

The Ten Promises: *Don't Box Me In* - wk 3

Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presb Church of Newton, KS - Oct. 18, 2020
(Based on Rev. Darrell Johnson's sermon series *The Manufacturer's Specifications*)

We're continuing our *Ten Promises* series, based on Rev. Darrell Johnson's book of sermons titled *The Manufacturer's Specifications* by looking at the Second Commandment.

"You shall not make for yourself an image 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 parents 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."

Why does the Living God speak this commandment? We have been arguing that God, whose name is Yahweh, spoke all the commandments to protect and enhance a life of freedom. Yahweh had freed three million Hebrew slaves from and for: from slavery and oppression, for relationship with Yahweh and with each other. God spoke the 10 Commandments to protect that new freedom and to enhance that new freedom.

How does the second commandment achieve that end?

The second commandment clearly belongs with the first commandment: **"You shall have no other gods before Me."** Indeed, some Christians, especially of the Roman Catholic

and Lutheran traditions combine the first and second commandments into one.

Why does God speak the second commandment? Well, why did God speak the first commandment? God speaks the first commandment to keep us from ruining our lives. In the first commandment, God is telling us something about ourselves that we would have never figured out on our own. God is telling us that we were created in such a way that only God can finally satisfy the longings of our hearts. We were not only made by God. We were made for God. We were created in such a way that only the Infinite, Holy, all-powerful, all-wise, ever-present, merciful, personal God can fill and fulfill our finite hearts. God speaks the first commandment to keep us from ruining our lives by letting anyone or anything come between us and God. **“You shall have no other gods before me.”**

The second commandment naturally follows: **“You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness....”** God is telling us that we not only ruin our lives by worshiping the wrong god. We also ruin our lives by worshiping the right God in a wrong way. God is telling us in the first commandment that we are the creatures who worship. God is telling us in the second commandment that we are the creatures who imagine. It is part of what it means to be created in God’s image: we were created with the capacity to imagine. But because we are, since the fall of Adam and Eve, no longer consistently what we were created to be, our imagining can lead us astray, especially about God.

Now, as we observed last Sunday, the first and second commandments are both grounded in the same dimension of God's character: "I, Yahweh your God, am a jealous God...." (Exodus 20:5).

What does this mean? J.I. Packer in his now classic book, Knowing God, asks: "*How can jealousy be a virtue in God when it is a vice in humans?*" (P. 152).

Dr. Packer then makes a helpful observation: *There are two kinds of human jealousy: one to be avoided, the other to be fully exercised. The first kind is the jealousy born out of resentment; resentment that others have what I want. Such jealousy is sin, and a cousin to coveting. The second kind of jealousy is born out of a zeal to protect a love relationship, and to avenge (!) it when it is broken (p. 154).*

New Testament scholar, R.V.G. (Randolph) Tasker, in his commentary on the book of James, writes that married persons "*who felt no jealousy at the intrusion of a lover or an adulterer into their home would surely be lacking in moral perfection, for the exclusiveness of marriage is the essence of marriage*" (1957, p. 106). God's jealousy is of this second kind: it is "*a praiseworthy zeal to preserve something supremely precious*" (Packer).

Yahweh is jealous to keep us from ruining our lives by worshiping anyone or anything other than the One for whom we were created and redeemed and to keep us

from ruining our lives by worshipping God in ways that actually get in the way.

I want to dig deeper now by asking four questions of this second commandment:

First question: What is the nature of the images Yahweh prohibits? What exactly is God commanding us not to do?

The second commandment warns us against any and all human-made images of God: be they statues, paintings, or mental pictures. We are to make no images, or likenesses, of anything in heaven above, on earth below, or in the waters beneath. Why?

Because although everything is created by Yahweh the Lawgiver, none of it is Yahweh the Lawgiver. Creation is not God. The work of God, yes. But not God. Creation is not even, as some religious systems hold, an extension of God. God holds it all together, movement-by-moment. But none of it is an extension of God. And, therefore, nothing in creation can serve as an image of God; nothing in creation can represent God; nothing in creation can stand in God's place and reveal God as God really is.

Yes, creation bears the stamp of God's handiwork; we see God's "fingerprints" everywhere! Creation declares the power and wisdom and glory of God. Creation reflects God's glory, but none of it is God. None of it is an extension of God's being.

Since creation is other than God and since it is not an extension of God, we can find in creation no image or likeness of God. All images of God, drawn from creation, made by human beings - by our imaginations - fall short of God's glory.

Which brings us to another important question I want to ask of the second commandment.

Second question. How does the use of images affect our relationship with Yahweh? The answer is straightforward. Images put God in a box. We, therefore, are no longer relating to the true God. We are relating to less than the true God, and in extreme cases, relating to other than the true God. Images put God in a box in at least four ways, each of them messing up our relationship with God:

a) First, every image taken from creation limits God. For the simple reason that no one image can possibly paint the whole picture. At best, it can only paint one little part of the picture. If I use that one image in my worship of God, my vision of God is severely distorted. For that one image blocks me off from other aspects of God's nature and character. And then instead of helping me see God, the image actually blinds me to God. "The heart of the objection to pictures and images is that they inevitably conceal most, if not all, of the truth about the personal nature and character of the divine Being whom they represent" (p. 40).

Let me illustrate. Take the image of a bull. A bull could stand for the strength and durability of God. But, if we worshipped God using only the image of the bull, we would miss out on God as lamb, pointing to God's gentleness, or miss out on God as fire, pointing to God's purity and cleansing presence. Using the image of the bull alone blinds us to other dimensions of God's nature and character.

The same is true of the use of mental images of God. Every human-made mental conception of God is inadequate. It may be true, but by itself it is inadequate. If I focus on God using only that mental image, I slowly, but surely, have a God who is too small.

This fact about images tells us we need to be careful even when working with Biblical images of God. No one image tells us everything. If we stay with just one image, we box God in. "God is on the throne": it is the dominant image of the book of Revelation. Thank God, God is on the throne. There is never a time when God is not on the throne. But if I only hang on to that image, as true as it is, I will miss out on the equally true and powerful image of God on His knees, sacrificing Himself in service to us. Lifting up His countenance to us with the gift of salvation.

When one image, especially one from creation, takes over our vision, our vision is limited.

b) Secondly, every image taken from creation leads us astray. For we can easily be led to think that other things in the image are also true about God. Take the example of the bull again. Aaron, Moses' brother, built the golden bull calf, and then pointing at it said, **"This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt"** (Exodus 32:4). Aaron no doubt chooses the bull to honor Yahweh as the God of power. But the bull was also a symbol of virility, of sexual prowess. If Israel kept that statue long enough, Israel would begin to think of God in those other terms as well. And sooner or later, Israel would adopt forms of worship involving sexual intercourse.

Take another example, from our imagination, "The Force" of Star Wars. "The Force" is the god element in the movies. Now, the concept of the Force, as George Lucas develops it, does teach us many true things about the Living God. But the concept also leads us astray, for "The Force" is both good and evil. "The Force" has both a good and evil side. Which is not true of the Living God. There is no evil in God. Evil is outside of God, other than God, anti-God. Which is why the true God gives us hope. The true God is bigger than evil. God does win in the end. The Star Wars "god" offers no hope. For even within "The Force" itself there is no certainty of the victory of good. And every human-made image ultimately leads us astray.

c) Third, images box God in because images localize God. That is, I come to think that I meet God in the box, at

the statue, in the picture, in the mental image. This was the primary function of idols in Israel's time. People in the ancient East were fully aware that their images of the deity were inadequate. But, as inadequate as they were, people still felt that the image was the place where the deity "broke through" to them. The image became the point of contact with God. Thus different peoples had their sacred rocks, their sacred mountains, and their sacred relics.

You can see how dangerous this is. For I can come to think then, that I meet God only in such and such a place, only while holding such and such a relic in my hands, only while focusing on such and such a painting or only while thinking such and such a mental image of God. How many Christians have only ever been told to find God in a church building and missed out, because they put God in a box with a steeple. The woman who Jesus met at the well had just such a boxed view of God. She said to Jesus,

"Our fathers [the Samaritans] worshiped on this mountain; and you people [the Jews] say that in Jerusalem is the place where we ought to worship."

Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, shall you worship the Father. "...But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is Spirit, and

those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:20-24).

Jesus freed her, and us, from a false concept of God.
Jesus freed her from her image which localized God.

d) Fourth, images box God in because they finally become a substitute for God. If I live long enough with the idea that I meet God in a particular statue or picture, then the statue or picture will become God to me.

Human-made images limit our vision of God, they lead us astray, we begin to think of them as the contact point with the Divine God and they slowly become a substitute for the Divine God. What mercy and grace there is in speaking the second commandment: **“You shall not make for yourself any image, or any likeness.”**

“I, Yahweh your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and fourth generations of those who hate me, but showing loving kindness to thousands of generations to those who love Me and keep My commandments” (Exodus 20:5-6).

The point? There are many points. One of them being that our false concepts - our images and likenesses of God - are passed on to our children. Our children pick them up without our saying a word. For we automatically relate to other people out of our vision of God.

So, for example, if a father's image of God is of a God who is never really satisfied with our service, the father is never free to rest and enjoy God and God's goodness. That father's daughter will adopt, implicitly, the same vision. She, too, never allows herself to rest - to enter into the rest God offers God's people by grace.

Another example is a mother's image of God. She tells her daughter she has to have it all together before God will love her. She treats her son the same way, telling him, "I love you" only when he is good or when he succeeds. The son then goes into life with the same vision. And so you hear his response to the invitation to come to the Lord's Table by saying, "*I am not good enough yet.*" His inherited image of God keeps him from hearing that the Lord's Table is precisely for those who do not have their life together. "We lucky bums" get God, even when we don't have it all together.

Our images not only affect our relationship with God. We pass them on to others, especially our children, and their relationship with God is affected. **"You shall not make for yourself any image or any likeness."** It is spoken for our sake and for our children's sake.

Now, I want to make it very clear that the second commandment does not prohibit the use of art in worship. It does not call us to worship God in a room stripped bare of symbols. How do I know this? Because the God of the second commandment ordered Israel to build the

Tabernacle. Read Exodus 25-40 sometime, and you will see how God painstakingly describes all of the ways that place of worship is to be adorned. It was to be filled with color, texture and symbols.

But note carefully that the art forms in the Tabernacle and the symbols in the Lord's Supper intentionally point away from themselves - beyond themselves - toward the Living God. Yet! As one moves through the Tabernacle, room by room, further and further toward the Holy of Holies, the symbolism decreases, until at the place where the high priest meets God there is nothing. It is open space, proclaiming very graphically that nothing in all of creation can finally stand in God's place as God.

3) We come then to a third question I want to ask of the second commandment. How then are we to relate to the Invisible God. Does God give us any help in light of our human need for some sort of visualization? If our human-made images distort and lead astray, what are we to do?

I have some very exciting news for you. God knows us. God knows our need for some visual aid. And God wants us to know God as God really is. So God gives us an image of Himself. We cannot make an image of God, but God can. And God does.

Listen to the following affirmation from the New Testament: **"For God, who said, 'Light shall shine out of darkness,' is the One**

who has shone in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6).

“And He is the image of the invisible God...” (Colossians 1:15).

“And He is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of God’s nature...” (Hebrews 1:3).

Did you hear that? We cannot make an image or likeness of God. But God can. God can construct an icon (that is the word used in 2 Corinthians and Colossians) that is God’s exact likeness. The icon of God is Jesus! Jesus is not only like us, in the image of God. He is the image of God. The Invisible, Hidden, Un-Imaginable God, has made the perfect image, the perfect likeness, and it turns out to be Jesus of Nazareth.

If you will, God puts God in a box. A box of God’s own choosing and making. But this box (if we can rightly speak this way) avoids the four dangers of human-made images.

a). For, first of all, Jesus is the one image who does not limit God’s glory. What we see in Jesus does not blind us to God’s true character. As John says,

“The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

“No one has seen God at anytime; the only begotten God [Jesus], who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained God” (John 1:18).

b). Secondly, Jesus Christ is the one image of God that does not lead us astray. What we see in Jesus is all true of the Invisible God. Jesus says,

“They who behold Me behold the One who sent Me” (John 12:45).

c). Third, Jesus Christ is the one image of God where we do meet God:

Paul says, **“God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19)**

Jesus says, **“The one who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).**

d). And fourth, Jesus Christ is the one image of God that really is God.

Paul says, **“In Him [Christ] all the fulness of Deity dwells in bodily form” (Colossians 2:9).**

Jesus says, **“I and the Father are one” (John 10:30).**

We are not left to our imaginations! God gives us an image of God that is God. Jesus Christ, fully human, is

fully God. He is one icon/image/likeness of God we can worship and serve and not commit idolatry. (See 1 John 5:20-21).

Therefore, I submit to you that we can restate the second commandment positively. In place of the negative, “**You shall not make for yourself any image,**” we can put the positive, “**Behold My Son! Behold Jesus Christ. In Him you do see Me. Love Him and you will not be putting Me in a box.**”

Here, too, we need to be careful. For it is all too easy to also put God’s image in a box. Thank God, Jesus won’t stay in any of our boxes long. As C.S. Lewis has one of the children say in *Chronicles of Narnia*, “*He’s not a tame lion, you know.*” If we keep the focus on Jesus, we will be moving in the right direction. And in the process He will slowly, but surely, overcome all of our inadequate imaginings. We will always be drawn closer to a full image of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Let me conclude by suggesting three practical implications of obeying the second commandment.

- 1) First, obeying the commandment protects and enhances the unity of the Church. The Living God is so much bigger than any one denomination’s images. The Living God is bigger than all the images of all the denominations combined. No one has a corner on God. No one can point to that box and say, “This is God.” No one can point to this box and say, “This is Jesus.” When

we recognize the inadequacy of our vision of God, we find the humility to listen to other believers. And then together we find the humility to subject all of our visions to the Word of God.

2) Second, obeying the second commandment will expand our vision of God, and, therefore, our vision of life. Our worlds are as big as our vision of God. The God who comes to us as Jesus Christ is the God who knows when a sparrow falls to the ground and the God who sets up and takes down empires and civilizations. The God who comes to us as Jesus Christ is the God who knows the number of hairs on our head, and He is the God who counts all of the stars of the universe. The more our little images of God are smashed under the weight of God's image, Jesus Christ, the bigger God becomes. A God big enough to hold the world together. A God big enough to hold our lives together. Jesus introduces us again and again to His Father who is our Father, who has adopted us and deeply loves us.

3) Third, obeying the second commandment will result in changed lives. We become like what we worship. We become like what we idolize. That simply is the way it is. Here is the promise: **“But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory...”** (2 Corinthians 3:18).

The more we focus on God's image of God, on Jesus, the more we become like Him, which means, the more we

become who we were created to be. For Jesus is at once the perfect revelation of God and the perfect revelation of who we, through Him, were created and redeemed to be.

The words of an old hymn give verbal expression to what my heart wants to say to the God of the second commandment:

“Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;
Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art.”

O Living God, do not be anything else to me but who You really are. Oh Jealous God, do not let me box you in. Reveal Yourself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Help me to live in Your steadfast love for me. In Jesus Name, Amen.