

CHAPTER TWO

Idol Curiosity

You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing love to a thousand [generations] of those who love me and keep my commandments ~Exodus 20:4-6.

INTRODUCTION

We have begun a study into the meaning and application of God's Law to Israel and humanity at large known as the Ten Commandments. We are engaged in this study because we have noted a severe lack of true repentance among modern-day believers. That lack is due in part to misunderstanding and misrepresenting God's gift of grace and the role the Law plays in bringing us to that grace. In the last Chapter we dealt with the First Commandment: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me".

I want us now to deal with the Second Commandment. This command, of necessity, arises out of the First. While the First Commandment spoke of the uniqueness of God, and its meaning related to both the physical and spiritual realms, this Second Commandment raises our awareness of some of the *specifics* of our involvement with other gods.

We may not have images *per se*, nor bow down to *images*. We may not go to the extent of some in fashioning physical idols that capsule our beliefs; but, here again, we have become guilty of neglecting the spiritual truth of this Law in our attempts to make sure that we are in compliance with the physical truth. Or, perhaps, we have not given *any* consideration to this Law; because we feel that we are not guilty of transgressing this Commandment. This belief is due to our preoccupation with the physical ramifications.

We are well aware of the problems the Israelites encountered as a result of violating this Second Commandment! Manasseh was the fourteenth king to reign in Judah. He had the dubious distinction of being one of Judah's most wicked if not *the* most wicked king. Ironically enough, his father was the godly king, Hezekiah. Instead of following in Hezekiah's footsteps, Manasseh chose to walk in the ways of his grandfather, Ahaz. Manasseh was as committed to idolatry as his father was to serving Jehovah. It almost appears as though he was intentionally seeking to destroy the memory of Hezekiah and all the reforms that were instituted under his reign. Manasseh erected altars to Baal, worshiped the "hosts" of heaven and sacrificed his infant son to the Ammonite god, Molech (2 Kings 21:6). He even went so far as to kill all who protested his evil ways. Tradition states that he was responsible for the death of the prophet, Isaiah, by having him sawn in two.

Nothing definite or historical is known concerning the prophet's end. Toward the close of the 2nd century AD, however, there was a tradition to the effect that he suffered martyrdom in the heathen reaction which occurred under King Manasseh, because of certain speeches concerning God and the Holy City which his

contemporaries alleged were contrary to the law. Indeed, the Jewish Mishna explicitly states that Manasseh slew him. Justin Martyr also (150 AD), in his controversial dialogue with the Jew Trypho, reproaches the Jews with this accusation, "whom ye sawed asunder with a wooden saw"; this tradition is further confirmed by a Jewish Apocalypse of the 2nd century AD, entitled, The Ascension of Isaiah, and by Epiphanius in his so-called Lives of the Prophets. It is barely possible that there is an allusion to his martyrdom in Heb 11:37, which reads, "They were stoned, they were sawn asunder," but this is by no means certain.¹

The writer of 2 Kings summarizes Manasseh's reign by saying he "seduced them (Judah) to do more evil than the nations whom the Lord had destroyed before the children of Israel" (2 Kings 21:9).

"Oh," we say, "That's bad... I've never done anything like that!" Let's look closer at our own lives. What are some physical things that can become idols? What about our automobiles, or our television sets, computers, novels, homes, or our jobs? We need to be reminded that an *idol* is anything or everything that we have set up that robs God of His rightful place in our lives. Isaiah 40:18 says, "To whom then will ye liken God? or, What likeness will ye compare unto him?" He was not fashioned by hands; therefore, there is no hand that can fashion a likeness of Him. The Psalmist tells us, "Your righteousness reaches to the skies, O God, you who have done great things. Who, O God, is like you?" (Psalm 71:19). The Prophet, Habakkuk, who was a contemporary of Jeremiah and ministered to Judah, asks the people what a man-made idol can possibly do for them. The words of Psalm 115 verses 4-8 give a good description of idols.

Psalm 115:4-8 But their idols are silver and gold, made by the hands of men. ⁵ They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but they cannot see; ⁶ they have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but they cannot smell; ⁷ they have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but they cannot walk; nor can they utter a sound with their throats. ⁸ *Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.*

~Emphasis added.

The Psalmist goes on to plead with Israel to trust in the Lord, because He is the only one who can be the help and give the protection that they need.

One of the reasons for this Law is that, according to the above Scripture, we become *like* our idols. Yet, we have been created in *His likeness, His image*. Therefore, we become guilty, not only of distorting the image of God's creation; but, we also become guilty of fashioning a god in *our image!* In so doing, we are misrepresenting the living God. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians at Corinth seeking to combat idolatry in their midst,

1 Corinthians 6:9 "Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral *nor idolaters*"

~Emphasis added.

Why won't idolaters inherit the kingdom of God? Because their idols, rather than God, are "in

¹ International Standard Bible Encyclopedia; Electronic Database copyright © 1993-1999 by BibleSoft

front of their face". We may think we are exempt because we have not succumbed to the *Letter of the Law* and have not fashioned idols with our hands: but, what about all those idols that we have set up in our hearts? In God's sight, it is a moot point to try and distinguish between something in our mind's eye and something in front of our physical eye. An idol is an idol regardless of where it is or how it is fashioned.

Sport is America's newest and fastest-growing religion, far outdistancing whatever is in second place," says Charles S. Prebish, associate professor of religious studies at Pennsylvania State University. ...It is not merely "like" a religion, he argues, nor is it a "secular" religion, as other religion scholars and sociologists have postulated.

To Mr. Prebish, sport can and does provide its followers everything that traditional religions have provided over the centuries. He writes: "For me, it is not just a parallel that is emerging between sport and religion, but rather a complete identity. Sport is religion for growing numbers of Americans, and this is no product of simply facile reasoning or wishful thinking. Further, for many, sport religion has become a more appropriate expression of personal religiosity than Christianity, Judaism, or any of the traditional religions. ..."

Athletes and spectators for whom sport is religion may differ in their ideas about what the "ultimate" is, Mr. Prebish says, but sport is the vehicle by which all of them find it.²

Why did God write this Law? Because our tendency is toward the physical; and since God is Spirit, the physical cannot truly capture, nor adequately portray, the concept of Spirit.

We looked in Chapter One at a passage in Ezekiel 14 that showed how Israel had violated this Law by setting up idols in their hearts. Ezekiel 14:3 "Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their heart...." How do we do that? We engrave an image on our hearts! There is only *one* thing that is to be engraved in our hearts and that is the Law of God,

Deuteronomy 32:46-47 He said to them, 'Take to heart all the words I have solemnly declared to you this day, so that you may command your children to obey carefully all the words of this law. ⁴⁷ They are not just idle words for you— they are your life...!'

We find a reminder of this covenant obligation given through the prophet Jeremiah to the people of Judah,

Jeremiah 31:33, This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,' declares the LORD. '*I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.* I will be their God, and they will be my people.' ~Emphasis added.

² Vance, M. Scott, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Christianity Today, Vol. 29, no. 18.; Bible Illustrator for Windows copyright © 1990-1998, by Parsons Technology Inc.

Lest we think that this is only for those of the “Old Testament”, Paul tells us,

Romans 2:15 “Since they show that *the requirements of the law are written on their hearts*, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.” ~Emphasis added.

We are guilty of violating the *Spiritual* meaning of this Law when we allow our hearts to be turned from God to some aspect of His creation, whether or not that turning is outward, to some physical manifestation, or inward, to some imagination. Listen to what God states about our imaginations (schemes),

Proverbs 6:18-19 There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him: ¹⁷ haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, ¹⁸ *a heart that devises wicked schemes*, feet that are quick to rush into evil, ¹⁹ a false witness who pours out lies and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers.

~Emphasis added.

Romans 1:21-23 For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools ²³ and *exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images* made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. ~Emphasis added.

David spoke to Solomon about this very thing,

1 Chronicles 28:9 And you, my son Solomon, acknowledge the God of your father, and serve him with wholehearted devotion and with a willing mind, for the LORD searches every heart and *understands every motive behind the thoughts*. If you seek him, he will be found by you; but if you forsake him, he will reject you forever. ~Emphasis added.

Idols, therefore, can be something fashioned by the hands—something purely physical, or something fashioned in the heart—spiritual. In the former case, the spiritual intent of the Law is violated as well as the physical because in order to physically fashion something to worship, it must be in our heart first, (see Proverbs 4:23). In the spiritual realm, we can have an imaginary idol without it ever becoming a physical talisman. For example: our imaginations, our memories, our desires, even the gifts of God; anything and everything that takes God's place in our lives is an idol! Vance Havner recounts, “I asked a preacher, “How are you getting along?” He said, “We are living in idolatry—just sitting around admiring our new church. We have arrived; we have it made—no more worlds to conquer.” What ought to be a milestone has become a millstone. We have run out of goals.”³ What can we do to rid ourselves of our idols? We find an answer in 2 Corinthians 10:5, “Casting down *imagination, and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God*, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ....” (KJV) ~Emphasis added.

³ Havner, Vance, from The Vance Havner Quote Book/On This Rock I Stand. Christianity Today, Vol. 30, no. 16. Bible Illustrator for Windows copyright © 1990-1998, by Parsons Technology Inc.

Maureen Howard states, We've lost ourselves in the cult of personality. We seem to have become "fans," passive spectators of the passing scene. The stars whom we either admire or despise serve as a distraction from the things we should be thinking about, such as our own lives.⁴

What should we do? We must repent. We repent by “casting down those imaginations” and things that take God’s place. The biblical use of the word “repent” means more than changing our direction. It means that we must change the way we think; in this case, we must change our thinking about our relationship to God and how idolatry affects that relationship. Remember what we read a few moments ago about Manasseh? As a result of God’s judgment, he was taken into captivity by the Babylonians; and, while there he repented,

2 Chronicles 33:11-13 So the LORD brought against them the army commanders of the king of Assyria, who took Manasseh prisoner, put a hook in his nose, bound him with bronze shackles and took him to Babylon. ¹² In his distress he sought the favor of the LORD his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. ¹³ And when he prayed to him, the LORD was moved by his entreaty and listened to his plea; so he brought him back to Jerusalem and to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD is God.

We should not have to wait for God to bring judgment before we change. Are you convinced that the Lord, He is God? Or, are you convicted of idolatry? Are you guilty of violating this Second Commandment? Our idolatry is no less a sin in God's eyes than the wicked acts of Manasseh. We, too, have been guilty of violating His Temple; we, too, can find forgiveness, if we humble ourselves and acknowledge our idolatry. When we confess, He will forgive; when we restore Him to His rightful place, He will restore to us His peace and presence. Listen to these words of a favorite hymn,

Lord Jesus, I long to be perfectly whole;
I want Thee forever to live in my soul.
Break down every idol cast out every foe
— Now wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.⁵

This is one of the few places in scripture that God talks about His jealousy. He states here that we are to obey this Command *because* He is a jealous God. “One reason why God has such jealousy is because we end up worshiping ourselves. The ‘things’ we put in place of God are a reflection of our image – what is effected by our intellect or through our hands is our creation. Idolatry then is simply the worship of self!”⁶

I. RESPONSIBILITIES WE MUST OBSERVE

Two addendums are given here in respect to our implementing this Law. First, this Law shows us that there are responsibilities we must observe. “Thou shalt not worship...”, to “worship” means to prostrate or bow, it also means to serve. According to Vine’s Expository Dictionary, “serve”

Howard, Maureen; interviewed in "Sunday" (Chicago Tribune magazine Sept. 7, 1986). Christianity Today, Vol. 32, no. 8.; Bible Illustrator for Windows copyright © 1990-1998, by Parsons Technology Inc.

⁵ Whiter than Snow; James Nicholson, William G. Fischer.

⁶ Ernst, Peter; Manzanita Baptist Church, Kingman, AZ

means, “to work in any sense; by implication it means to serve, till, enslave, or keep in bondage”. This word “serve” is first used in Genesis 2:5, “... and there was not a man to ‘till’ the ground”. It is used again in Genesis 15:13, where God told Abraham that his descendants would “serve” the people of a strange land for 400 years. The NIV translation states that they were to be “enslaved by” these people. From these usages, we come to understand that God is telling us that we are not to *voluntarily* become enslaved by anyone or anything. This same word is used by God to describe the fact of our “worship” to Him, Deuteronomy 6:13 will help clarify this, “Thou shalt fear the Lord thy God, and ‘serve’ Him...”. We are not, therefore, to be enslaved by anything nor by anyone except God Himself.

Secondly, there are *repercussions* for our observances – obedience or disobedience.

II. REPERCUSSIONS FOR OUR OBSERVANCES

Negative Repercussions

Here again, there are two considerations before us: first, the negative, or a curse. We do not like to think of God in this way, seeing Him as instigator of a curse or generational curses. Yet this is what He states will happen. In other words, He is laying the responsibility for future generations at our door. This, in and of itself, has been a big part of the modern churches’ failure. We have been content to view God as a God of love and refuse to acknowledge our responsibility and culpability in His judgment. Note that the curse falls on those who *hate* Him. Here the Hebrew word is “*sane*” and means “to set against”.

Sane’ represents an emotion ranging from intense ‘hatred’ to the much weaker ‘set against’ and is used of persons and things (including ideas, words, inanimate objects). *Sane*’ is the feeling Joseph’s brothers experienced because their father preferred him [Genesis 37:4; cf. v. 11]. This ‘hatred’ increased when Joseph reported his dreams [Genesis 37:8]. Obviously, the word covers emotion ranging from ‘bitter disdain’ to outright ‘hatred’, for in [Genesis 37:18ff] the brothers plotted Joseph’s death and achieved his removal.”⁷

Now, given these facts, why do so many Christians suffer from the same maladies as their godly parents? Either it is because the parents were not as ‘godly’ as previously thought, i.e. the parents were involved in a form of idolatry and by so doing were ‘set against’ God Himself; or it is because we have ‘believed a lie’, i.e. “Your father was trapped by this and it’s a generational thing. You can’t help it; it’s just a fulfillment of God’s Word.” We need to allow God the right to convict us through His Word without the softening or explaining away that is so commonplace today.

Positive Repercussions

Second, there is also a positive aspect or a blessing to this Law. Blessing for obedience is something that is too often overemphasized, largely at the expense of a balanced understanding of both blessings and curses. The specific blessing mentioned in connection with this Commandment

⁷ BibleSoft; PC Study Bible for Windows, Ver 2.1B; ©1993-1997.

is that God will demonstrate mercy to those who love Him and keep His commandments. We can also conclude that those same individuals will be blessed in the manner Moses spoke of when he told the people what to do before they entered the land of Canaan. There were two mountains separated by a valley. As an object lesson, six tribes went to the top of Mount Gerizim and read the blessings for keeping the Law. The other six tribes went to the top of Mount Ebal and read the curses that would come as a result of disobedience to the Law. Moses concluded those words with the following,

Deuteronomy 30:11, 15, 19 Now, what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. ¹⁵ See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. ¹⁹ This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live....

We, as Christians, are supposed to love God with all our heart. Therefore, we should *not* succumb to the Satanic lie that we are *helpless*. This is what Paul was referring to in Romans 6 when he told us that we have been *freed from sin*, whether that *sin* is part of a generational curse or not. We have been set free from not only the *penalty* of sin, but also from its *power*. Romans 8:2 also tells us that we have been “freed” from the Law of Sin. That word is in the past tense. “The verse does not say, 'going to free,' 'will soon free,' 'can free,' or 'intends to free,' but 'has freed' -KJV.”⁸ We *must*, therefore, exercise our rights and appropriate this freedom.

The Spirit of God is always the spirit of liberty; the spirit that is not of God is the spirit of bondage, the spirit of oppression and depression. The Spirit of God convicts vividly and tensely, but He is always the Spirit of liberty. God who made the birds never made birdcages; it is men who make birdcages, and after a while we become cramped and can do nothing but chirp and stand on one leg. When we get out into God's great free life, we discover that that is the way God meant us to live ‘the glorious liberty of the children of God.’⁹

CONCLUSION:

This Commandment is of critical importance in our relationship with God. As human beings, we tend to elevate common things into that position reserved exclusively for God. We are too quick to elevate our idols and too slow to tear them down. This Commandment must be taken to heart and our priorities arranged according to God's perspective.

In the next Chapter, we will see how using the name of God in vain is a *regular* occurrence among many Christians.

⁸ Living Stream Ministry “The Stream magazine;” December 4, 1997; “Living by the Law of Life, Part 1.

⁹ Chambers, Oswald; in *The Moral Foundations of Life*. Christianity Today, Vol. 32, no. 13.; Bible Illustrator for Windows copyright © 1990-1998, by Parsons Technology Inc.