets. *Idolatry is spiritual adultery*. It is cheating on the one to whom you owe faithfulness. You cheat on God when you take other gods. You commit adultery in front of Him when you take other gods. It is always done *before Him*. I hope your mind recoils from that. It should. It should make us think differently about diverting our affections and our trust to another.

Hebrews 4:13: “And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.” You can never serve another god without it being in His face, *before Him*. Every diversion of affection or trust to an unworthy object is open and naked before the one to whom we must give an account.

What does the 1st Commandment forbid? Simply put, it forbids *atheism* and *polytheism*.

To *not* take the one true God as your God is forbidden by the 1st Commandment. Whether you take Him as such or not, reality stands fast: HE IS GOD. “The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God.’” (Psalm 14:1a). It is unlawful *not* to take this God for your God. That is atheism, *no God*. The 1st Commandment forbids it. He is God. He is the existing One.

And it is unlawful to take any god but the God of Scripture, even to say the God of Scripture is the best and highest among the gods. No. All of that is polytheism, *multiple gods*. He has no interest in being the top of the heap of gods. He alone is God, there is no other. Ultimately, when you have a second god, what you *said* was your first god was not the God of Scripture, who doesn’t allow for that, who doesn’t make room for that. You have turned even your conception of God into an idol when you take the second god - and the third and the fourth.

I should also note the immediate context. The Israelites just had direct proof against atheism. They are three months removed from the ten plagues in Egypt, and from crossing the Red Sea on dry land, and now God has descended on the mountain in cloud and fire, and is audibly speaking the Ten Commandments to them. But they also had direct influences of polytheism in Egypt, and they were going to a place with more of the same. Egypt had gods everywhere, and they are going into Caanan, where there are gods everywhere. Understand the context in which the Israelites are hearing the voice from heaven.

What the 1st Commandment teaches about God

No doubt other important things are taught about God by the 1st Commandment, but I offer these three.

1. He is worthy, and He alone is worthy.

Revelation 5 relates a great search for one who is worthy to open a scroll. All of heaven is searched. All of earth is searched. Everything under the earth is searched. No one is found who is worthy to open the scroll and read it. John weeps, then an elder says him, “Do not weep,” because there is one who is worthy. There is a worthy Redeemer who has redeemed a people with His own blood from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. “You shall have no other gods before Me” is rooted in this truth. There is one - and only one - in all the universe who is worthy of our ultimate affection and trust. There is one and only one. He *ought* to be loved. He *ought* to be believed on. It is actually a great privilege.

On the other side of the cross, it isn't burdensome at all. When you've been bought with that Redeemer's blood, the 1st Commandment goes from being a crushing weight to being the greatest honor of your life. It is the privilege of a lifetime to take this God for your God. He is infinitely worthy. He bought you, He reconciled you, He's taking you to heaven to be with Him forever. At His right hand there are pleasures forevermore. That is what He's marked out for you when. What a privilege. What an honor. For the redeemed, *it is pleasure* to worship him. Maybe you have drifted away from that experience, and it jolts you to hear it in those terms. *It is pleasure to worship Him*. If that is you, if you have a sense of distance from it being pleasure to have this God as your God and to have your heart *erupt in affection* - then do heart work. Repent, turn around, return to your first love. Run as fast as you can to reclaim the pleasure of worshiping this God. If you have no frame of reference for this in your personal experience, repent, believe in Jesus Christ, and be saved, and *you will!*

He is worthy. He alone is worthy. That is the heart of the 1st Commandment. It is framed in the negative. "Don't have other gods." "Don't direct your affections and your trust to something else." But what is the heart of that? He is worthy. Only He is worthy.

2. He is alone, separate, "other," *holy*.

All of these mean the same thing. He is alone. He is not lonely, *He stands alone*. He is separate. He's not like anyone else you know or will ever know. He is "other". He is not the best of a category, He is in a category by Himself. He is holy. Many times when we think of *holy*, we think of *righteous*, as if they are synonyms, but to be righteous is only a sliver of what it means to be holy in the fullest sense. To be holy literally means to be set apart, to be distinct.

In Exodus 9:14, God tells Moses to speak this to Pharaoh on His behalf: "for at this time I will send all My plagues to your very heart, and on your servants and on your people, *that you may know that there is none like Me in all the earth*." The plagues were sent upon Pharaoh and his people for one great reason, that they would know that there is none like God in all of creation. God sent this message to an idol worshiper, to the great king of Egypt, with all his gods, and thinking he *was* a god. There is no one like God. Isaiah 46:5: "To whom will you liken Me, and make Me equal and compare Me, that we should be alike?" It is obviously a rhetorical question. You *had better* answer that question, "No one!" "To whom are you likening Me?" "No one!" "To whom will you make Me equal and compare Me?" "No one! No one is like You, no one is equal to You, no one can be compared to You!" God is not the best in a category, He is in a category by Himself.

Consider how Paul says it in 1 Corinthians 8:4-6.

4 Therefore concerning the eating of things offered to idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is no other God but one. 5 For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords), 6 yet for us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we live.

What is Paul saying? False gods are *just make-believe*. God is in that category by Himself. There is no such thing as another god. They are all just inventions. None of them are real.

3. He is a jealous God. He will not share the honor which is due to Him, and He will not be robbed of it.

Isaiah 42:8, "I am the LORD, that is My name; and My glory I will not give to another, nor My praise to carved images." He will not share His glory. He is jealous of His glory, and we are coming to that truth explicitly as part of the 2nd Commandment: "you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, *am a jealous God...*" (Exodus 20:5a). Deuteronomy 4:24, "For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God." It is all over the Bible. He is a consuming fire, a jealous God. He will not share the honor which is due to Him. He will not allow Himself to be robbed of it. *It is a crime for creatures to short-change their Creator*. It is a crime for created ones to short-change the One who gave them their existence.

This all makes me think a couple of things.

First, we need the "*do*" as much as we need the "*don't*". *Don't* have other gods, but *DO* have this God! Render to Him the glory due His name! In that great day when God judges the living and the dead, I firmly believe that the greater crime will not be redirecting affections to the other gods, it will be that what was due to God wasn't given to Him. It is a great crime to give God's place to something else. I know that. But the greater crime is that He is infinitely worthy of all of your affections and your trust, and you wouldn't give them! It was right and good and the most fitting thing in the world, but you wouldn't give them. You withheld them from Him. How could He deserve your affections and your trust more? Study His nature and His character. And on top of that, He sent His only Son from heaven, and still you withheld your affections and your trust! Oh, it is such a crime!

Consider Exodus 34. God hides Moses in the cleft of the rock. He passes before him and shows him just a glimpse of His back so that Moses won't be consumed by His glory.

5 Now the LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord. 6 And the LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, 7 keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation."

What more do you want than a God who would reveal Himself like this, a God full of mercy and compassion, longsuffering and forgiving sin? What more do you want in a God? Why would you withhold your affections and your trust?

We need the “do” as much as we need the “don’t”. Worship this God! He is worthy! Oh, may He capture your heart and make it His own, may He captivate you so that when you sense a rival affection, you wage a holy war against it because it isn’t worthy of your affection or your trust.

Finally, understand that in our natural state (as we are born into the world), *we must have a new heart*. This commandment is for *the worship of a Redeemer*. Only those who have been redeemed can truly worship this Redeemer. Don’t try to law-keep your way into God’s favor. This is for the worship of a Redeemer who doesn’t have law-keeping for salvation, law-keeping for righteousness, hanging over the heads of His people. If you succumb to law-keeping for salvation, you will never be free to worship Him without fear. This commandment is for the worship of a Redeemer who has purchased you with his own blood from every people and tribe and tongue and nation, so that you will be there in that scene in Revelation 5, praising Him for all eternity.

Thomas Watson says this: “It is more honor to serve God, than to have kings serve us... Serving the true God is delightful.” Would God have that be true of us, that it would be more honor for us to serve the God of Scripture than to be served by kings!

Chapter 4

Our Other gods and What Now

I write this chapter in hopes of effectively attacking your false gods. Calvin famously said that the human heart is an idol factory. No sooner have you been jolted awake by the fact that there is a rival affection to God in your heart, and you smash that idol, than another one is forming. I think those of us who have walked with the Lord for a long period of time understand that this is a discouraging reality. Our hearts really are idol factories, so it’s a blessing when we have an opportunity to identify our false gods, so that we can smash them. And it’s a blessing anytime we encounter something which would make us more vigilant against the forming of new idols.

In the last chapter we covered these three topics:

1. What the 1st Commandment requires. In summary, it requires me to have the one true God as my God.
2. What the 1st Commandment forbids. In summary, it forbids atheism, saying there is no God, and polytheism, having multiple gods (which by definition means *false* gods).
3. What the 1st Commandment teaches about God. In summary, it teaches that God and only God is worthy of my love, my trust, my worship, that He is holy, in a category by Himself, and that He is jealous, unwilling to share His glory or be robbed of it.

We now focus on the final two topics of our pattern:

4. How we have failed to keep the 1st Commandment.
5. How the Lord Jesus has perfectly kept the 1st Commandment.

In subsequent chapters, I won't restate the pattern, but you'll see that I'm generally following it.

In our most sane moments, I think we all recognize that God is thoroughly worthy of a lifetime of cheerful, unbroken, adoring obedience. This is what we see in the life of Jesus, and this is what we need to grow in more and more.

How we have failed to obey the 1st Commandment

As I said in the first chapter, mankind has become absolutely expert in shrinking the law. We are practically professionals at it. We know how to whittle it down and qualify it to death, so that it ends up being some shrunken thing which is manageable and externally doable, so we can say we obey that commandment. But what we see in Matthew 5 is Jesus exploding that by taking the law into our *heart motivations*, our *thoughts*, and the *words* that we speak. He says murder is not just an external act which ends a physical life, but that the law against murder extends into our thoughts and words. If you hate your brother, that is a violation of the law against murder. If you speak evil of your brother, that is a violation of the law against murder. So man is always trying to shrink the law and whittle it down, so we can say, "I obeyed that law," but Jesus is having none of it. Jesus expands it out to the limits of what God has always intended, extending it into our motivations, our thoughts, and the words that we speak.

So it simply won't do to think, "I'm not a Muslim," or "I'm not a Mormon," or "I'm not a Jehovah's Witness," and then assume that means you have obeyed the 1st Commandment, "You shall have no other gods before Me." This is about *giving away God's place*, and *professing Christians* can do that in a hundred different ways. God insists on having the place of absolute preeminence, the absolute, unrivaled place of honor. He owns that spot, and He will not be robbed of it by His creatures. But giving away that place happens in the heart, so it can be totally undetected by everyone else around you. Your spouse doesn't know it, your children don't know it, your parents don't know it, your neighbors don't know it, your friends don't know it, *but you gave away God's place of honor*, the place that only God is worthy of.

Let's look at three texts of Scripture which will expand our understanding of the 1st Commandment.

1. Philippians 3:17-19, where Paul writes about *the walk* of the Christian, meaning *the pattern of life*, and he contrasts it with the walk of the unbeliever.

17 Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern. 18 For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: 19 whose end is destruction,

whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame—who set their mind on earthly things.

Paul is describing people who are enemies of the cross. How can you be saved if you're an enemy of the cross? The cross is the only thing that will part you from your sins! Oh, tremble at the thought of being an enemy of the cross. You are an enemy of the one remedy for your soul. If you are the enemy of this medicine, you can never be healed. In verse 19, Paul says *their end is destruction*, and then he says this: “whose god is their *belly*”. They have a fake god. Their belly is their god. Paul gives a further description: they “set their mind on earthly things.” God isn't in their thoughts. Their thoughts are just on this earthly plane. Their eyes never turn upwards.

There is a clear example of this in Genesis 25, though it is an example which can be hard to believe ever happened. If it wasn't in the Bible, you might doubt the person who related it to you. What is in Genesis 25? Esau selling his birthright to Jacob *for a meal of stew*. Esau has been out hunting. He comes in. Jacob has been cooking lentil stew. Esau is famished, so he agrees to sell Jacob his birthright for a meal of the stew. Here is a question for you: Do you think Esau loved stew? “I'll give it all away for this - my brother makes the best stew!” I don't think that's it at all. I think it could have been almost anything.

In Romans 6:12, Paul says this: “Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts.” That is what's happening in Genesis 25, the reason we see a *rational being* do something so *utterly irrational*. Sin is reigning in Esau's mortal body. Since the coming of sin into the world, you have a body of corruption. You are born *bent* towards things which God hates, and backwards towards things He loves, and so sin reigns in your mortal body, and you obey it in its lusts. It craves something and you serve the craving. “I'm hungry, so I'll sell everything. I'll sell my birthright for a meal of stew.” Esau was simply obeying his lusts. The birthright was out there somewhere in the future, but the stew was right here in front of him - *now!* - and his lusts were demanding to be served, so he served them. *Their god is their belly*. This goes so far beyond food. The belly is shorthand for cravings. Lust can be sexual, but it doesn't have to be sexual. It's a craving after any earthly thing. Your sinful nature craves something, it demands to be served, and you sell your birthright.

Have you ever given up something for nothing? Have you ever given up something valuable for something that, looking back on it, was practically nothing? I have. It was because the thing of value was out there in the future, but my lusts were demanding to be served, so I traded it for nothing because the nothing was at hand. Esau isn't alone. Sin reigns in our mortal bodies, and only salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone can break the power of that, and even then the cravings in our flesh still cry out to be served. Paul says to believers, “Don't let sin reign in your mortal bodies!” Christians don't have to serve our lusts. But when we set our minds on earthly things, and God is out of sight, we'll sell it all for nothing, just because the nothing is at hand.

2. Proverbs 10:15a: “The rich man's wealth is his strong city...”

The rich man's money and stuff are his strong city. I said in the last chapter that the essence of having another god is to redirect my affections or my trust away from God, who alone is worthy, to something which is unworthy. Jesus said this: "And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." (Matthew 19:24). That is all but impossible. With man it *is* impossible, but with God all things are possible. Why is it so hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God? Because he doesn't feel his need. He trusts in his riches. His wealth is his strong city. But wait: *God* is the strong tower of His people. The righteous *run to God* and are safe. That's Proverbs 18:10. Not the rich man. His *wealth* is his strong city. He runs to the wrong refuge, so he's lost, because instead of trusting God, who is worthy of it, he trusted his money, because it seemed like such a solid refuge. It was not worthy of his trust. He had a fake god. He had a fake savior. He thought his money would save him. Money will not save you. Only Jesus will save you.

Thomas Watson says that it is idolatry to redirect trust to *the arm of the flesh* ("my strength is enough"), to redirect trust to *wisdom* ("my understanding is enough"), to redirect trust to *goodness* ("my attention to religious duties is enough"). Those are all idols which will fail to see me through. They are fake saviors. Has your trust ever been diverted off of God, who is completely trustworthy, and placed on something which will fail in the end? Are you trusting anything right now that's not worthy of your trust?

Consider 2 Chronicles 16:12, "And in the thirty-ninth year of his reign, Asa became diseased in his feet, and his malady was severe; yet in his disease *he did not seek the LORD, but the physicians.*" He trusted the doctors *instead of* the LORD. This was an ongoing problem for Asa. Earlier in the same chapter, Judah is under attack, and instead of calling on God, he hires the Syrians. God sends a prophet to rebuke him for trusting in the Syrians instead of Him. Is it wrong to go to the doctor? Of course not, not any more than it is wrong to seek allies in war, provided they are the right allies! It's wrong to *trust* the doctor instead of God, to place your confidence in the doctor when you haven't even called on the Lord! Go to the doctor, but *trust* the Lord.

3. 2 Timothy 3:1-5, where Paul warns Timothy about people with a false profession.

1 But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: 2 For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, 3 unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, 4 traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, 5 having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!

From verse 4: "lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God," a redirection of affection to pleasure, away from God. From verse 5, right on the heels of it, "having a form of godliness but denying its power." You can be outwardly respectable to everyone and love pleasure in your heart, rather than God. You can have all the forms, so that everyone says, "Look at that great lady," "Look at that great man." She has her stuff together. He has every external form of godliness. Everything is in place. Only she loves pleasure rather than loving God. He loves

pleasure rather than God. God's place has been given away, when only He is worthy of our affections.

It is only lawful to have *subservient loves*. It is only lawful to have loves underneath the master love of loving God, loves which are *beneath* and *serve* the preeminent love for God. Our other loves must bow to our love for Him. Marital love is designed by God to be that. Marital love is designed by God to be a real and wonderful love which is still beneath the governing master love for God. You love God more than anything or anyone else, and *then* you are fit to truly love a spouse. God gives many, many good gifts. They are pleasures, and they are *meant* to be sweet. The sweetest pleasures are in God, and they are meant to be received with thanksgiving. BUT BE CAREFUL. The most lawful, noble pleasures can supplant God. You can give away His place to them. You can give away God's place to marital love, to love for children, to enjoyment of food, to lawful recreations. Those things were designed to be *subservient loves* and to be received with thanksgiving, *but be careful*.

Have you ever found that you had redirected your highest affections to even a lawful pleasure? There are ways to diagnose this. Your thoughts. "I love God, *but I think about* my team. All the time. Go team!" Your words. "I love the Lord, *but I talk about* my favorite movies. Constantly." Your time. "I love the Lord, *but I spend my time on* my hobbies." "I'm a news junkie." "I'm an exercise junkie." "I'm a friends junkie." "I'm so busy I can hardly scratch out any time to pray or read my Bible. Oh, but I love the Lord." Your money. Where's the money going? "I love the Lord, *but I spend my money on* my vacations. I can't wait for that vacation. I will not be deprived of that vacation." Your thoughts, your words, your time, your money - they tell the tale.

I picked some things that should hurt me a little. I do want to touch my sacred cows, and your sacred cows too. You know what sacred cows are, right? It has become a figurative term, but it comes from literal cows in India, wandering among the hungry, yet no one dares to take them for food because they are thought to be sacred. If you were to slaughter one to feed the hungry, you might be lynched, but the truth is that a lot of good would come from killing those cows! It is permissible to preach these things as long as we don't get too specific in applying them. Well brethren, today we're applying them!

In Luke 14:26, Jesus says this, "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple." Those relationships are your *closest* relationships, they're *lawful* relationships, they're often *exceedingly happy* relationships. And your affections for those people must *seem like hatred* compared to your love for Jesus. Otherwise you cannot be His disciple. This is not a calling to be a super-Christian. This is not a calling to be a special Christian. This is a calling to be *a Christian*. Just a real Christian. Just a biblical Christian. Oh, friends, He will not share His place! He will not be robbed of it. He must have the place of preeminence, of ultimate honor, of ultimate affection and trust.

This is the great commandment from the Gospel of Mark. In Mark 12:30, Jesus says, "And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind,

and with all your strength.’ This is the first commandment.” Thomas Watson says this, “Many heathens have worshipped their false gods with more seriousness and devotion than some Christians do the true God... Let us abhor ourselves for our deadness and formality in religion; how we have professed God, and yet have not worshipped him as God.” I had a little taste of this my freshman year in college. I roomed with the valedictorian of my high school class, a Muslim. He had his false god, and he was devoted to him in a way that put me to shame. They serve an unworthy god with *so much vigor*, and we languish in our worship of the one true God, *so halfheartedly!* Where does that leave us?

How the Lord Jesus has perfectly obeyed the 1st Commandment

I think the obvious place to start is Matthew 4, which just goes directly to the point. Satan tells Jesus to worship him. I don’t know how you get a more direct line than that.

1 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2 And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward He was hungry. 3 Now when the tempter came to Him, he said, “If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.” 4 But He answered and said, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.’ ” 5 Then the devil took Him up into the holy city, set Him on the pinnacle of the temple, 6 and said to Him, “If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down. For it is written: ‘He shall give His angels charge over you,’ and, ‘In their hands they shall bear you up, Lest you dash your foot against a stone.’ ” 7 Jesus said to him, “It is written again, ‘You shall not tempt the Lord your God.’ ” 8 Again, the devil took Him up on an exceedingly high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. 9 And he said to Him, “All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me.” 10 Then Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve.’ ” 11 Then the devil left Him, and behold, angels came and ministered to Him.

“Give way to something, Jesus, anything.” “Give way to food.” “Give way to presumption.” “Give way to ambition.” Jesus comes back with Scripture, once, twice, three times. This is how you treat idols. You quote the Bible to idols. You quote the Bible about idols. You let the Bible smash your idols. Jesus had no idols. Jesus wouldn’t pick up an idol.

One of the things I love dearly about the Gospel of John is that we see over and over and over again that Jesus said only what His Father gave Him to say, and did only what His Father gave Him to do. A perfect representation of this is John 12:27-28, where Jesus was troubled about the approaching cross: 27 “Now My soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save Me from this hour’? But for this purpose I came to this hour. 28 Father, glorify Your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, saying, “I have both glorified it and will glorify it again.” We see the same in Gethsemane, as Jesus agonized over the prospect of bearing sin. “Not my will. Your will.”

Jesus’ affections and trust, throughout His incarnation, were always and only fixed upon His Father. We have many examples in the gospels of Jesus going away just to pray. Jesus had

cravings. *He craved fellowship with his Father.* That was a craving He served, to make the most of opportunities to be with His Father. In all these instances, what is Jesus doing? He is loving His Father with all of His heart, and with all of His soul, and with all of His mind, and with all of His strength. He left heaven to take on flesh and keep the law so He could give His righteousness away. That's what we're witnessing in the gospels. Jesus did not consider His rightful place of glory in heaven to be something He should cling to. He relinquished it to take on flesh. He cheerfully and thankfully obeyed His Father every day of His life. He perfectly kept the 1st Commandment (and every commandment) so that He would have a righteousness to give away.

It is precious to see Jesus having no other gods before His Father, expressing His love for His Father through His obedience, so that He would have a righteousness to give away. As the Son of Man, He came and obeyed as a man. He was the God-Man, taking on flesh and perfectly obeying the 1st Commandment to win salvation for His people.

This all makes me think a couple of things.

First, it makes me think of 2 Corinthians 5:21, the Good News distilled to its barest essentials: "For He [God the Father] made Him [Jesus, God the Son] who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." Think about how impossibly rigorous the command to love God with *all* your heart, *all* your soul, *all* your mind, and *all* your strength is for sinful people like us. It makes me catch my breath. I know I haven't loved God that way for an hour of my life.

What is to be done then? God made His perfectly undefiled Son - Jesus knew no sin - to *be* sin for me. God took all of my sins against Him, all of the variations of the ways I have failed to love Him, and heaped them upon His Son, so that His anger towards me for giving away His place to unworthy things could be turned away from me and satisfied at the cross. Jesus drank the last drop of the cup of God's righteous fury against me, leaving the cup dry with not a single drop for me to drink. I have become the righteousness of God by being joined to His Son by faith, as if I had *thought* like Jesus, and *spoken* like Jesus, and *done* like Jesus for every moment of my life. Glorious! How much favor from God is lavished on one who has lived a lifetime without a single stain of sin? That favor is mine! That favor can be yours.

Backing up in that same chapter, Paul says this: 10 "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. 11 Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men..." (2 Corinthians 5:10-11a). A day is coming when each of us will stand before the judgment seat of Christ to receive according to what we have done, whether good or bad. *Oh no!* But the Gospel is the Good News that you can have *Jesus' life* substituted for your life, His record substituted for your record, His full, complete, cheerful obedience substituted for what you have. You know, if the Bible is the standard, what the verdict on your life must be. "Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men," persuade them that they must stand before that Judge, and then an eternity of eternities after that, endless ages. The terrors of hell extend forever.

The stakes couldn't be higher. The joys offered in Christ are beyond imagination. "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him." (1 Corinthians 2:9). But the terrors of hell extend forever too. And there's nothing in between. You either gain Christ and His merit by faith, and all the joys and pleasures He has planned for His people for eternity, or you stand before an all-knowing Judge on your own record, immediately followed by endless ages of separation and torment. There is no third option.

Finally, all this makes me know I should be *more humble*, and I should be *more happy*. I hope I have given you some sense of how far short of the 1st Commandment we are. Peel back the many layers of what it means to love the Lord with all the heart, all the soul, all the mind, all the strength. Have you done that for one hour of your life? I know I haven't. That should humble us. But the more you recognize the mountain of your sin, the sweeter God's grace is to you, the sweeter rest in Christ is to you. Let this study make you more humble, and let this study make you more happy.

We *have* allowed ourselves to be governed by rival affections, and given away God's place. God is worthy of white hot affection. Who can say, "My affections are often white hot?" *Often*, let alone *comprehensively*? But Jesus died for sinners. He gives his righteousness away to *all* who throw themselves upon Him and His work on the cross. Be more humble, be more happy. There is a goodness to being laid low by the truth of God's word. That is not to be despised. And there is a happiness which comes from seeing how completely *necessary* grace is, and how freely it flows to all who repent and believe. Jesus Christ is a real Savior who delivers to the uttermost.

Chapter 5

A God of Revelation, Not Imagination

Exodus 20:4-6

4 "You shall not make for yourself a carved image—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 nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, 6 but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments."

God has revealed Himself to us. You have the Bible. That's what He wants you to know about Himself. The Bible is the revelation of truth about God. How you might imagine God to be is *not* truth about God. That is what the 2nd Commandment is fundamentally about. God is glorious, and He has revealed Himself to be glorious in Scripture. Nothing is more fitting in all the world than that we would worship Him, and that we would worship Him as He has said He desires to be worshiped, that He would be God *over* our worship. Are we a cheerful, thankful,

redeemed people, who are happy to know what pleases God in His worship, and happy to do that and only that? May He make us such a people!

What the 2nd Commandment requires

This is our second commandment, and the second commandment which is *framed in the negative*. It tells you what *not* to do, “Thou shall not...” But we also think back to Jesus in Matthew 22, where He says that all the law hangs on the great commandments of love, to love God and to love neighbor. So we accept that God is wisest in how He gives His commandments, and was wise to frame this in the negative, “You shall not make for yourself a carved image,” but we also frame this with reference to the great commandment and say that this is actually about loving God with the heart, soul, and mind.

“You shall not” is simply God putting His finger on a love-killer. We must teach our minds to think about it that way. God is putting His finger right on what will kill love, and carved images will kill love for God. You must not make a carved image because it kills love for God. So what is the positive heart behind the negative command, forbidding any images of any kind? That we worship the one true God as He reveals Himself to be. That we love the self-revealed God, and we worship Him as He tells us to worship Him.

The God of Scripture is a real God who has not left us wondering. He has revealed Himself. You probably have several Bibles. In that Book, God has told you what He’s like. Who is the one true God? The God of the Bible. Our God has not left us to devise worship according to our own tastes and preferences, and of course we all have the desire to worship according to our own tastes and preferences. Those have worked their way out into how churches worship God. It isn’t right to do that. God doesn’t want that kind of worship.

Consider Deuteronomy 4:15-19, a text which throws light on the 2nd Commandment. It speaks of images, using many of the same words and phrases from the 2nd Commandment, but it also expands on the topic, giving us insights which are not included in the commandment itself. In a way, it is God’s own exposition of the 2nd Commandment, and that is just what we need.

15 “Take careful heed to yourselves, for you saw no form when the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, 16 lest you act corruptly and make for yourselves a carved image in the form of any figure: the likeness of male or female, 17 the likeness of any animal that is on the earth or the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, 18 the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground or the likeness of any fish that is in the water beneath the earth. 19 And take heed, lest you lift your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun, the moon, and the stars, all the host of heaven, you feel driven to worship them and serve them, which the LORD your God has given to all the peoples under the whole heaven as a heritage.

God gave those created things to us as a gift, as an inheritance. They are not to be worshiped. They are to be *enjoyed*, but *not worshiped*. They are not God, and they are not

like God. They are just the creation. Moses is describing the giving of the Ten Commandments. Right at the beginning, verse 15, "Take careful heed to yourselves..." Pay attention! Watch out! "For you saw no form when the LORD spoke to you." In God's most direct and public revelation, at the giving of the Ten Commandments, when God appeared to the whole nation in fire and thunders, *there was no image*. God *spoke*. The other revelations in the Old Testament are God revealing Himself, again, not in or by *images*, but in and by *words* to a prophet. But even when God gave the Ten Commandments directly, there was no image, only a voice speaking words, words which God then inscribed in stone.

Images, no. Words, yes. Why? Here is what Jesus says in John 4:24, "God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." Our worship should be *spiritual* worship, because God is Spirit. Our worship should not be the *sensual* worship of forms and images, relying on pictures and statues and images and representations. What the 2nd Commandment is teaching us is this: ***Every representation is a MISrepresentation***. Every image of God is a misrepresentation of God. The *words of Scripture* reveal Him.

All images dishonor God, but the words of Scripture honor Him, so honor those words by being satisfied by them. Love Him by studying Him in the Bible. Learn God's self-revelation. Don't learn what images and statues and all the things that come out of our imaginations teach. The words of Scripture do not come out of our imagination. You would never concoct this God. You never would. But here He is in Scripture. He has revealed Himself to you. So if you're going to really love God, you have to love the God of His words, the God of Scripture, God as He has revealed Himself to be. If you love a creation of your imagination, you don't love God. That isn't God.

What the 2nd Commandment forbids

"You shall not make for yourself a carved image - 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; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them." This is not just an extension of the 1st Commandment, "You shall have no other gods before Me." It definitely has a relationship to the 1st Commandment, but it isn't just simply an extension of it. I think it's more accurate to say that the 1st Commandment forbids other gods, false gods, while the 2nd Commandment forbids worshiping the *true* God in a *false way*. That is a better way to think of how these two commandments relate to each other.

This is a longer commandment in word count, and there is a danger in segmenting the verses which comprise it too rigidly. We dare not pluck out a phrase and look it with tunnel vision, walling it off from the rest. If you do that, you may think the meaning is that no images are acceptable for any purpose. But then you're confronted with temple worship, and the temple was *filled* with images, and they were *commanded* images. Images of cherubim over the mercy seat (Exodus 25:22), and priestly garments "for glory and for beauty," (Exodus 28:2), with gems to represent the tribes, and golden bells and pomegranates on the hem. And on and on. But none of the images in the temple were *images of God*. There were no representations of God. There were many glorious and beautiful images, and God actually

commanded it to be that way, so to section off a phrase and say it means no images for any purpose at all doesn't pass the test.

Or you can section off another phrase and think it means that all images are okay as long as they're not for worship, that we can have any images we want, and they're only bad if you bow down to them or serve them. But if you look at the unified whole of the 2nd Commandment, what you get is twofold. First: All representations *of God* are forbidden. Any likeness of anything from anywhere is forbidden *as a representation of God*. The created can never be offered up as a representation of the Creator. That is forbidden. And therefore, Second: Use of any representation of God *in worship* is forbidden. The point is that a *unified view* of the 2nd Commandment gives us this twofold proposition which should never be separated. The two statements which form the proposition are inextricably unbreakable. All representations of God are forbidden, and therefore use of any representation of God in worship is forbidden.

These two things are bonded together because of the nature of the human heart, the nature of images, and the nature of worship. In other words, how can I create or receive something as a representation of God and *not* direct reverence to it? The moment I make or receive a representation, and say God is like this statue or picture, because of the nature of the human heart, and the nature of images, and the nature of worship, I will *unavoidably* direct reverence towards that image. The 2nd Commandment teaches us that when you make something and say, "This represents God," you reverence it.

Let's consider two passages. The first is a prime example from the Old Testament, and the second is New Testament commentary from Paul on the matter.

1. Exodus 32:1-8, the account of the golden calf.

1 Now when the people saw that Moses delayed coming down from the mountain, the people gathered together to Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make us gods that shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." 2 And Aaron said to them, "Break off the golden earrings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." 3 So all the people broke off the golden earrings which were in their ears, and brought them to Aaron. 4 And he received the gold from their hand, and he fashioned it with an engraving tool, and made a molded calf. Then they said, "This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!" 5 So when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow is a feast to the LORD." 6 Then they rose early on the next day, offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play. 7 And the LORD said to Moses, "Go, get down! For your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves. 8 They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them. They have made themselves a molded calf, and worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!' "

Question: Is Aaron making them a new God? It sounds like that's what they asked for in verse 1, "Come, make us gods that shall go before us." "Make us some new gods." But is that what Aaron did? Look at the end of verse 4. Aaron has made the calf. What does he say? "This is your god, O Israel, *that brought you out of the land of Egypt!*" That isn't a new god! *God* brought them out of the land of Egypt. Remember, God introduced the Ten Commandments by saying that, *before* the making of the golden calf! "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." (Exodus 20:2). What does Aaron say in verse 5? "Tomorrow is a feast to the LORD." Capital L, Capital O, Capital R, Capital D. Anytime you see that in your Bible, it means Jehovah, the self-existing one, the most holy name of God, the name by which the God of Scripture calls Himself. The calf was not made to be a new god. It was meant to be a way of worshiping the "old" God with an image.

Think of the history. God spoke at Mount Sinai. The people were terrified, and it was right for them to fear God in that moment. So they asked Moses to mediate. "From now on, ask God to speak to you, and *you* speak to us." Here is the truth with images: No one fears them. They are all quite tame and predictable. You *make* them, and you can *manage* them. We want a God that answers to us and not the other way around. Images serve that purpose. Nobody's scared of that golden calf. Nobody's frightened by that calf. They made him out of their earrings, and they could manage him. They replaced a God who frightened them with a god that was no threat to them, *a god who would never command them*. They rejected the God who could command them. They're rejecting a commandment that was given twelve chapters earlier. You don't want the God who commands? How about a golden calf? You make it, you manage it.

Secondly, who told them God is like a calf? Who told them that the God who made everything we have ever experienced is like a calf? "You shall not make for yourself a carved image - 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." "Don't make an image of anything you know and say it's like Me." Consider Habakuk 2:18, "What profit is the image, that its maker should carve it, the molded image, *a teacher of lies*, that the maker of its mold should trust in it, to make mute idols?" Now, of course, that's true of false gods, like a Buddha on your mantle. It's a teacher of lies. But the golden calf is just as much a teacher of lies. Who told them God was like that? God is not the best in a category, He's in a category by Himself. That's why you can't take a creation, a creature, and say God is like that. We can only trust His own self-revelation, because every image is a misrepresentation.

Thomas Watson says this: "To set up an image to represent God, is debasing him. If anyone should make images of snakes or spiders, saying he did it to represent his prince, would not the prince take it in disdain?" Think of what he's saying here. You make an image of a spider, and you go to your prince and say, "We've worked really hard on this likeness of you." What do you have the right to expect from the prince? That's a good approximation, only the gap between the image of the spider and your prince is nowhere near as large as the gap between anything in creation and God. It is an assault on His majesty to make any image and say God is like it. You're insulting God. It's blasphemy.

So it won't do to say I'm not worshipping the image, the image just helps me. No image helps you! It harms you. It doesn't bring you closer to the truth of God, so that you can worship Him rightly. It takes you further from the truth of God and taints your worship. It *invalidates* your worship. God doesn't receive it. So don't let anyone do the slight of hand and tell you, "Oh, I'm not worshipping the image. It's just a representation that helps me worship the God behind the image. It just helps me in my worship." No, it doesn't! That's exactly why God told us *not* to do that, because it will *never* help you to *truly* worship. It will harm you. You're sinning against Him to do that. You're blaspheming by saying God is like this image, that this image helps you know Him better. No, no, it takes you *further* from the true knowledge of Him. The true knowledge of God is found in the *words* of His Book.

2. Romans 1:18-25, where Paul speaks of directing worship towards created things.

18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, 19 because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. 20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, 21 because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Professing to be wise, they became fools, 23 and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. 24 Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, 25 who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

This last verse goes right to the heart of it. There's an exchange made: the truth of God for a lie. When you bring representations into worship, images into worship, you're trading the truth of God for a lie. In verse 18, Paul calls it *suppressing the truth in unrighteousness*. He's saying that even if you never had a Bible, when you look around at what has been created by God, His handiwork, you see certain things about his eternal essence, His Godhead. So the clearest and most complete revelation is in His word, but even if you never had Scripture, you can look around at what's created and know that the God who made these created things is not like them, is infinitely *above* them. In other words, His eternal power and Godhead are spoken of in just looking at creation. Bringing images into worship is a rejection even of *natural* revelation. How much more so the *specific* revelation of Scripture!

In verse 21, Paul says that all of this flows out of *darkened hearts*, out of thinking which has become futile. They didn't glorify God as God. They weren't thankful. And so their hearts darkened, their thinking became futile, and out popped the images. Verse 22 says they profess to be wise. They say it is *wisdom* to do this, but they have become fools. Verse 23 says they changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image like corruptible man. That's right at the heart of it. You have this glory of an incorruptible God, and now you say

He's like something we see here. That's so wrong. It's the heart of the problem. All we know is tainted by corruption. God's not like that at all. You can't represent Him with anything like that. Everything we know and have seen with our own eyes is *finite*. God is *infinite*. He's incorruptible. He's not like anything you would represent Him with.

Now, I can't leave this without talking about images of Jesus. What does this mean about images of Jesus? Let me ask four questions and try to answer them. Full disclosure: I'm building a case. This is hotly debated, and it is worthy of the debate, because Jesus took on flesh, so you could see Jesus if you lived in His lifetime and you went to where He was. He was in specific places at specific times. You would have *seen* Him, so you can understand why there is a debate about pictures of Jesus. But I'm going to build a case that the 2nd Commandment forbids images of Jesus.

Question #1: Is Jesus God? Yes, Jesus is God.

Question #2: Are the images of Jesus teaching truth or lies? There are images of Jesus everywhere. Are they *helping* or *harming* your understanding of Jesus? What are they teaching you, truth or lies?

Let's consider Isaiah 53 and compare what we read to the images you've seen of Jesus. Isaiah 53:2b, speaking of the suffering servant, "He has no form or a comeliness [*that word literally means magnificence, splendor, glory*]; and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him." That's what the words of Scripture reveal about the appearance of Jesus. How does that compare with the images that you've seen of Jesus? No glory, no splendor, no magnificence, no beauty that would draw you to Him. Then why is He a European hair model in every image you've ever seen of Him?

I once drove past a brand new church with a large and beautiful stained glass window depicting a scene with Jesus and His disciples. Black Jesus and His black disciples. It was a predominantly black church. And that depiction is probably closer to the truth than the images of Jesus that you're used to seeing. Why? Because you're used to Caucasian Jesus with Caucasian disciples. What does that tell you? We make Jesus like us. If you have black skin, you make Him black skinned. If you have white skin, you make Him a European hair model. That's teaching lies about Jesus. That's not Jesus. He didn't look like the images you've seen.

Question #3: Did Jesus ever tell us to use a representation of Him? Four gospels. Did Jesus ever say to use a representation of Him? Or is there even any hint? I would have to consider even a *hint* that Jesus' *disciples* used a representation of Jesus, or encouraged the use of a representation of Jesus. You have the Book of Acts, the record of the apostles going throughout the known world preaching, establishing churches, initiating New Testament worship. Is there any hint that they either used or encouraged an image of Jesus. You have the pastoral epistles, letters instructing pastors, and in all of it there's not even a hint. You say, "Well, that's an argument from silence." Sometimes the silence is deafening.

You want images of Jesus, even though you have the 2nd Commandment, and Jesus never said anything about using a representation of Himself, and His apostles never did it, according to the histories of the New Testament and the pastoral admonitions in the New Testament.

Question #4: Did Jesus look like *that* in eternity past, whatever *that* is? Okay, so let's say you have a photograph from Jesus' life, so you have an *accurate* representation of what Jesus looked like in His incarnation. Is that how we should think of Him? "In the beginning was the Word, and Word was with God, and the Word was God." (John 1:1). Is *that* what Jesus looked like then, in eternity past? Or is *that* what He looks like into eternity future? Not according to Revelation 1. In Revelation 1, His eyes are like a flame of fire and His face shines as bright as the sun. By the way, I think those descriptions are probably figurative, prophetic language used to describe what Jesus *is* like, not what He *looks* like. Either way, I think it is safe to say that etching an image of the appearance of Jesus during the briefest of time (against the backdrop of eternity), when His breathtaking glory was overwhelmingly veiled, risks diminishing Him in our thoughts. His earthly life lasted for 33 years, a speck of dust on the scales of eternity, and our images don't even accurately depict what He looked like then, and certainly don't accurately depict His Godhood from eternity past or into eternity future.

Here is what Thomas Watson says: "It is Christ's Godhead, united to his manhood, that makes him to be Christ; therefore to picture his manhood, when we cannot picture his Godhead, is a sin, because we make him to be but half Christ - we separate what God has joined, we leave out that which is the chief thing which makes him to be Christ." What is he saying? Even if you saw an accurate depiction of what Jesus looked like when He was on the earth, you would have a half a Christ, half a Savior. Because in the picture you don't get Jesus in His fullness. All you have is the image. You separate Him from the perfect words and all of the signs of the Messiah which He was performing day by day. Jesus is the God-Man, and you can't picture the God side, so every representation would be a *misrepresentation*. You would see the picture - even and especially if it was an *accurate* picture - and would say, "That's an average Joe." Jesus was not and is not an average Joe!

Years and years ago (2004), "The Passion of the Christ" came out. Christians were flocking to it. Churches were renting theaters and saying, "Bring your neighbors to see this. It will change their life. It will change your worship." I was a very new elder at the time, and I had an older co-elder who was jumping out of his skin! He couldn't believe what was happening, how churches were embracing this movie, and my attitude was sort of like, "What's his problem? Must've gotten up on the wrong side of the bed." It was because I was totally ignorant of how the godly had viewed this for two thousand years. You know, we didn't just start thinking about whether or not we should be using images of Jesus. There's a two thousand year debate which has unfolded, and the people that we love, and quote, and appreciate for their godliness and their understanding of Scripture, would have universally been jumping out of their skins when "The Passion of the Christ" came out.

Brethren, don't let your views of Jesus be shaped, or even colored, by Mel Gibson. Mel Gibson produced that movie. He comes out of an image-embracing, image-loving tradition, so

he did it and wouldn't even blink at the inappropriateness of it. But this is a wicked man, even by the world's standards, and in a sense, Christians have handed over their view of Jesus to him to shape it and to tinker with it and to color it. I'm not saying you'll accept everything in the movie as true, but it will influence your thinking about Jesus *in ways that you might not even know and acknowledge*. Are you willing to do that? Are you willing to hand over influence about your thoughts of our Lord Jesus to *anyone*, let alone Mel Gibson? Do not. Do not.

What the 2nd Commandment teaches about God

God is revealed in His commandments. They reflect His righteousness. He's telling us what He loves and what He hates, so when we study His commandments, we're really studying God, studying what He's like. I'm sure the 2nd Commandment teaches us more about God, but let me offer these four.

1. God wants to reveal himself.

The fact that He's not content to just let our imaginations run wild and think of Him however we want tells us He actually wants to reveal Himself. Praise God! He didn't have to reveal Himself to us, but He's revealed so much to us about what He's like in His word. He *wants* to be known.

Redemption is about God revealing Himself. God sending Jesus to redeem people is so that He would be known as the merciful God that He is, as a God who delights in mercy. He's revealing Himself. He wants to be known. He wants to display Himself, and redemption does that. Reject a man-centered gospel which puts man at the center of Jesus coming. Yes, Jesus coming to save means everything to us. But it isn't fundamentally about us. It is fundamentally about God revealing Himself to be a God who redeems. He wanted that to be known.

Friends, be satisfied with God's self-revelation! His revelation of Himself in His word and by His Spirit *is* satisfying. The clamor for images is really just dissatisfaction. It reveals dissatisfaction with God's self-revelation. God can be known so well through the blood of His Son and by the Book. You can know Him so intimately as He has revealed Himself to be, with the help of His indwelling Spirit! Don't clamor for something else. What really satisfies the soul is to know this God through the blood of Jesus, through the words of Scripture, and through the ministry of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Be reconciled to God by Jesus' work on the cross, and then give yourself to knowing Him as He reveals Himself to be in His word. That is so satisfying. Be content with the God of revelation, and don't clamor for a god of your imagination. You will always end up diminished by the other things you were clamoring for.

2. God insists on being God in our worship.

He won't let you make it up to suit your preferences. He insists on being worshiped in the way that He requires. He is not dependent on our tastes and preferences, and aren't you so thankful for that! What kind of a god would that be? Not a god worth worshiping.

3. The consequences of disobeying reverberates for generations.

There's something in the text we haven't even touched yet. In the second half of verse 5, God says, "For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me". The basis given in the text is that *God is a jealous God*. Question: Is all jealousy bad? Clearly not. God is engaging in jealousy here, and He only ever does what is *good*. So clearly this is good jealousy. It is good and right that God would protect what belongs only to Him. That is what's happening here. God is jealously protecting what belongs only to Him. Only He is worthy of worship. He will not share His glory with another. That's the jealousy here, and it's good and right.

I think our minds tend to reshape the words of the text into something like this: "When someone makes or uses a representation of God, contrary to the commandment, God transfers their guilt to their innocent children, and their innocent grandchildren, and maybe even their innocent great grandchildren." But that's not what the text actually says, and that contradicts other Scriptures. For instance, Ezekiel 18:20a, which is as crystal clear as it could be: "The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son..." Exodus 20:5 is true, and Ezekiel 18:20 is true, and they can be reconciled, but we're not going to get to a sound understanding by twisting the 2nd Commandment in our minds to mean that image-lovers have their guilt, and God transfers that guilt to their innocent children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren.

So what does it mean that the iniquity of the fathers is visited upon future generations? Let's start with Romans 9:29, a verse which jolts us out of man-centered thinking which creates a category of innocent victims, a category which doesn't actually exist. Paul writes, "And as Isaiah said before: 'Unless the LORD of Sabaoth had left us a seed, we would have become like Sodom, and we would have been made like Gomorrah.'" Let's unpack that. Unless the LORD of Sabaoth - the Lord of hosts, the One at the head of the army of heaven - had left us a seed (New American Standard renders it "a posterity") - we would have been made like the two cities which were famously and instantaneously destroyed by fire and brimstone. Sodom and Gomorrah represent the total annihilation of rebels. *Death to rebels*. If the account of Sodom and Gomorrah screams anything, it screams "*Death to rebels!*"

Unless the One at the head of heaven's army had left some remaining, as an act of His mercy, it would have been the total annihilation of rebels. *And we're all rebels*. No one is righteous (Romans 3:10). Everyone has broken God's good and holy laws. God leaves a remnant because it pleases Him to display His mercy. So the category of *innocent victims* is stripped away from us when we're talking about God. There are certainly innocent victims *in a human sense*, where a person who didn't deserve something was exploited or harmed, sometimes with truly awful things happening to them. I'm not delegitimizing or denying that notion at all. But I'm saying that God is always righteous, and He would be righteous to kill anyone at any time, because if you want fairness, *fair is death to all rebels*. Fair is death being paid as the wages of sin (Romans 6:23), and all have sinned again and again. Even if our verse in Exodus 20 meant that God would kill your children and your grandchildren and your great grandchildren, He wouldn't be unjust to do it. I don't believe it means that, but don't think

that would be unjust of God, because He wouldn't be killing innocent victims, He would be killing *rebels*.

All God has to do for *anyone* to be destroyed is to simply step back and allow them to chase their very own passions, affections, inclinations. To just pass over them, and leave them alone in their rebellion. Do you understand that this is fundamental to a right understanding of the gospel? If God leaves you alone to pursue what you love, what you are naturally inclined towards, what you *want*, the rebellion in your heart will express itself in a thousand ways as you walk on the broad road that leads to destruction. Because our natures are so bent against Him. You must be born again!

So what *is* the 2nd Commandment saying? That the downstream relatives of image-users suffer consequences from that hatred of God expressed in disobedience to this commandment, and often the consequences are devastating, even four generations downstream. It's really quite simple. Those who use representations of God, regardless of what they say or pretend, have set themselves against God. You might say, "I love God, so I'm using this image for worship." God says that's a lie. That is not love for God. That is *hatred* for God. That is a rejection of the God of revelation, and you may live to see the carnage of that in the lives of your great grandchildren. Think about that! We are being confronted with a stark warning here. We need this warning. When you reject God's commands, you may live to see the carnage of that in the lives of your great grandchildren. You see the carnage in the lives of your children, and when they have your grandchildren, you see the carnage in their lives, and when they have your great grandchildren, you see the carnage in their lives. Imagine what it would be like, in the closing days of your life, to behold the carnage of your sin in the lives of your great grandchildren! May God have mercy on us!

Let me give you an example: The adults of the generation who were brought out of Egypt. They refused to take possession of the Promised Land. God told them to take possession, but they believed the lie that the inhabitants of the land were too strong for them. This was followed by *forty years* of wandering in the wilderness. God determined and declared that all who had been twenty years old or older would die in the wilderness during those forty years, all except Joshua and Caleb. Almost certainly a million people died in the wilderness. Now, let's say you had been a fifty year old with a nineteen year old son or daughter. That nineteen year old is going to spend the next forty years wandering in the wilderness, instead of being in the Promised Land, because *you* wouldn't go in and possess it. The nineteen year old marries and has a child (your grandchild), who grows up and has a child (now your great grandchild), all while wandering in the wilderness because of your sin. Did that mean that none of the people repented in the wilderness? No, some of them repented and were saved. But the iniquity of the fathers was visited in that very specific case to the third and fourth generations of those who would not obey God, who disobeyed God in the face of the miracles they had seen and the great deliverance they had experienced.

Friends look around. Find people who will not be governed by God and trace out their generations. Their children are harmed. Their grandchildren are harmed. We've all seen it up close at some point or another. The iniquity of the forbears is visited upon multiple

downstream generations. *It matters* if you serve the Lord or not. It will matter in the lives of your children, in the lives of your grandchildren, maybe in the lives of your great grandchildren, whether you serve the Lord or not, whether you will obey the Lord or not.

4. The consequences of obedience reverberates for *millennia*.

A millennium is a thousand years. Millennia is the plural form, so *thousands of years*. The consequences of obedience reverberates for millennia. The last point was: The consequences of disobedience reverberates for generations. But the 2nd Commandment makes clear that the consequences for obedience reverberate for millennia, for *thousands of generations*.

Look again at Exodus 20:6, “But showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep my commandments.” Just half a verse earlier than that, “to the third and fourth *generations* of those who hate Me,” *generations* was a word added by the translators to bring across the accurate meaning. If you have a translation which *italicizes* words added by the translators (many do), you can see that. The translators should have also added it in verse 6, saying, “But showing mercy to thousands *of generations*,” to make it clear that the comparison is between God visiting iniquity on three or four generations of those who hate Him, but showing mercy to thousands *of generations* of those who love Him. What is the 2nd Commandment saying here? That those who satisfy themselves with God’s self-revelation and God’s prescribed worship invite the mercy of God into thousands of their generations. If in your lifetime, you satisfy yourself with worshiping, not through images or informed by images, but according to God’s self-revelation and according to the worship He prescribes, you will send the mercy of God down through thousands of your generations. That’s what this is saying.

So the first thing to say is that we’re given a wonderful ratio. At the worst, God is 250 times more inclined to mercy than judgment (1,000 generations of mercy at the worst, when it is really multiples of that, and 4 generations of the consequences of sin, and it could be only 3). In the worst case, when you whittle it down as far as you can from both sides, God is communicating that He has this disposition: He is 250 times more inclined towards mercy than He is towards judgment. That’s wonderful, and having walked with Him for more than three decades, I’m not surprised.

Let’s keep going with the math. A generation is twenty years. So a thousand generations is *twenty thousand years!* The Bible says that human history is less than ten thousand years, so all of human history hasn’t caught up with the extent of God’s promise yet. Do you understand that? The Bible says that God’s mercy is from everlasting to everlasting (Psalm 103:17). I think God is saying that in the 2nd Commandment. Here is an example: Abraham. Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness (Romans 4:3). Christ came through Abraham’s generations, and as recently as 1967, the Six Day War, God’s mercy is still being displayed. When I read Romans 11, I can only think it means that God isn’t done with Israel, and that there will be a great ingathering of genealogical Israel before Jesus returns. Why?

Because God's mercy to Abraham extends through His generations. It's a case study in God's disposition towards mercy.

Friends, the ratio is a dire warning and a tremendous enticement. It's a warning about hating God by disobeying Him. But it's also a tremendous enticement towards all the good that God wants to flow through you to your future generations, because you really loved Him and demonstrated that love through obedience.

I pray that we would be satisfied with what God has given us and not clamor for anything He hasn't. I pray that parents who read this would be warned about the consequences of rejecting God through disobedience, and would take measures to head off the carnage that can come into the lives of your children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren. I pray that the sweetness of the thought of God's mercy flowing through our love for Him to a thousand generations will increase our hunger to obey. May it be so.

Chapter 6

The God Who Satisfies

To really study God is to study God *as He has revealed Himself to be*. And in knowing *that* God, the people of God are abundantly satisfied. That is the essence of the 2nd Commandment, "You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything... you shall not bow down to them nor serve them." (Exodus 20:4a, 5a). He wants us to cling tenaciously to His revelation of Himself in His word, because every visual representation of Him is an insulting misrepresentation which teaches lies about Him. We need to be filled with the thoughts of His greatness and His goodness *from His word*, and then find our great satisfaction in that.

How we have failed to obey the 2nd Commandment

Since we want to wage war against our natural tendency to shrink down the commandments, let's identify what it might look like to whittle this commandment away to something which is very manageable with just external things. I'm actually going to pass right over having Buddha on the mantel, because no professing Christian I've ever met has a Buddha on the mantel, let alone says of it, "That is the God who went to the cross for me." That would be a shocking violation of the 2nd Commandment, to be sure, but I doubt that is your struggle. It isn't mine.

And it won't suffice to simply say, "I don't do those Roman Catholic things," and move on to something else. If you went into a "good Roman Catholic home," you would find the images, probably images of God the Father, certainly images of God the Son, maybe images of God the Holy Spirit. Just because you, as a "good Evangelical," or even a Christian in the Reformed tradition, would never have those images in your own home, doesn't mean that the 2nd Commandment has nothing to do with you. It is all well and good that you avoid the most obvious violations, but are the more subtle violations really less offensive to God? The things

you are rightly avoiding, after all, could all be fixed with a scavenger hunt, meaning that if someone's sensitivity was raised, convincing them that they should get rid of every visual representation of God, they could go room by room and make sure they were ship-shape in a few hours. But how would Jesus, who said unrighteous anger is a violation of the commandment not to murder, and lust is a violation of the commandment not to commit adultery, give us God's view of how we have failed to obey the 2nd Commandment?

Remember, the *positive heart* of the commandment is that we worship the one true God as He reveals Himself to be, and as He tells us to worship Him. It could go without saying that God *desires* and *deserves* to be loved as He is, not as how we imagine Him to be. Is there anything controversial in that statement? Hardly. God desires to be loved as He is, not made into something He isn't. And God deserves to be loved as He is. Nothing is more appropriate than to love God as He is in His all-sufficient perfection. He is the most lovely. He is the most worthy to be loved, above and beyond anyone or anything else that could ever be.

Here is a start. To whatever extent our natural inclinations recoil from His revelation of Himself in His word, we have failed to obey the 2nd Commandment. Have you ever thought about it in those terms? To whatever extent I recoil from what Scripture says about God, I have failed to obey the 2nd Commandment. And if you say, "Well, I've never recoiled from that," it is time to think more deeply, to peel back another layer. Whenever I catch myself thinking - "Can that be God? That *can't* be God. God can't really be like that!" - I need to repent. In all of those instances, God is never the problem. *I* am always the problem, and that's why I need to repent. When we say God can't be like *that*, it is never because our sensibilities are right and God's revelation of Himself is revealing a flaw. It is because our sensibilities need to be recalibrated by and to truth.

What are some examples? Well, here's a rule of thumb. Anytime I erect a man-centered framework, a world revolving around man, and then try to fit God into that, it never ends well. That framework can never contain God. "Election isn't fair." Now, if you have embraced the doctrine of election, I submit to you that you didn't start there. You came to that conclusion after some hard wrestling, where you were saying, "That *can't* be God." I remember very distinctly the time in my life when I recoiled from an electing God. I couldn't believe God could be like that, because how could a God of love and mercy pass over innocent people who wanted to be born again? He didn't include them in His plan or in His mercy, and so they have to be lost forever? God couldn't possibly be like that. I simply had a man-centered framework, and God didn't fit into it. That's right, election isn't fair! But the sentence shouldn't end there. Finish the sentence: "Election isn't fair, and *thank God He decided not to be fair.*" In the context of what the Bible teaches, a God-centered framework, have you thought about what fair means? Fair means death to all rebels, and all are rebels. Fair means all sinners getting paid the wages of death for their sin, and all are sinners. But God has decided not to leave sinners alone to chase their desires into eternal destruction. It isn't a shock that anyone is lost, it's a shock that *not everyone* is lost. It's a shock that anyone is *saved*. It is proof of God's mercy.

Or how about this. The injustice of the Old Testament genocides. Have you ever thought that? I have. The Israelites are supposed to *annihilate* the nations that they're displacing as they come into the promised land? The animals die. The the men die. The *women* die. The *grandmothers* die! The *babies* die. Have you ever thought, "It would have been unjust for God to do that. God *can't* be like that!" I have. But again, this comes from a man-centered framework in which we're not all members of an utterly fallen race who are *by nature* enemies of God. But, since Genesis 3, that is exactly what we are. Human nature was warped with the coming of sin and rebellion into the world, and all anyone needs is *time* and *opportunity* to prove that God is our enemy. The truth of the Canaanite nations is that they were peoples who had plunged themselves into very outward, scandalous, perverted, barbarous, unrestrained rebellion against against God for *centuries*. And the truth is, even our very inward, "respectable" forms of rebellion deserve the ending they received. The cutting off of those nations was the culmination of centuries of God's *patience*.

Or what about a more subtle form. All sickness comes from either natural processes or the devil, and then God, who is good, comes in and heals. So natural processes are the problem, or the devil is the problem, and then God comes riding in on the white horse and saves the day. We are comfortable with that framework. God does heal, so that part of the framework holds up. But guess what? God is also the "problem". What does Scripture say? "Now see that I, even I, am He, and there is no God besides Me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; nor is there any who can deliver from My hand." (Deuteronomy 32:39). Does that mean there's no such thing as natural processes? Well, that depends on how you define that term. There is certainly nothing outside of God which constrains Him and ultimately determines outcomes. Or does that mean that the devil doesn't do evil things and inflict sickness? No, but all of those things are *secondary* causes, all under the overriding purposes of the primary cause, God. And He is working all things together for the glory to His name and for the good of His people, and He does it all with perfect wisdom, and He doesn't offer to explain it all to you.

Do you love to *study God*? Do you want to know Him more? Do you want to know Him as He really is? Do you want to know Him as He has revealed Himself to be? Well, the Bible is the book for that. Is the Bible where you are learning about Him? We should learn to love, not the God we imagined, but the God of self-revelation. He *wants* to reveal Himself and to be really known. When Jesus says that the Father is seeking true worshipers who worship in *spirit* and *truth* (John 4:23), this has to be central to what it means to worship God in truth, to worship Him as He's revealed Himself to be. Can it even be called worship if you're worshiping what came out of your imagination and not what comes out of the word of God? The God who is - *He* is great and greatly to be praised (Psalm 145:3). And I would add to that, He is great and greatly to be *loved*. No one *ought* to be loved more than the God who has revealed Himself in His word, but that God, the one true God, doesn't fit our man-centered framework, so we should throw it away. It never serves us well. It distorts our view of God and makes Him seem unjust when He is the *most* just, the *all-just*. He could never be unjust.

For the born again, the beginning of adoring Him as He is, is here in the Bible. If you want to adore Him, get a handle on the Bible and you'll adore Him more and more and more. And we

should. He's infinitely worthy of it. But be ever mindful of 1 Corinthians 2:14, "But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." What does that mean? Without a new heart, you don't stand a chance of breaking out of the man-centered framework. All the truths about God and man are just foolishness, they make no sense at all, to those who have never been born again, so they reinvent God and man. Real believers can struggle to escape a man-centered framework, of course, but sometimes the struggle comes from something more fundamental, which is that a person has never been born again and given a new heart.

When churches become more worldly, it is often because they are dominated by worldlings who reject God's self-revelation while still professing to embrace God. They have redefined God in their own image and then said, "This is God." This god looks just like them! This god is comfortable with everything they do. He never threatens them. He never commands them. As Christians, we have to be so careful that we don't join in with that in any way. As churches drift, as worldliness comes in, it is a sign that the worldlings increasingly make up the church. We live in a professing Christian culture which is more and more dominated by people who actually aren't following Christ. They're following a christ in their own image who never threatens them. Always remember: we are swimming in those waters, and they're demanding compromise every day, and the demands are getting louder and louder and louder, but we can never participate in that.

If you catch yourself thinking, "God just can't be like that," know that is what the homosexuals have been saying. "God can't be like that." "God can't require that." But they are far from alone. That's just another in a long line of manifestations of the same old problem, and you have that same instinct in your heart. You have the same temptation when you read certain portions of Scripture to shave off a little here and add a little there. And before you know it, God looks just like you and He's no threat to any of your thinking or speaking or acting at all. I think we *want* God to be a threat to some of our thinking and speaking and acting, because we don't look like His Son yet. I think we want God shaving off parts of us and adding parts to us instead of the other way around. We want Him refashioning us, not us refashioning Him. That is what's at stake with the 2nd Commandment: Who's going to fashion who? Are we going to fashion God and make Him look like us? He would be so non-threatening then. Or are we going to step aside and welcome Him to do the fashioning? When we find ourselves saying, "Who could love a God like that?", we need to repent and ask for grace.

Ask yourself this: Am I doing anything which is forbidden by the 2nd Commandment, either *externally*, or *internally*. If all visual representations of God are misrepresentations, do I have any of those? And Jesus is God. Are there any crucifixes in my belongings which set forth a perpetually crucified Jesus? If you have one, get rid of it. Here is my urgent exhortation as a pastor and a brother: Get rid of any and all images of God the Father. He is nothing like an old man with a white beard. No one has ever seen Him. He dwells in an unapproachable light (1 Timothy 6:16). Get rid of any and all images of God the Son. Get rid of any and all images of God the Holy Spirit. They are teaching falsehoods. They are influencing your thinking about God. They are harming you, not helping you, and you have them in contradiction to Scripture. They're teaching you things about God that Scripture will never teach you, because Scripture

teaches *truth* about God. Scripture is right. The images are wrong. And we must realize that the most plausible ones to us are the *most dangerous* ones. In other words, if you got rid of the “bad” ones, only to keep a few “good” ones for sentimental reasons, you might actually be worse off. There are no good ones. The ones which are most plausibly accurate to you are the most dangerous ones *because* they’re plausibly accurate to you. And so you drop your filter and drink in the influence in ways that you don’t even perceive.

It’s quite possible you will have a reflex to defend some images of Jesus. What about the “Jesus” film? Do you know how many people have been saved through the Jesus film? Show me the person who was saved through the Jesus film, who *wouldn’t have been saved* without it. Find me one. Because that person will overthrow the doctrine of election. I know people are saved through unscriptural means. *That only proves that God is merciful!* I know God uses questionable people in the salvation stories of other people. I know that. That doesn’t sanctify those means or those people. What does the word of God say? That is the question we need to guide us. I thank God that He’s worked in my life through means which I now reject and understand to be unbiblical. Some of the people who God used tremendously in my life to bring me to faith and to disciple me aren’t even walking with the Lord now! What does Scripture say? Let’s do that. Value the words. Trust the words.

In Exodus 32, when Moses came down and found the people worshiping the golden calf, he waged war against that image. Look at Exodus 32:20. “Then he took the calf which they had made, burned it in the fire, and ground it to powder; and he scattered it on the water and made the children of Israel drink it.” This is what war against images looks like. Take that calf. Burn it with fire. Grind it to powder. Put the powder in water. Drink it. NO QUARTER. That calf ain’t never coming back! You will never reconstitute that calf! If you said, “Let’s just put it away,” it would show up again later, perverting someone’s conception of God.

Or what about 2 Kings 18:4, which speaks of Hezekiah’s war against images: “He removed the high places and broke the sacred pillars, cut down the wooden image and broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made; for until those days the children of Israel burned incense to it, and called it Nehushtan.” A lot of that is self-explanatory, but what about the image of the bronze serpent? What is Nehushtan about? It is a follow-on to Numbers 21. There the people had been in rebellion. As judgment, God sent serpents among them, and the people were being bitten, and the venom was killing them. They came to Moses and pleaded with him to intercede for them. Moses did, and God instructed him to make a bronze serpent, and to instruct anyone who had been bitten to look to that image to be healed. *Hundreds of years later*, they still have that bronze serpent, an image God commanded them to make, and people are burning incense to it. That probably says all we need to know about how dangerous images are and how prone we are to be influenced by them. It tells us so much about the power of images, and what our natures are like, and how easily we are inclined towards things which harm us in this category. Hezekiah rightly waged war against that.

Fathers and mothers: Wage war against images in your home. Don’t have a single one. Remember the rest of the 2nd Commandment, that God visits the iniquity of the fathers upon

the children to the third and fourth generations. Don't open wide the possibility that you will see terrible fruit in your grandchildren's lives.

And don't stop with visual representations. Work to identify your dissatisfactions with God and then root out those lies. What do I mean? I mean that, yes, there are real, literal images which must be dealt with, but that to stop there stops well short. What about your heart? Go take inventory of your heart and say, "Where am I dissatisfied with God?" You have probably never uttered the words, "I'm dissatisfied with God," but there are realities in your life which tell a story of dissatisfaction, and there are lies beneath each dissatisfaction. What darling sin is saying without words that God isn't enough to satisfy? What is it? What is the sin you protect, you hide, you nurture on the side? Now the darling sin of many unregenerate people are right there on the surface. Anyone can see it. Professing Christians are often much more sophisticated. Oh, Christians hide their darling sin, they nurture it on the side, and treat it like a friend when it is an enemy which will drain the life out of their souls and rob them of everything they should love and hold dear. The presence of the darling sin is speaking: "God isn't enough to satisfy me." "I *need* it." But the God revealed in Scripture is a God who can abundantly satisfy *every need of every one* of His people. That is either true or it isn't. If it's true, we should never clamor for something else.

"Yes, I need Christ. But I also need this other thing to be happy." Not true.

"Yes, I believe in the God of the Bible. But I need this other thing not to be fearful." Not true.

Finally, our worship is regulated by the 2nd Commandment. Can I worship God in any way I want? No. God restricts us. He insists on being God in His worship. God regulates us in our worship. Can we use images? No, he restrains us. We are to be satisfied with God, and *also satisfied with the worship He has prescribed*, and not clamor for something else. The deepest, best, sweetest, most helpful, most satisfying worship is what God has given us. Do you believe that? Many people don't believe that. Many mistake an emotional high for worship. Our worship ought to be deeply emotional, but not governed by an insistence on achieving a particular emotional response. There is a dramatic difference.

How the Lord Jesus has perfectly obeyed the 2nd Commandment

As we've been studying, both of the first two commandments are framed in the negative, "Thou shall not..." And since Jesus is completely without sin, there isn't much to say coming at it from that direction. A person must not make an image of God and/or use it for worship. And so Jesus did not, end of story. But the heart of the commandment is having an abundant satisfaction in God which eliminates any need to clamor for anything else. Think about the gospel accounts. That *perfectly describes* Jesus! He took on human flesh, and He was abundantly satisfied in His Father. There is no hint of clamor for anything else throughout the four gospels. Think about John 1:1, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." From eternity past, Jesus was with His Father. He knew everything about His Father. He loved His Father. He was satisfied in His relationship with His Father. Creation of mankind was not because the Triune God had a hole that needed to be

filled. The Father and the Son and the Spirit communed together, satisfied in one another from eternity past. They could have continued through eternity future. God wanted to *reveal Himself*, to be known and seen and displayed. The point from John 1:1 is that Jesus knows God the Father and God the Spirit *perfectly*, and He was completely satisfied.

Now consider these selections from John 14.

8 Philip said to Him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us." 9 Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" 10 Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on My own authority; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works. 11 Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father in Me, or else believe Me for the sake of the works themselves."

The great mystery of the Trinity is on display here. Jesus is in the Father, and at the same time, the Father is in Him. They they are one, and yet they are distinct. Now, look at verses 19-21.

19 "A little while longer and the world will see Me no more, but you will see Me. Because I live, you will live also. 20 At that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you. 21 He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him."

In the first section, Jesus gave us the model of Jesus being in the Father and the Father being in Jesus. Now in this second section, He brings us into it. Those who love Jesus are in Jesus, and Jesus is in them. The foundational relationship is between the Father and the Son, and the believer enters into that mystical union. Now look at verse 23 and then 31.

23 Jesus answered and said to him, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him... 31 But that the world may know that I love the Father, and as the Father gave Me commandment, so I do. Arise, let us go from here.

Jesus, from the beginning of his life to the end, did nothing but obey the Father. Why did He do that? So that His love for His Father would be on display. His complete, unbroken, cheerful, thankful obedience to His Father was put on display so that we would know of His great love for His Father. Jesus was and is abundantly satisfied with His Father.

From the beginning of the incarnation to the end, Jesus' unbroken obedience to His Father was the fulfillment of a great and precious promise, and I want you to see it. Look at Jeremiah 23:5-6.

5 “Behold, the days are coming,” says the Lord, “That I will raise to David a Branch of righteousness; a King shall reign and prosper, and execute judgment and righteousness in the earth. 6 In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell safely; now this is His name by which He will be called: THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.

This is the promise that God would raise up from the lineage of David a great saving King. He would be called by this name: the Lord our righteousness. Then Jesus came, perfectly obeying God, obeying Him cheerfully, thankfully, expressing His love for His Father from the beginning of His life to the end. The Lord our righteousness. Have *you* obeyed the 2nd Commandment? No, you haven’t. Have you ever held and even cherished wrong thoughts about God? Yes, you have. But God sent a sinner-bearer for us, the Lord our righteousness. He did what I should have done but didn’t. He held back from what I shouldn’t have done but did. And now He offers to trade places. I can have His righteousness, and He will bear my sin.

This all makes me think one thing. Just consider this quote by Thomas Watson: “Is it not an absurd thing to bow down to the king’s picture, when the king himself is present?” What are we doing with images *when the King is right here!* The King is present. His actual presence is abundantly satisfying. Friends, it is our job to root out all the counterfeits. The 2nd Commandment is a call to root out all the counterfeits. Let the King satisfy you. He sustains the heart, even in trouble, *especially* in trouble. All the counterfeits abandon us when we need something real and solid the most. God never abandons.

When you’re abundantly satisfied in God, your pleasures grow stronger and stronger. That’s exactly the opposite of what we find with the counterfeits. All of the counterfeits offer pleasures which only get weaker and weaker.

I believe. Help my unbelief.

Chapter 7

A Worthy God Demanding Careful Reverence

Exodus 20:7

“You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain.”

This the 3rd Commandment. God is God, worthy of all praise and honor, and He demands - not suggests - careful reverence. God requires careful reverence from His creatures. He commands us not to take His name in vain, and He promises to hold anyone who does guilty. Instead, we must offer honor to Him freely, willingly, lovingly, in how we think, speak and live. All of that is right at the heart of the 3rd Commandment.

The 1st Commandment was “You shall have no other gods before before Me,” and I said it was fundamentally about having the one true God, and Him alone, as your God, loving Him

with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind. The 2nd Commandment was “You shall not make for yourself a carved image,” and I said it was fundamentally about embracing the God of revelation, as He has set Himself forward in Scripture, and *not* making a god from our imagination. Now we come to the 3rd Commandment, and it is another one framed in the negative, telling us what we must *not* do. And again, since all the Law and the Prophets hang on the two great commandments of love (God, neighbor; Matthew 22), this negatively framed commandment is really about love. What are we to love? An all-worthy God who requires that we love Him by offering careful reverence. We should *want* our thoughts and words and lives to express honor to this great God! We should want to offer that freely, willingly, lovingly, simply because He’s so worthy of it.

What the 3rd Commandment requires

“You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain.” The negative side of this coin is right there on the surface. We’re told so explicitly what we *shall not do*. Now flip the coin over. What is on the positive side? What Jesus taught us to pray. “In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name.” (Matthew 6:9). “*Hallowed* be Your name.” To hallow is to *hold in the utmost reverence*, to give that name a place where you couldn’t possibly give it more reverence. To make it the name above every name! To never lose sight of the *greatness* and the *goodness* which that name represents. Jesus uses that terminology in many places in the gospels, telling us to believe in *His name*, and by “name” He means everything He is and has eternally been. The “name” of God represents God Himself in all His fullness. If we were to undertake a study of the names of God in Scripture, bringing them all together into a full understanding of who God has revealed Himself to be in His different names, it would be a long but wonderful study. We would taste some of the depth and breadth of all that He is.

When we hallow His name, we hold His name in the utmost reverence, we hold it as the name above every other name. We never lose sight of the greatness and the goodness which that name represents. All other names represent secondary, inferior things we may be tempted to worship in His place. They’re just created things. He made them all. For thousands of years, people have worshiped the sun and the stars, but they’re just a shadow of His own glory. They’re just a faint reflection of His own glory. They seem glorious to us, and humans are tempted to shift honor to them, but the almighty God who created them says, “Now see that I, even I, am He, and there is no God besides Me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; nor is there any who can deliver from My hand.” (Deuteronomy 32:39). God declares Himself to be *so supreme* above *all things*. There’s no one on the level with Him. Everything is beneath Him.

So what must my disposition be towards such a God? One of *careful reverence*. I can’t be thoughtless about a God like that. I can’t be careless in my disposition towards a God like that. And not only is He God over all, He is also the God of His people in a special, particular way. He is their possession, not because they say so - they have no rightful claim to that in and of themselves - but because *He* says so, having made it possible through the blood of His Son. He gives Himself to His people to be their God. What did God say to Abraham

(actually, his name was Abram at the time), who believed God and it was accounted to Him for righteousness? “I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward.” (Genesis 15:1b). Abraham was God’s, but God was also Abraham’s! God gave Himself to Abraham because of his saving faith. Imagine how precious it is for the God who made everything we’ve ever experienced to say, in effect, “I give you a claim on Me. I am yours.” What did John the gospel writer say when he was framing his entire gospel in John 1? Consider this. These are precious words. “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” (John 1:12-13). John says two great things here. First, God is extending the right to become His children to any and all who will entrust themselves to His Son. Second, when anyone does that, it was God who did it. God made them His, and gave Himself to them to be theirs. It was not of the will of man. That person was born of God.

Now back to Exodus 20. Put verse two and verse seven together, back to back. “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage... You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain...” Which God? The one who brought you out of bondage. *That* God. Be careful with His name. Give His name careful reverence. Don’t take His name in vain. He brought you out of bondage. And He not only took you for His own, He gave Himself to you as your own. Imagine the privilege of being able to call Jehovah, the almighty, self-existing God, *your* God. What a privilege! Imagine what that would cost Him (not cost you, you could never afford that price), then imagine using His name carelessly, irreverently, even profanely. Hopefully that jolts your sensibilities. He bought me with the blood of His Son so that He could take me for His own and give Himself to me, and now I take up His name carelessly, irreverently, even profanely. How could that be? What a crime! Oh friends, let us hallow that name above every name! Let us freely, willingly, lovingly offer Him careful reverence. Let us hold His name in the utmost reverence. Let us never lose sight of the greatness and goodness that name represents. He is our redeemer! He bought us out of bondage.

I’ve said this before. Think of how precious these words must have been to the Israelites, who were literally brought out of Egypt. Yet they have nothing on you. If you had slaved away in Egypt, these would have been precious words to you: “He brought you out of the land of Egypt. He brought you out of the house of bondage.” Well, haven’t *you* slaved away under a cruel master? Christian, has He not brought you out of the land of Egypt spiritually, out of the house of bondage spiritually? Do the people who went through the Red Sea have anything on you? No, they don’t. Not if you’re free. Not if you’ve been brought out of the house of your spiritual bondage.

So that’s what the 3rd Commandment requires: freely, willingly, lovingly offering Him careful reverence.

What the 3rd Commandment forbids

“You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain.” What does it mean to take the name of the Lord in vain? It means to *use* that name, or to *reflect on* that name, in a way which is out of step with the utmost reverence God is worthy of. Let me say it again backwards. God is worthy of utmost reverence, but instead of giving Him that out of love, I use His name, or reflect on His name, in a way that’s unworthy of Him.

Now, let’s consider both of these things.

How do we *use* the name of the Lord in vain? Let’s go to three texts of Scripture which shed light on the subject.

1. Deuteronomy 23:21-23. Vows, and by extension, oaths.

21 “When you make a vow to the Lord your God, you shall not delay to pay it; for the Lord your God will surely require it of you, and it would be sin to you. 22 But if you abstain from vowing, it shall not be sin to you. 23 That which has gone from your lips you shall keep and perform, for you voluntarily vowed to the Lord your God what you have promised with your mouth.

The Bible speaks of *vows* and *oaths*, and they’re very closely related. A vow would be a promise I make directly to God. “God, I promise You that I will...” An oath is a promise that we would make to one another, in the presence of God and calling Him to be witness. Our church membership covenant is actually an oath. We covenant together to live together in a certain way, calling God as a witness to our official commitment. Deuteronomy 23 is actually talking about vows, but the principles are generally the same for oaths.

God is assuming you’ll make vows to Him, and when you do, He tells you not to delay fulfilling your vow, because He will require it of you. In other words, when you vow, He’s paying attention, He hears it and He’ll require that you fulfill your commitment. He becomes the arbiter of it, a sort of guardian of the vow, because you chose to invoke His name, and He heard it, and He’s now responsible to hold you to it. You *invited* Him to hold you to it. In verse 22, it says there’s nothing wrong with abstaining from vowing. In fact, it’s infinitely better to keep your mouth shut, to never vow or take an oath, than it is to vow or take an oath and then not follow through with your promise, because you are inviting God to be the guardian and the ultimate enforcer of your commitment. Verse 23 makes it clear that these are voluntary things. If you say it, you better do it, because you invited God to witness and enforce what you said.

Consider Deuteronomy 10:20, which is along the same lines. “You shall fear the LORD your God; you shall serve Him, and to Him you shall hold fast, and *take oaths in His name.*” So when you take an oath, it must be in the name of God. Don’t invent a system which takes an oath in another’s name. That is exactly what Jesus is condemning in Matthew 5. They had made a system of swearing by other names - by heaven or by the earth or by Jerusalem. That’s exactly what’s forbidden in Deuteronomy. If you take a vow or make an oath, do it in God’s name, and *only* in His name. Bringing God’s name into a commitment is where this ties

into the 3rd Commandment. You're saying, He *is*. There is a God out there. And He cares, and He'll make it right in the end if you fail to keep your promise.

Or consider Hebrews 6:16. The author of Hebrews is making an argument about how unbreakable and unchangeable God's promises to send the Savior were, and he says because there was nothing greater to swear by, God swore by Himself (in His own name). And then he says this in 6:16, "For men indeed swear by the greater, and an oath for confirmation *is for them an end of all dispute.*" What does that mean? When there is a conflict among people who fear God, an oath can be taken about the truthfulness of what is being asserted, calling God to witness and enforce the oath, and that ends the dispute. You wouldn't be able to do that among people who don't claim God as their God, because the oath would be meaningless to them. But among people who profess that God is their God, an oath can be the end of the conflict because all the parties have essentially placed it all in His hands, and any God-fearing person would tremble to do it falsely, and *even if someone did it falsely*, you could know that God would make it right, sooner or later.

A very striking example of this can be found in Numbers 5. A procedure is given for what should happen if a husband suspects his wife of adultery, *but she denies it and there is no evidence*. He is convinced she has committed adultery, but he has no proof. What are you supposed to do then? According to Numbers 5, you go to the priest, the priest takes water, and he takes dust from the tabernacle floor and puts it in the water. I don't know why, other than Numbers 5 says so! Then she drinks the water, accepting a curse upon herself if she is lying - under oath and before the LORD - a curse that her thigh will rot, and her belly will swell, and she won't be able to have children. And then all the parties simply leave it in God's hands. The husband is to accept that whether she's innocent or guilty, God will handle it because His name has been invoked. He is the witness, and He is the one to make it right if lies were told in His name. It is a way people who say they fear God can end disputes by putting everything in His hands.

Here is something John Calvin said which I find helpful: "...man's ingratitude is very gross, that when God grants them His name, as if at their entreaty, to put an end to their strifes and to be a pledge of their truth, still it flies promiscuously from their mouths not without manifest disrespect." A lot of that is language we don't speak. What in the world is Calvin saying? He's saying that God has actually given us His name to be used very reverently, very judiciously, to put an end to strifes, and to pledge to be telling the truth, and to make the most solemn commitments. And how ungrateful it is that men still misuse His name, when God has so graciously given His name to be used in these rare instances! It is actually a great kindness of God that He gives us a way to deal with our disputes and to make the most solemn commitments to one another. How grossly unthankful it is to then *misuse* His name when He has been so kind to give us His name to be used!

2. Leviticus 24:10-16. The verdict on a blasphemer.

10 Now the son of an Israelite woman, whose father was an Egyptian, went out among the children of Israel; and this Israelite woman's son and a man of Israel fought each other in

the camp. 11 And the Israelite woman's son blasphemed the name of the Lord and cursed; and so they brought him to Moses. (His mother's name was Shelomith the daughter of Dibri, of the tribe of Dan.) 12 Then they put him in custody, that the mind of the Lord might be shown to them. 13 And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 14 "Take outside the camp him who has cursed; then let all who heard him lay their hands on his head, and let all the congregation stone him. 15 Then you shall speak to the children of Israel, saying: 'Whoever curses his God shall bear his sin. 16 And whoever blasphemes the name of the Lord shall surely be put to death. All the congregation shall certainly stone him, the stranger as well as him who is born in the land. When he blasphemes the name of the Lord, he shall be put to death.'"

On the scale, how much or how little does God care? Big deal to God, or little deal to God? You can tell by the sanction. The mind of God on this matter is made so clear by the fact that He insists on it being dealt with *swiftly* and *irrevocably*. It isn't that any sins are "little sins" in the sense that they don't render you condemned before God. But some sins are deemed by God to be so offensive and destructive that He deals with them immediately and irrevocably (there's no going back on the death penalty!). God cares *a lot* about His name. God cares a lot about the *handling* of His name. This man was in a rage, and he blasphemed God. God's mind on the matter was that the witnesses must place their hands on this man and then the congregation must stone him to death.

This displays that we think one way about giving careful reverence to God, and God thinks another. God interprets carelessness about His name as *contempt*. So who's right and who's wrong? God is right. God is *always* right. You are displaying contempt for God when you will not render Him careful reverence, when you will not be careful to honor His name.

3. 2 Samuel 15:7-9. A son cheats the system.

Now it came to pass after forty years that Absalom said to the king, "Please, let me go to Hebron and pay the vow which I made to the Lord. 8 For your servant took a vow while I dwelt at Geshur in Syria, saying, 'If the Lord indeed brings me back to Jerusalem, then I will serve the Lord.' " 9 And the king said to him, "Go in peace." So he arose and went to Hebron.

In this instance, Absalom exploited his father's fear of the Lord by claiming he needed to fulfill a vow. Absalom *knew* King David wouldn't hesitate to recognize and honor the need to make good any vow made to the Lord, and he used that to begin his treason against his father and the kingdom. Needless to say, it did not end well for Absalom. He didn't cheat the system after all. God saw it all and made things right in the end.

In the school I attended as a boy, "recess" (outside time) could be quite free-wheeling. One of the things I was always hearing (or saying) on the playground was, "I swear to God!" It was intended to emphatically communicate, "I'm telling the truth about this!" We didn't know better, or at least I didn't know then what I know now, but that was a *terrible* idea. It was being said *all the time* as a way to give a little extra "*oomph*" to convince someone. More often than not it

meant you were lying and *needed* the extra “oomph” to convince someone you were telling the truth.

Here’s what Thomas Watson says: “A man that is honest will be believed without an oath... the more a man swears, the less others will believe him.” The honest man doesn’t need the oath. People know he tells the truth. The more a man “swears to God,” the less others believe him. That is universally true. It was true on the playground in elementary school, and it’s true today. The more you need an oath, the less people are likely to believe it. They know. This is exactly what Jesus is saying when He says to let your yes be yes (Matthew 5:37). Be known for truthfulness so you don’t need oaths to be believed. The New Testament testimony is that vows and oaths should be very rare, reserved for only the most solemn commitments. It is a fearful thing to invoke the name of God and call on Him to witness a promise. Our normal pattern should be to let our “yes” be yes and our “no” no.

How do we *reflect on* the name of the Lord in vain? By “reflect on,” I don’t mean “think about” or “consider,” I mean acting in a way that doesn’t bring honor, or worse, *brings dishonor*, to the owner of that name, because of my association with that name. I am associated with God’s name. Why? Because I said, “He is my God. I belong to Him.” So now, based on my own profession, I have associated myself with His name, and now the things I say or do reflect on Him. When my words and my actions fail to bring Him honor, or worse yet, bring dishonor to Him, I take His name in vain.

Let’s start with the Hebrew word which has been translated “vain”. Its literal meaning is “emptiness,” or in other words, *to no purpose*. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God *in emptiness* or *to no purpose*. Up until this point I have been primarily dealing with the range of meaning that is towards *falsehood*. You must not bring God’s name into it when you’re not telling the truth or when you don’t fulfill a promise. But now I’m inflecting towards the other part of the range of meaning, *emptiness*, or *to no purpose*.

Whenever I associate myself with that name, I claim to belong to God. I claim to follow Jesus. I am a CHRIST-ian. His name is on me. But when I live in disobedience, my words and actions declare that all that is empty. It’s just talk. All that is to no purpose. It has no transforming effect on the things that I say or the things that I do. It reflects on God when I do that. I am taking the name of the Lord in vain.

Let’s look at three New Testament texts which drive this point home:

1. Mark 7:5-7. Religion with no heart.

5 Then the Pharisees and scribes asked Him, “Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?” 6 He answered and said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: ‘This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. 7 And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’”

Why are you not washing your hands when you eat? You're ceremonially unclean when you eat. The tradition is to wash your hands so that you're ceremonially clean when you eat. Jesus says, in essence, "Empty! Empty! To no purpose! You honor God with your lips. You associate yourselves with God with your lips, but your hearts are far from Him! You exhaust yourselves with religious activity, but it has nothing to do with God. Your worship is vain, empty, to no purpose." They gave scrupulous attention to religious activity, but it was only the traditions that they actually loved. Their hearts were far from God.

God would have you stop calling yourself His, if you won't love Him with your heart. Get His name off of your lips if you won't love Him from your heart! Don't you understand the danger of taking His great name on your lips, if you will not love him with your heart?

2. 2 Timothy 2:19. Does the life match the talk?

Nevertheless the solid foundation of God stands, having this seal: "The Lord knows those who are His," and, "Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity."

Oh, the 3rd Commandment is here! The Lord knows exactly who are His! And the Lord knows exactly who are *not His*, whatever they may profess. Look at the second quote: Let all those who name the name of Christ... Sing loud in worship? No. Go to church? No. Wash their hands to be ceremonially clean? No. None of that. *Depart from iniquity*. Turn away from sin. Cultivate a life of ongoing repentance. Learn to be more and more like Jesus over time. Let all who name the name of Christ, who take up the name of Christ upon themselves, who profess to follow Him, turn around and walk away from their sinful patterns. Otherwise, you're taking the name of the Lord your God in vain. It's emptiness. It's to no purpose. You say, "God owns me," but your life declares that He has no power to transform you. That's *blasphemy*. When I name the name of Christ, but I don't depart from iniquity, I take the name of the Lord my God in vain.

3. Titus 1:15-16. Paul instructs Titus.

15 To the pure all things are pure, but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure; but even their mind and conscience are defiled. 16 They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work.

Paul is talking about false profession. It's so clear that these are unbelievers. They are not regenerate. They are traveling a road which leads to destruction. They are not in Christ. They say, "I know God," but *in their works*, they deny Him. This is exactly what the 3rd Commandment is addressing, a profession which takes on an association with God, "I know God," joined to a life which *contradicts the profession* and brings dishonor on the name of God. Mouth: "I know God." Life: "I deny God." A life of disobedience tells the tale, regardless of the profession.

What the 3rd Commandment teaches about God

I'm confident this commandment teaches many other wonderful things about God, but let me offer these three.

1. God is infinitely worthy of careful reverence. This is the foundation of the commandment.

God is only calling for what's good and right. There is nothing more fitting than that we would offer him careful reverence, freely, willingly, lovingly, both in the words of our mouths and the patterns of our lives. He is beyond worthy of it. That is the footing of the commandment. Nothing is more fitting that you can do in your whole life.

Here is a question: Must God *beg you* for careful reverence? This is another one of those questions which is meant to jolt your sensibilities. It makes something rise up within you to say, "No! God could never be a beggar!" Have you made Him a beggar? He will not be a beggar. He is no beggar. He will beg no one. But one who would send His Son to spill His blood to set you free, do you want Him to beg you to honor Him? Some of us need to set this book down and repent without a moment's delay. Find a quiet place and say to God, "Was I waiting for You to beg me? You spilled the blood of Your Son, and I so foolishly withheld the careful reverence You *ought* to have. Please forgive me! Change this hard heart!"

2. Have you noticed that we haven't even touched half of the commandment yet? Here is the entire command: "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, *for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain.*" Or to say it from the other direction, the Lord *will hold him guilty* who takes His name in vain. So the second thing the 3rd Commandment teaches about God is this:

God takes notice when His name isn't given careful reverence.

God always takes notice, and He wants to make sure we don't lose sight of that, so He includes it as a part of the commandment. I think He includes the warning because a lot of times, when the name of the Lord is taken in vain, people "get away with it". Many times, when the name of the Lord is being used or reflected on in an unworthy manner, it is something happening in the heart or at a level where other people don't notice, so that you "get away with it". I think God is saying, in effect, "No, there's no getting away with it." The Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain. Though your neighbors don't see it, your family doesn't see it, your co-workers don't see it, people in your community don't see it, *God sees it*, and He will not hold you guiltless. God takes notice when His name isn't given careful reverence. He sees it every time. It offends Him, because he knows you've brought Him into contempt.

Here's what Thomas Watson says: "Methinks these words, 'The Lord will not hold him guiltless,' should put a lock upon our lips, and make us afraid of speaking anything that may bring dishonour upon God." I say a hearty, "Amen!" to that.

3. God is acutely aware of every use of, and association with, His name.

In the next chapter we'll go right to applying this to our lives. God is acutely aware, He is so sensitively aware, of every use of His name, and every association with His name.

God has the name above every name. More specifically, God the Father has given His Son the name above every name, that at His name every knee would bow, and every tongue would confess that He is Lord. Nothing could be more fitting in all the universe than that. It is His reward for His sufferings on behalf of sinners.

This study brought me face to face with so many breaches in my own words and patterns which I was very insensitive to. I am thankful for that. I don't want to run away from that. I want light thrown on my failures to keep this commandment. It is now so clear to me how sensitive God is to it, and I want to be sensitive to it too. I want to be part of a holy people, set apart for God's own good pleasure, cultivating careful reverence in my thoughts, words, and deeds, so freely, so willingly, so lovingly. He is worthy.

Source Notes

Abbreviations Used

JC	Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses, Volumes II & III, John Calvin, Baker Books, Reprinted 2003
MH	Matthew Henry's Commentary, Volume 1, Hendrickson Publishers, Reprinted April 2000
NKJV	New King James Version (all Scripture quotations are from NKJV unless otherwise noted)
TW	The Ten Commandments, Thomas Watson, The Banner of Truth Trust, Revised Edition 1965, Reprinted 2013

Chapter 1 - N/A

Chapter 2

- 1 "They were not only spoken...": MH, 282
- 2 "... 'thy God,'...": TW, 17
- 3 "You will sooner be corrupted...": TW, 28
- 4 "...it would not be enough for men...": JC, Vol II, 339

Chapter 3

1 “It is more honour to serve God...”: TW, 58

Chapter 4

1 “Many heathens have worshipped...”: TW, 54

2 Thomas Watson says that it is idolatry to redirect trust to *the arm of the flesh...*: TW, 56

Chapter 5

1 “To set up an image to represent God...”: TW, 59

2 “It is Christ’s Godhead, united to his manhood...”: TW, 62

Chapter 6

1 “Is it not an absurd thing...”: TW, 60

Chapter 7

1 “...man’s ingratitude is very gross...”: JC, Vol II, 409

2 “A man that is honest will be believed without an oath...”: TW, 89

3 “Methinks these words, ‘The Lord will not hold him guiltless,’ ...”: TW, 92