

Colleyville Presbyterian Church - Ten Commandments
Week 3 – The Second Commandment

Exodus 20:4-6: “*You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or 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 or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.*”

John Frame: “The first four commandments serve as rules for worship. The first commandment deals with the object of worship, the second with the manner of worship, the third with the language of worship, and the fourth with the time of worship.”

What do we learn from the 2nd commandment?

1. *We learn of God’s absolute transcendence in his glory, majesty and power.* See Exodus 33:17-23; 1 Tim. 6:13-16, Rev. 1:12-17. We must not make graven images of God to worship because they are inherently a false representation of God. God reveals himself in his son through the incarnation. But how is the incarnation revealed to us? By the written word.
2. *We learn God’s hatred of false worship.* This commandment means far more than this, but it at least most certainly means this – we may not bow down before or serve any carved image, of God, or anything else in heaven, on the earth, or in the seas. Note that our heart or intentions in bowing down before a carved image is not the crucial thing – the action itself is prohibited. See Exodus 32. Leithart: “The Second Word prohibits making images for a particular purpose—to bow before and serve them...the commandment forbids certain liturgical actions...When Christians seek Jesus through an image, they’re looking for God in the wrong place.” We might kneel in worship to confess our sins before God, but we do not bow before created images. Note: this commandment forbids bowing before images, not bowing before men (cf. Genesis 33:3).
3. *We learn how seriously God takes our worship of him.* Annie Dillard writes: “I often think of the set pieces of the liturgy as certain words which people have successfully addressed to God without their getting killed.” See Exodus 19:16-24, Leviticus 10:1-3.
4. *We learn that the Christian religion instituted by God is fundamentally a word-based religion, not an image-based one.* This has huge implications in our image-based culture. Leithart: “Yahweh declares, commands, writes on tablets. At Sinai, he does *not* show himself. Yahweh is the unseen God who speaks. He is word.” How does Jesus reveal himself to us today? In the written word. In the sacraments of the Lord’s Supper and Baptism (which are not primarily manifestations of God that we see, but manifestations of God that we touch, taste and smell). Note the senses by which God reveals himself to us: the ear (especially), the nose, the tongue, the body - but not the eye. Leithart: “Jesus ascended and is no longer visibly present. We *don’t* see his glory as the apostles did. He’s with us by his Spirit...that Spirit comes to us in sensible forms—in audible words, tangible water, and edible food and drink. Someday we will see Jesus face-to-face. But not yet. To live by the eye is to reach ahead of our time.” How does this relate to our relationship to visual images of God and especially Jesus? We should be very careful in how we relate to these things.

Westminster Larger Catechism, **Q. 108: What are the duties required in the second commandment?**

A: The duties required in the second commandment are, the receiving, observing, and keeping pure and entire, all such religious worship and ordinances as God hath instituted in his word; particularly prayer and thanksgiving in the name of Christ; the reading, preaching, and hearing of the word; the administration and receiving of the sacraments; church government and discipline; the ministry and maintenance thereof; religious fasting; swearing by the name of God, and vowing unto him: as also the disapproving, detesting, opposing all false worship; and, according to each one's place and calling, removing it, and all monuments of idolatry.

WLC Q. 109: What are the sins forbidden in the second commandment?

A. The sins forbidden in the second commandment are, all devising, counseling, commanding, using, and anywise approving, any religious worship not instituted by God himself; tolerating a false religion; the making any representation of God, of all or of any of the three persons, either inwardly in our mind, or outwardly in any kind of image or likeness of any creature whatsoever; all worshiping of it, or God in it or by it; the making of any representation of feigned deities, and all worship of them, or service belonging to them; all superstitious devices, corrupting the worship of God, adding to it, or taking from it, whether invented and taken up of ourselves, or received by tradition from others, though under the title of antiquity, custom, devotion, good intent, or any other pretense whatsoever; simony; sacrilege; all neglect, contempt, hindering, and opposing the worship and ordinances which God hath appointed.

My own difference with our Larger Catechism on the Second Commandment: "I believe that Scripture teaches in the second commandment (Exodus 20:4) that it is forbidden to make idols or images to bow down and worship, but not that it is forbidden to make any representation of God at all, either inwardly or outwardly. Though Christian tradition has generally found it impious to create images of God the Father, it has not generally thought the same with regard to Christ, the Son of God, or the Holy Spirit. More specifically, the Scriptures themselves speak of the form of Jesus (e.g. Isaiah 53, John 20:24-29, etc.) and of the Holy Spirit in the form of a creature (Matthew 3:16). Thus I believe that the confession goes beyond the prohibitions of Scripture in this regard."

Note: I hold this standard loosely, and continue to wrestle with it. I know I am at odds with Calvin and other early Reformers in my interpretation of this commandment, and that gives me pause. I understand the logic of the writers of the Standards, and I find aspects of their logic compelling. I am wary of the fact that my view is a modern one within the context of the Reformed tradition, and I acknowledge that I may be overly influenced by the age in which I live.

I do think we have to be very careful with representations of Jesus, and I think generally our modern Christian culture is not careful enough (for example, people put images of Jesus on tee shirts and coffee mugs and all sorts of things). For myself, I will not watch movies or TV shows which depict Jesus, and I am very careful about "realistic" artistic depictions of Jesus - because I want my impression of Jesus to be shaped by the way God has chosen to reveal Jesus to me - through the written word. Note: LOTR movies.

Certainly I believe that this commandment means that we may not use icons or pictures or statues of Jesus as means to inspire devotion or engage in worship of God.

Application questions:

How should this commandment influence the seriousness with which we worship God on the Lord's Day?

How should this commandment influence our worship practices?

How should this commandment influence what artistic depictions of Jesus we possess or allow ourselves to see (if any at all)?