

Exodus 20:4-6 No Idols!

Introduction

The first commandment prohibited worshipping false gods. By contrast the second commandment prohibits worshipping the true God in inappropriate ways. Exodus 20:4-6 states: *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.* After a simple reading of the text it appears that this is possibly the easiest commandment to keep. After all, have any of us here been tempted to make a representation of God in wood, metal or stone, set it up in our homes and then bow down to it? No? I didn't think so! However, it involves much more than that, although for some people the subject of worshipping or adoring representations of God or some heavenly being is still a live issue. In 1878 China suffered one of its worst famines. It was reported that around seventy million people were dying of starvation. This was an extraordinarily high proportion of the population at that time. Confucian scholar Hsi Shengmo remembered the fear he had experienced as a boy from gazing on the grizzled faces of the carved idols in his village. The idols had not been central to worship in the community until the famine began to take a serious hold and hundreds of thousands of people were dying. The villagers decided that it might be the gods that were responsible so they honoured them in a variety of ways with feasts and other celebrations; performing shows in front of them to entertain them, but still the rains did not come. Having tried 'the carrot' approach and failed, they decided to try 'the stick' approach of leaving the idols exposed in the blazing sun. Their paint peeled and they looked much the worse for wear, but still no change with the famine. In exactly the same way as the Baals could not help their prophets in the challenge with Elijah on Mount Carmel (I Kings 18:16-29), these idols were found out as useless. Hsi Shengmo became convinced through this episode that there must be a higher power than these idols, it was to lead to his acceptance of Christ [Brian Edwards, *The Ten Commandments for Today*, p. 78]. As Augustine (354-430AD) the great Algerian Christian theologian once declared, there is a God-shaped 'hole' in every life and people are yearning to fill it. The vast majority of people will worship something, there are very few consistent atheists, as it is too hard to close your eyes to the evidence for God in the world around us (Romans 1:19-25). John Paton, the former Glasgow City Missioner, who did such an extraordinary work amongst the Pacific Islanders (New Hebrides), also spent a short time in Australia with Aboriginal people. He was greatly disturbed that a significant proportion of the population viewed these native Australians as no different to the animals in the bush. One of the 'reasons' for this folly was the claim that they showed no traces of evidence of the worship of any deity. Eventually an Aboriginal friend was persuaded to talk about their beliefs and the man produced a little bag filled with tiny pebbles, representations of their deities. Some bad experiences with white men had led to a reticence to talk about their beliefs as they did not wish to experience further ridicule concerning their beliefs. Paton was convinced that a careful search of all human people groups would provide evidence of the worship of God or gods. He declared: 'Nor do I believe that any tribe of man will ever be found, who, when their language and customs are rightly

interpreted, will not display their consciousness of the need of a God, and that divine capacity of holding fellowship with the unseen powers, of which the brutes (animals) are without one faintest trace.' Therefore, although at first glance this commandment may appear less relevant to our lives today, this is not the case in practice.

1. The Rule from God (Exodus 20:4-5)

*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;* The other commandments follow naturally on from the first one. If God truly has the first place in our lives then we will naturally want to honour Him in the way He has guided and directed us. **What was the purpose of this law?** People in the ancient world generally believed that by producing carved representations of their gods that they were bringing themselves into closer contact with them. So the intention was to worship the god 'behind' the image representing it, but so easily the two could become confused and the object itself gained some kind of sacred status in the mind of the worshipper. This commandment ensured that obedient Israelites would be unlikely to make the same mistake as their Canaanite neighbours. After all no visual representation of God could possibly be accurate and therefore it must be classified as 'an idol'. So step one was the prohibition of the creation of these 'aids to worship'. Step two was the banning of these objects in worship services. So pictures, icons, statues or any other religious artefacts were forbidden as representations of God or heavenly beings; However, this was not a ban on religious art or similar crafts. After all Moses was instructed by God to create all kinds of beautiful things for the tabernacle in the desert, including on the Ark of the Covenant:¹⁸ *And make two cherubim out of hammered gold at the ends of the cover.*¹⁹ *Make one cherub on one end and the second cherub on the other; make the cherubim of one piece with the cover, at the two ends.*²⁰ *The cherubim are to have their wings spread upwards, overshadowing the cover with them. The cherubim are to face each other, looking towards the cover.*²¹ *Place the cover on top of the ark and put in the ark the Testimony, which I will give you.*²² *There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the Testimony, I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites* (Exodus 25:18-22). The purpose of the ban was to insist that God who in His essential nature is a spiritual being is not restricted within a material object or a particular geographical location. Isaiah in a number of passages attempts to explain the distance between God and humanity. Isaiah 57:15, for example states: *For this is what the high and lofty One says— He who lives for ever, whose name is holy: I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.* A couple of chapters earlier on the same theme, Isaiah represents God as saying: *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord.*⁹ *As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts* (Isaiah 55:8-9). Therefore God's big concern was that their worship be exclusively of Him, not any object they had created.

2. The Response from Humanity

(a) **The Clarity of the prophets' messages** There are plenty of Old Testament passages that condemn idol worship, but none so clearly and powerfully as those of the prophet Isaiah. In chapter 40 verses 18-20 it states: *To whom, then, will you compare God? What image will you compare him to?*¹⁹ *As for an idol, a craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and fashions silver chains for it.*²⁰ *A man too poor to present such an offering selects wood that will not rot. He looks for a skilled craftsman to set up an idol that will not topple.* Isaiah 44: 14-20 is a fuller exposure of such folly:¹⁴ *He cut down cedars, or perhaps took a cypress or oak. He let it grow among the trees of the forest, or planted a pine, and the rain made it grow.*¹⁵ *It is man's fuel for*

burning; some of it he takes and warms himself, he kindles a fire and bakes bread. But he also fashions a god and worships it; he makes an idol and bows down to it. ¹⁶ Half of the wood he burns in the fire; over it he prepares his meal, he roasts his meat and eats his fill. He also warms himself and says, Ah! I am warm; I see the fire. ¹⁷ From the rest he makes a god, his idol; he bows down to it and worships. He prays to it and says, Save me; you are my god. ¹⁸ They know nothing, they understand nothing; their eyes are plastered over so that they cannot see, and their minds closed so that they cannot understand. ¹⁹ **No-one stops to think, no-one has the knowledge or understanding to say, Half of it I used for fuel; I even baked bread over its coals, I roasted meat and I ate. Shall I make a detestable thing from what is left? Shall I bow down to a block of wood?** ²⁰ He feeds on ashes, a deluded heart misleads him; he cannot save himself; or say, Is not this thing in my right hand a lie? Isaiah goes on to give a historical example of the Babylonian gods Bel and Nebo after their empire was brought crashing to the ground. Isaiah 46:1-2 records the cruel irony of their impotence: *Bel bows down, Nebo stoops low; their idols are borne by beasts of burden. The images that are carried about are burdensome, a burden for the weary.* ² *They stoop and bow down together; unable to rescue the burden, they themselves go off into captivity.* Idols cannot save people, only the Lord God, the Creator and Redeemer of His people can do so. Only once as far as I know did a ruler in the Ancient Near East seek to impose a form of monotheism on a nation. Akhenaten (known as Amenhotep IV) ruled for 17 years and died around 1336 BC or 1334 BC. He is especially noted for abandoning traditional Egyptian polytheism and introducing worship centered on Aten, the sun god. It didn't work as too many temple priest stood to lose their jobs and status in the land! So after his death things returned to normal and a commitment to worship many gods. (b) **The challenge to Israel's conduct** Down the centuries there was a consistent faithful minority who stood firm for the Lord against the idolatry that was endemic in the pagan nations around them. Prophets like Elijah and Elisha stood firm even in the darkest days when the majority turned their backs on the God of Israel. Even godly kings like Hezekiah (II Kings 18-20 and Josiah II Kings 22-23:30) could not eradicate such practices despite this tribute after his death: *Hezekiah trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel. There was no-one like him among all the kings of Judah, either before him or after him.* ⁶ *He held fast to the Lord and did not cease to follow Him; he kept the commands the Lord had given Moses.* ⁷ *And the Lord was with him; he was successful in whatever he undertook* (II Kings 18:5-7). The extent of the problem was seen in the conduct of the Israelites while Moses was still on the mountain communicating with the Lord. Exodus 32:1-8 records: *When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered round Aaron and said, Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him.* ² *Aaron answered them, Take off the gold ear-rings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me.* ³ *So all the people took off their ear-rings and brought them to Aaron.* ⁴ *He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.* ⁵ *When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord.* ⁶ *So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterwards they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.* ⁷ *Then the Lord said to Moses, Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt.* ⁸ ***They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.'*** A government or some other authority can change the outward appearance of its citizens or the public activities they are allowed to engage in, but it cannot legislate for the desires and aspiration of the human heart. The Israelites wanted an object on which to focus in worship. They struggled to accept the plainer and more simple form of worship God had commanded. Church buildings and their ornamentation do tell a lot about the approach to worship of the opinion formers of that congregation. Some of our spiritual ancestors may have gone over the top in insisting on

whitewashed walls in churches with only the Ten Commandments written on the walls, but what they were striving for, the purity of worship, was essential. Our focus must be on Him and God alone. No visual images can accurately represent Him, and therefore are misrepresentations and in violation of this principle. The Israelites here and later after the kingdoms of Israel and Judah divided, Jeroboam II, ruler of the northern kingdom of Israel erected a similar statue in the key towns of Bethel and Dan: *Jeroboam thought to himself, The kingdom is now likely to revert to the house of David.*²⁷ *If these people go up to offer sacrifices at the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem, they will again give their allegiance to their lord, Rehoboam king of Judah. They will kill me and return to King Rehoboam.*²⁸ *After seeking advice, the king made two golden calves. He said to the people, It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.*²⁹ *One he set up in Bethel, and the other in Dan.*³⁰ *And this thing became a sin; the people went even as far as Dan to worship the one there* (I Kings 12:26-30). These calf images were meant to represent Yahweh the God of Israel, but the Lord had not asked for this new expression of worship to be introduced. Even legitimate objects used in the worship of God could take on a significance that God never intended for them. For example, the Ark of the Covenant was the ornate box that carried the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone. They were processed through the streets on occasions and rightly respected as it caused people to think of the God who gave these laws to His people. However, in I Samuel 4 there is the account of a time when the Israelites were living lives displeasing to God and they were defeated by their old enemies the Philistines. What was the response to this wake-up call? Did it bring them to their knees to repent of their sin? I Samuel 4:3-5 states: *When the soldiers returned to camp, the elders of Israel asked, Why did the Lord bring defeat upon us today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the Lord's covenant from Shiloh, so that it may go with us and save us from the hand of our enemies.*⁴ *So the people sent men to Shiloh, and they brought back the ark of the covenant of the Lord Almighty, who is enthroned between the cherubim. And Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God.*⁵ *When the ark of the Lord's covenant came into the camp, all Israel raised such a great shout that the ground shook.* This was a God-honouring piece of craftsmanship built on the instructions of God and played a part in Israelite worship, but it was not a magical object that could transform their situation. The nation needed to confess its sin of turning away from God and get right with Him, before their problems at that time could be addressed. It was no surprise that the next battle was lost even more heavily because they had missed the point altogether. Likewise today it is not the form of worship services, or our choice of words in private prayer, for example, that makes the difference, most of all, it is the attitude of our hearts towards God that is key. Only in the exile period was there that wholehearted commitment to exclude idols and worship the Lord as He had demanded. It was a hard lesson for them to learn. Does God have first place in your life and mine or does some other person or interest usurp His place?

3. The Reinforcement from Jesus (John 4: 21-24)

Jesus did not directly quote this Second Commandment, but in His discussions with the woman at the well in Samaria there is a clear statement of His perspective on this topic. John 4:21-24 states: *Jesus declared, Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.*²² *You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews.*²³ *Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks.*²⁴ *God is spirit, and His worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth.* On another occasion Jesus saw His disciples marvelling at the amazing engineering skills required to erect the massive Temple complex in Jerusalem. They had every reason to be amazed at a time when there was no heavy-lifting gear, no cranes or other equipment we

take for granted today on civil engineering projects. (Matthew 24:1: *Jesus left the temple and was walking away when His disciples came up to Him to call His attention to its buildings.*) In response He warned them that the day would come when they would be taken apart block by block and be a pile of ruins, as it was barely forty years later. The essence of Jesus' teaching was this –our priority is not a particular building but the purity and sincerity of our acts of worship. It is irrelevant in God's eyes whether our Sunday services are in a consecrated building or a hired hall; what He is concerned about is that it is *in spirit and in truth*. Over the next few years we may be out of our premises on a Sunday for a period of time, but this should in no way affect the due offering of praise and worship to the Lord to which He is entitled. Jesus had made a point of worshipping in a local synagogue each Saturday morning, as well as the Jerusalem Temple, on the occasions when He participated in the major festivals. But His main concern was whether people were truly worshipping God and seeking Him with their whole hearts, regardless of the geographical location.

4. The Relevance for today

(a) A right view of God in contrast to idolatry

God gives purpose and meaning and fulfilment to my life

God governs the choices I make in my life

God is the central focus of my whole way of life

God is often in my thoughts and I get enthusiastic when I think about Him

God's Word /His promises comfort and encourage me when I am feeling down

God comes up in my conversations with other people, especially with others that also are following Him [based on J. John *Ten* p.244]

I desire to be more like Him and to follow Him more closely

Pause for reflection: if you replaced 'God' with your career, hobbies, possessions, sport, music, sex or relationships or? Would the above be more accurate for you /me? Idolatry in essence is placing a higher focus on something/ someone other than God;

(b) What kind of inappropriate images might people have today? There are many so only a few can be reflected on here:

(i) Wealth the obsession with the lottery and other forms of gambling leaves many people obsessed with obtaining a lifestyle 99.9%+ of them can never have; how many have run up debts of multiple thousands on credit cards chasing an illusory dream.

(ii) The Body For some strange reason models in clothes magazines etc all tend to be young slim and beautiful; far too often unhealthily thin which can cause not only for some models, but also many insecure young people problems with anorexia or bulimia; the recent controversy over faulty breast implants sold in their thousands to women without a medically diagnosed need of them, together with the growing cosmetic surgery industry amongst men as well as women, must be a concern about the perceived body image at least some of these people have of themselves –one that is less than healthy.

(iii) Power Why do people seek office in local regional and national government? Many have good motives to help the less well-off, but how many remain committed to such ideals as they climb 'the greasy pole' of party hierarchy? Likewise in positions of power / office in the workplace or even church to ask how am I using this position for God's glory or the common good? Or is it primarily to benefit me or enhance my CV? Daniel and Esther are two biblical examples of people who kept their focus on God in an exalted public office.

(iv) Sex /Relationships How many people live their lives through the characters in their favourite soaps? How many do so because they are dissatisfied with their own lives? The message that comes out through many magazines and televisions shows and feature films is that having a wild sex life with a steady stream of different partners is what brings fulfilment

to people? It has never been easier for men and women to access pornography from the comfort of their own homes; never been easier to set up and conduct affairs in an increasingly fragmented society. However, the statistics of broken marriages and the much faster disintegration of the relationships of people cohabiting outside of marriage suggest that this popular idol is a very cruel master. This idol is irrelevant in a world where from a third to two-thirds of the population may be single at any one time. Our security and fulfilment have to be in God not in unrealistic expectations of relationships.

(v) Fame In the last decade the celebrity culture is predominant; once it was just Hollywood film stars now celebrity chefs, footballers pop stars even businessmen; shows like Big Brother and more recently X Factor, Pop Idol and others you could add that potentially give ordinary citizens a moment of fame. Now in certain industries you need air time and publicity to get a career off the ground, but something more is taking place at the present time, that appears less than healthy.

(c) **What kind of idolatry might be a problem in your workplace** (i) Security finding our security in our career, trusting it to give us our identity; but what happens when redundancy occurs? (ii) Significance God intended work to be fulfilling and a cause for satisfaction when a job is well done, but the significance of our lives must be greater than that found in work alone. Some companies like my first employer after university had lost a sense of perspective regarding its place in their employees' lives. (iii) Control so easy to abuse a position to treat others unfairly in work rotas, holiday entitlement and a whole lot more issues, or to favour a few friends at the expense of other employees. Or at the higher management level setting salary / pension arrangements that disproportionately favour a few at the expense of the many;

(d) **Overcoming idolatry** John at the very end of his first letter wrote: *Dear children, keep yourselves from idols* (I John 5:21). Idols cheat us of the freedom and fulfilment God wants each one of us to have in life, whether single or married; old or young, waged or unwaged. The idol of nationalism from the Balkans to parts of Africa and Asia, won't bring ultimate happiness. Neither should it be that significant which side wins the Referendum vote in a couple of years time! Idols lie about what they can deliver for us. They steal our affection, but ultimately leave people dissatisfied, disillusioned and sometimes even dehumanized in the modern world today. Jeremiah long ago wrote: *The whole human race is foolish and has no knowledge! The craftsmen are disgraced by the idols they make, for their carefully shaped works are a fraud. These idols have no breath or power* (Jeremiah 10:14 NLT). By contrast to following idols and all the ultimate disappointment they will bring, follow Jesus –put Him first in your life and know through the good and the bad, the happy and the sad times, the fulfilment He alone can bring. Take away with you these words of Jesus from John 10:10: *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full, Amen.*