
The Second Commandment: You Shall Make No Graven Images

by: Ronald L. Dart

By the time God finished thundering the First Commandment down from Mount Sinai, I expect most of the people waiting below were shattered. The experience of God, firsthand, would really have been more than a lot of people could bear. You had terrible thunder and lightning on the mountain and then the sound of a trumpet so loud that it nearly broke the rocks coming down the mountains and then the voice of God rolling down the mountainside. I expect it was enough to loosen the bowels of a strong man and probably many people fainted dead away, and we haven't even gotten to the Second Commandment at that point.

God Is the Guarantor of Our Freedom

"I am, the LORD your God," He said in Exodus 20 verse 2, "Which brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. {3} You shall have no other gods before me."

God is saying "I brought you out of the house of bondage, of slavery. I'm the one who gave you freedom, you must be faithful to me and no one else. I and no one else, am the guarantor of your freedom."

You know the founding fathers of our country, the United States of America, knew that. They said, "We consider to be self-evident, that all men were created equal and were endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights." The founding fathers saw that the guarantor of our freedom was the Creator.

The Second Commandment

The Creator God speaks from the top of Mount Sinai with the mountain smoking in His presence, with thunder and lightning everywhere, and with some grown strong men fainting dead away at the foot of the mountain, with the sound of His voice, He says {3} "You shall have no other gods before me. {4} You shall not make any graven image, or any likeness of anything that's in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, or in the water that is under the earth. {5} You shall not bow down yourself to them. You shall not 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 generation of them that hate me, {6} And showing mercy unto thousands that love me, and keep my commandments."

There it is, the Second Commandment!

What Is So Important About Graven Images?

Now what is so important about graven images? What's the big deal? Let's take the most obvious things first. Any image of anything created cannot possibly represent the one who created it. In the nature of things, any image of God, that anyone could make, would be false and misleading. There's just no way that we could ever make God visible like that.

In Deuteronomy chapter 4 verse 15 God said to the people at that time, "Take good heed to yourselves, for you saw no manner of similitude (a visible likeness, resemblance, image) on the day that the LORD spoke to you in Horeb out of the midst of the fire."

Now that is fair enough isn't it. Think about it. "Take good heed, you saw no similitude." "You did not see anything you could imitate, match, draw, sculpt or anything else when I talked to you. Therefore, how could you possibly make a graven image? How can you make an image of something you have never seen?"

And the Bible tells us, "No man can look on God and live" (Exodus 33:20).

A man can only hear certain sounds. There are sounds outside the range of our hearing. Dogs can hear more than we can. Man can only see part of the spectrum of light, and consequently man, with his limited ability, can't possibly represent God. Any representation we could make can do nothing except diminish God.

So God said, {15} "Take good heed to yourselves, you saw no similitude on the day that the LORD spoke to you in Horeb out of the midst of the fire, {16} Lest you corrupt yourselves, and make you a graven image, the similitude of any figure, the likeness of male or female, {17} The likeness of any beast that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged fowl that flies in the air, {18} The likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is beneath the waters under the earth,"

Dagon the Fish god

But surely, no one could be that stupid, could they? No one would ever make an image of a fish and bow down to it! Would they? Well, Yes, I am afraid they did, and the god's name was Dagon. He was the Fish god and people made him their god.

Paul spoke about this when he wrote his letter to the Romans. Paul's talking about the Gentiles, the nations of the world in general, and what they knew or ought to have known about God.

In Romans one verse 18, Paul says this, "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness." Now why would God be angry with them? He says, {19} "Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has showed it to them."

Now what Paul is basically saying here is, "Any fool walking down here on the planet should know better than this."

Verse 20, "The invisible things of him," Paul says, "from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and godhead, so they are without excuse."

You ought to be able, anybody with two brain cells in a row, ought to be able to sit down and say to himself, "This is a created thing, this is not the Creator, and therefore I ought to look at this created thing and see if I can understand the one who made it, who is obviously greater, obviously different from."

Paul continues, {21} "Because that, when they knew God, they didn't glorify him as God, they weren't thankful, they became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened, {22} Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, {23} And they changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image, made like corruptible man, and to birds, and of four-footed beasts, and to creeping things."

Worshiping a Bug

In Egypt they had images made of god's that were like little beetles that creep along on the ground. Imagine, looking down in the dirt at worms and scorpions and creeping things that are there, and saying "This must be, somehow, a representation of God." What did God say about that?

God says, "They know better than that." It was their ego. It was their vanity. It was their foolishness that darken their own hearts to the point that they could finally worship a BUG.

Paul continues in verse 24, "Wherefore God gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonor their own bodies between themselves, {25} Who changed the truth of God into a lie, and they worshiped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed forever."

Worship a Graven Image

You know, it has to be so, if you make one graven image, you are worshiping something that is created, and what's funny is that it is even created by your own hands.

One of the prophets made this point, he said, "People are so stupid, they can sit down and they can take a block of wood and take an ax and they can go to work on this thing and carve it into the shape of an idol, and they can look upon it, bow down and worship it and it never crosses

their stupid minds, "I made this thing. I could burn it if I wanted to. I could cast it into the fire, burn it and keep myself warm by it, how can this possibly be made into god, because I made it."

How does God look upon it? Listen to what Paul said in verse 26 of Romans 1, "For this cause also, God gave them up to vile affections, even their women change the natural use into that which is against nature. {27} And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of women, burned in their own lust towards one another, men with men, working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves the recompense of their error which was fitting."

Where does it all go? Where does it end?

Verse 28 of Romans 1, "Even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not right, {29} Being filled with all unrighteousness, fornication, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness, full of envy, murder, debate, deceit, malignity, whisperers, {30} Backbiters, haters of God, despiteful, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, {31} Without understanding, covenant breakers, without natural affection, implacable, unmerciful, {32} Who, knowing the judgment of God, that they who commit such things are worthy of death, not only do them, but they take pleasure in them that do them."

Do you know what that last part means to me? It is that people, not only do these things, they make their entertainment out of people who do these things, and I suppose that shouldn't be surprising. When people turn their backs on the living God, a God who is so great He cannot be represented by anything that man can make with his own hands. A God who transcends all eternity. A God who lives outside of time. A God whose very presence in contact with the mountains sets it on fire.

When a man goes away from that God and begins to worship scorpions and beetles, worms and birds, fish and bugs, why should anybody be surprised if this long list of terrible attitudes, crimes and corruption that men commit, why should we be surprised, that men who turn away from the one God to create creatures like this, should end up doing the things the creatures do. So, men bow down to fish and they bow down to birds and it did not stop there.

Worshiping the Sun

Deuteronomy 4 verse 19 again, "Lest you lift up your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun, the moon, and the stars, and all the host of heaven, you should be driven to worship them, and serve them, which the LORD your God has divided to all nations under heaven."

Why? He said {20} "The LORD God has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, even out of Egypt, to be to him a people of inheritance, as you are this day." And what do you do? You go off and worship the sun, the moon, the stars, creeping things, and snakes. What kind of people are you? So yes, yes, in the commandment, it really was necessary for God to say, "I am the LORD your God. You shall have no other gods before me, and you will not make yourself any graven image of anything and bow down to it and worship it." It was necessary.

Don't Go After other gods

The laws of God identify God, and to abandon His law, is to abandon Him. Where can you go when you abandon God? The abandonment of God will take you to places you don't want to go.

So, what can happen if you forsake God, and make one of your own? There is a passage of scripture in Deuteronomy chapter 12 that I think is interesting in this regard. It begins in verse 29, "When the LORD your God shall cut off the nations before you, where you go to possess them, and you succeed them, and you dwell in their land." Pay attention, "Take heed to yourself. Be sure that you're not snared by following them after they are destroyed and that you inquire not after their gods, saying, "Well, how did these nations serve their gods, I'll give that a try. I mean, they have cute little customs. They have nice little ethnic twists they put on things. It's attractive. Why don't we do that!" (Jeremiah 10:1-5).

Here is what God said, {31} "You shall not do so to the LORD your God." Well, I can hear Israel saying, "Well, why?" His answer, "Every abomination to the LORD, which he hates, they have done to their gods. For even their sons and their daughters, they have burned in the fire to their gods" Get it? {32} "Whatever I command you, observe to do it. Don't add anything to it. Don't take anything away from it."

You want to watch out for those cute little religious customs of other gods, and how the people of other gods, used to serve them, because it can take you places you definitely don't want to go.

God Revealed Himself In 'Words'

Now there is one other thing about the Second Commandment that is not quite so obvious, and I would be remiss if I didn't tell you this. God did not reveal Himself to man in images. He revealed himself in 'words.' Now this is an important distinction because it changes the whole nature of your conceptualization of God, your whole idea of God. Words and images are processed differently by the human mind. They are processed in different places in the brain even. We reason and process information logically with words, not pictures.

Let me put it this way, the worship of the God of the Bible is more cerebral than the worship of other gods, which look like fish, birds and cows. Images appeal to the emotions. Words appeal to the mind. God is about ideas not about images. The religion of God is logical not merely emotional and that is not to say that words do not appeal to the emotions, they can, and they do, but it is God's intent to speak to the reason of man, as well as to his emotions.

The prophet Isaiah quotes God as saying this, in Isaiah chapter 1 verse 18. ""Come now, let us reason together," saith the LORD." Fascinating isn't it. God doesn't say, "Look at this." He says, "Come here and let us reason together, though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow, though they be red like crimson, they shall be like wool."

Now it's interesting how words can invoke an image in the mind, but the effect is different. What God is doing is reasoning with man.

The 'Word' of the LORD

I don't know if you have thought much about this or not, but when you read the Old Testament, what you really encounter again and again, as man encounters God, is not an image or a picture, what we encounter is the 'word'.

For example, Genesis 15 verse one. This is one of the early encounters of man and God. There was a man named Abraham, who comes in contact with God for the first time. It says, "After these things the 'word' of the LORD came to Abraham in a vision, saying, "Fear not Abraham, I'm your shield and your exceeding great reward."

Now I realize it's a small distinction to make, between saying "The LORD came to Abraham in a vision saying," but that is not what it says, it says, "The 'word' of the LORD came to him in a vision, saying."

Then there is the prophet Samuel, who even as a young boy was visited by God, but it tells us at this time, 1 Samuel 3 verse 20, "All Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was established to be a prophet of the LORD. {21} And the LORD appeared again in Shiloh, for the LORD revealed Himself to Samuel in Shiloh," and how did He do that? He revealed himself "by the 'word' of the LORD."

This crops up again and again through the Bible. Later on, "It came to pass that the 'word' of the LORD came to Nathan the prophet telling David what he could do and what he could not do (2 Samuel 7:4-5).

And then there is Elijah, the archetype of all the prophets, God speaks right at the very beginning concerning Elijah, 1 Kings chapter 18 verse 1, "And it came to pass after many days, that the 'word' of the LORD came to Elijah, saying "Go, show yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain upon the earth."

The 'word' of the LORD came to Elijah. Now if this happened once or twice, you might not think much about it, but it occurs again and again.

Here's Isaiah chapter 38 verse 1, "In those days Hezekiah, the king, was sick to death. And Isaiah the prophet came to him and said, "Thus saith the LORD, "Set your house in order, for you shall die and not live."" Poor Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed and asked God for mercy. What happened? "Then came the 'word' of the LORD to Isaiah, saying, "Go and say to Hezekiah and give Hezekiah the message. We have this again and again.

We have it in Jeremiah, chapter 1 verse one, "The words of Jeremiah, the son of Hilkiah, of the priests that were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin: {2} To whom the 'word' of the LORD came."

Now you find this pattern repeated with Ezekiel, Hosea, Amos, Joel, Jonah, Micah, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, "The 'word' of the LORD came." And the way it's worded, it is not just the LORD came and spoke, it is the 'word' of the LORD came. Now there is a pattern here. When the time came for God to reveal Himself to a prophet, he did not send an image, He sent the 'word'.

Now there's something really interesting about that when we come to the gospel according to John.

In the Beginning Was the Word

Throughout the Old Testament, God reveals Himself again and again in terms of, the 'word' of the LORD, and therefore it shouldn't be entirely surprising when we come to the gospel of John, chapter 1 verse one, and we read this, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. {2} The same was in the beginning with God. {3} All things were made by him, and without him was not anything made that was made. {4} In him was life, and the life was the light of men."

Now this is really a remarkable statement in every way, because in our language, in our system of logic, when we speak of something, we can't say that something is something and is with something at the same time. That implies that they are the same thing and they are not the same thing.

"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." That's a little tricky isn't it?

Now what is this Word? And what does it mean when John talks about this Word being the Creator of the world. Did you notice that? "All things were made by him, and without him was not anything made that was made." What? With what? "The Word of God, that was with God, and that was God."

Now John goes on to talk about this Word, He says, {5} "And the light shines in darkness and the darkness didn't understand it, {6} there was a man sent from God, whose name was John. {7} He came as a witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe. {8} John was not that Light, he was sent only to bear witness of the Light. {9} That was the true Light, that lights every man that comes into the world."

Who's that? Even a careless reader of the Bible is going to understand very quickly that he is talking about Jesus Christ. He was the true Light, "that lights every man that came into the world."

Verse 10, "He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world didn't know him." Now that should eliminate any confusion over who the antecedent is of the one who created the world. It's the Word of God that he's talking about, that came into the world.

{11} "He came to his own, (the Jews), and his own did not receive him." They rejected Him, {12} "But to as many as received him, to them He gave power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name, {13} Who was born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." Now listen to what John says, {14} "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."

Back to The Second Commandment

The Word was made flesh, and we saw His glory. Now that brings us back to the Second Commandment, "You shall not make yourself any graven image, or any likeness of anything in heaven above, or the earth beneath, or the water under the earth. Don't bow down to them, don't serve them, because I am the LORD your God, a jealous God, who visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of them that hate me" (Exodus 20:4-5).

Why Should Children Suffer for The Sins of Their Fathers?

Now that's a hard saying. Why should children suffer for the sins of their fathers? Why would God do this?

Well, why should a child go blind because his mother had gonorrhea when he came through the birth canal? It happened you know. I don't know how many hundreds of children, maybe thousands, in the generations before they figured out what was going on, were blind, because their mother had illicit sex, contracted gonorrhea, became pregnant and gave birth to a baby and the gonococcus got into the eyes of the child as it was in the birth canal, ultimately, making it blind, until they realized they had to put something in the eyes of newborn children.

The fact is, the things we do, the sins we commit, affect our children. You know the sad thing about this is, that the sins of man, the sins of society, probably affect the children first, and the children the most.

One of the saddest chapters in all the Bible is the seventh chapter of Jeremiah where God lays out the whole situation for Israel, so they could understand it. I don't have time for all of it, but from verse 28, "I want you to tell them this, Jeremiah. This is a nation that did not obey the voice of the LORD their God, they would not receive correction, truth is perished. It's cut off from their mouth. {30} "The children of Judah has done evil in my sight," saith the LORD, "They have set their abominations in the house which is called by my name, to pollute it." They have actually gone in and brought idols right into the Temple of God and polluted it. {31} "They have built the high places of Tophet, in the valley of the sons of Hinnom."

Why did they build all those alters down there and worship those gods for? "To burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I commanded them not, and it never came into my heart."

Why did God say that? Because they had mingled the religion of Tophet with the worship of God, as though burning their children alive to God as the pagans did would be somehow pleasing to God.

So, God turned the name of that place into the valley of the sons of Hinnom, the valley of slaughter, which came to be known as Gehenna.

How can human beings be so perverse? That they will kill their own children in service to a god, who is no god at all. I don't know, but God knew they would, and hence the commandment.

One of the most striking things about this commandment is that it was given not merely to protect you, but to protect your children.

The late Ronald L. Dart was a Christian evangelist whose teachings still inspire thousands of people around the world. His legacy spans decades. For more information about the teachings of Ronald L. Dart, visit RLDEA.com where you will find booklets, articles, sermons, Bible studies, and books by Mr. Dart.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever wondered how the Israelites could see the awesomeness of God and hear Him speak, and then turn right around and disobey Him?
2. What exactly is a graven image to you?
3. Is it possible to have non-physical graven images?
4. What are some modern idols that people have today?
5. Do we still have a lot of people today that worship the creation rather than the creator?
6. What are some ways that Christianity has been guilty of inquiring after other gods?
7. Have you ever considered the fact that Mr. Dart points out that “God did not reveal Himself to man in images. He revealed Himself in ‘words’?”
8. Have you paid attention to the importance of the ‘word’ in the Old Testament?
9. Why do you think God came to people through His word rather than through an image?
10. Have you noticed how much the children are affected by the fact that most of society does not adhere to God’s commandments?

