

GET REAL WITH GOD

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You shall not make for yourself any graven image, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them [i.e., the graven images]; for I, Yahweh your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments." (Exodus 20:4-6, adapted from the NASV)

Moses knew God, and had met God in a very dramatic way in the back side of the desert of Sinai in the Burning Bush experience. God had revealed his Name, "I Am that I Am" meaning, of course, "I Am the Eternal, All Existent, Being upon whom all other beings, and all creation depends." And Yahweh gave him a message that Moses was to deliver to powerful Pharaoh, and the message burned the heart of Moses and gave him a mission like no other mission given to anyone before him. The children of Israel were delivered from Egypt, delivered from plague and from the great power of Pharaoh's armies. But they were not yet delivered from their own sinful, Egyptian, ways. So God brought Moses back to Himself to the top of the mountain that thundered and shook, and gave him rules for the pilgrimage, the Ten Words, the Ten Commandments.

Today we will look at some implications of the second commandment. The first commandment prohibited polytheism, the worship of many different gods; and this second commandment prohibits idolatry, or the worship of idols depicting God, or gods of various kinds.

These two ways of worship were quite common in the time of Moses, and they are not at all uncommon today. God the Lord could appear in a burning bush, but a burning bush could not appear as God; God the Lord could appear in a fiery cloud or pillar, but Heraclitus the philosopher and the Zoroastrians were wrong in seeing fire as God.

When God said to Moses, "I Am that I Am" the meaning of that was also, "I will be who I will be." He could appear in many different theophanies, but the theophanies were not God, nor could they contain God, the Holy and Infinite One. These theophanies in which God appears, or should I say with which he enshrouds Himself to address man, can still be with us today in some senses. For I believe that the early transcendentalists of American Literature were correct in saying they felt God's Presence in nature but beyond nature. However, as Jesus showed in the miracle of calming the wind and the waves, nature is not God, never can be, for it is also under the Lordship of its Creator.

I will attempt today to pose two questions regarding this second commandment, and to try to answer them. My first question is: **why in the world do men make idols and worship them?** And, the second question is: **what are our more persistent modern idols?** Then I will embrace with you, fellow Christians, the answer Jesus gave.

The first answer to why men make and worship ‘graven images’ seems to me to be that men make idols to eliminate their fears. The first fear is what might happen to me today and its corollary what will happen to me tomorrow. This fear of the uncertainty of life haunts us throughout our waking hours, and visits us in dreams, and visions, and nightmares as we sleep. Men have dealt with this in many ways including recreation, reading, and work, but it is such a persistent rascal that only religion can deal with it adequately. Because of our future anxiety, and our finitude anxiety, we feel that we must seek the extraordinary to be in control of those events, which we cannot know.

Moreover we are well aware that we are guilty of being sinful in our lives, even if we live by an excellent moral code. We are responsible to act when presented with opportunities, yet our action or our inaction, our decisions or our indecisions, bring us condemnation or congratulation in the face of our own souls. The play-writer, Arthur Miller, in *Timebends*, puts it accurately, “An idol tells people exactly what to believe, God presents them with choices they have to make for themselves. The difference is far from insignificant; before the idol men remain dependent children, before God they are burdened and at the same time liberated to participate in the decisions of endless creation.”

But there is a more practical reason that men make and worship before graven images: These graven images allow them to control their god, or gods. The worshipper has power over the things that his hands have formed, even if he has no power over the things The Lord God’s Hand has formed, and no power over the events of the future. If my sculpted god doesn’t magically deliver me, then I can burn it in the fire and make another.

Clearly, I think there is another reason, and that is the need for the familiar. We cannot see the face of an invisible God, we cannot look upon the features of His Being, but we can look upon a statue of a Golden Buddha, seeing all its features, and we can look upon the features of a household god of Shintoism, and be perfectly familiar with it. We are in love with the familiar; we hesitate to be in the presence of the unfamiliar. That is why Jesus’ disciple, Peter, having been saved from drowning, though now in safety, cried out on board that boat, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man.” In a word, “I am unholy, and cannot be content in the presence of something so different from myself.” Something has to happen to Peter, and to us or we will prefer our idols and our magic and our astrological sign. We are so unfamiliar with the Living God that

Paul even says, “You are dead.” Shakespeare was right about familiarity breeding contempt; but it also breeds comfort. We do not like that which we do not know.

I am certain there are other reasons why men, ancient and modern, create idols, but these are some of the reasons.

I would like now to speak about Modern Graven Images, the most obvious of which is materialism. Arthur Hugh Clough, the English poet, put it pretty well when he wrote, “No graven images may be worshipped, except the currency”

This reminds me of being in a park in Romania one summer a few years ago, where I was preaching the Gospel. One irate young lady, scantily dressed, and extravagantly covered with make-up, looked at me and said, “You speak of God. Well, the only God that I know is money.” My friend Vali said something to her in Romanian. I asked him what he said and he told me, “Well, you know that eye that is on money, in Romania, we call it the ‘eye of the devil’; so I told her, “Then you worship the devil.” Much too often our money, which is a reflection of our materialism, for money is only worth what it will buy—much too often money is the object of our worship. Money becomes our ‘graven image.’ And even if it says on money, ‘in God we trust’ one must ask, “Which God?”

I am certain that the Jews were prohibited from worshipping things created by man, but everything material falls into that category. In Sociology we talk about the material artifacts of a civilization, and that includes all manmade materials that a culture produces. I remember reading once a rather long poem in which the poet writes that in future generations the archeologists will unearth a million golf balls. The cultural anthropologists will try to make something out of those golf balls, I am sure. Maybe they will say these were magical charms, or the eyes of some white-eyed gods. We needn’t think that is a far-removed idea, for oftentimes golf, baseball, basketball, tennis, and other sports become our ‘graven images.’

Whether, however, it be money or things, whatever we put in the place of the God and Father of Jesus Christ makes us guilty of breaking this second commandment. Now you know that for most in our society, television is the ‘graven image’ before whom most people worship. I do think, however, that the commandment means essentially trying to depict the Lord God with material objects so that our senses can manipulate God.

Don’t we often use even religious objects and religious ideas in our churches and try to make them the ‘image of God’ for us? We pray in certain proscribed ways, feeling sure that only such prayer touches the face of God, or substitutes for His Face. We also make the preacher into our ‘graven image’. Human beings, however great and glorious, can never look like God. Familiar hymns, or familiar translations of the *Bible*, and even the *Bible* itself can become

‘graven images.’ We feel much more at ease with the familiar even when the familiar is not defined as an idol, i.e., familiar hymns, crosses, *Bibles*, sermons, preachers, and so on. I read once of a church in which some of the worshippers would stop at a certain point and genuflect, not knowing why. Someone found out that the reason they did so was that the church, now Anglican, had been formerly a Catholic Church, and a statue of Mary had once stood at the place where they stopped. Old habits are hard to break.

Another way we make ‘graven images’ is through our ‘God-language.’ A more dignified name for such a thing is called Anthropomorphism. The meaning of Anthropomorphism is: **defining the nature of God in human terms.** Indeed, we do this because we are human and cannot speak of God in any other terms. But we must be careful when we define God in human terms because in doing so we are limiting the truth of Who the Lord God has revealed Himself to be. We speak of God as walking, talking, loving, living, being angry, being jealous, etc., and all of these terms are human terms to describe and to define the Eternal One. When we say, “God is Love,” we are only partially describing God, because Love is different in God, Everlasting in God, more wonderful than we can possibly imagine, or than our poor human language can ever describe.

So, you see, we use our ideas about God, human ideas, and these ideas become ‘graven images’ that cannot possibly please God. We use these great, theological, high sounding phrases and ideas, and, if not careful, we push them from our lungs and off our tongues as if they were indeed the Truth of the True God Himself. Our language, the immaterial artifacts of our culture, is in itself as fallible, as fallible man. That is why the Lord God requires our humility. Our beautiful phrases and our wonderful mastery of language and our skillful rhythmic patterns often become just ‘graven images.’

Isn’t it interesting that just as Jesus gave us the answer to the first commandment, so **He gives us the real answer to this second commandment.** He tells us how we can keep this commandment, and He tells us in positive terms:

^{John 4:23} Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. ²⁴ God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."

Jesus gives us, then, the answer to our human dilemma: We must worship God in Spirit, and in Truth.

First we must worship God in Spirit and verse 24 of John 4 tells us why: God is a Spirit. The most obvious truth about the Spirit is that it is not visible, not material, not apprehensible. Nothing about our sensory way of knowing can help us to understand the Spirit that God Is. We can neither see Him, hear Him, touch

Him, smell Him, taste Him, nor feel Him. God is a Spirit, therefore, God is totally free.

He can come to us; we cannot come to Him. True, we can draw near to God, we can seek God, we can thirst for God, but ultimately, God must come to us before we can know Him. John Wesley very appropriately said, "Bring me a worm that can comprehend a man, and then I will show you a man that can comprehend the Triune God!" We cannot break the bonds of our humanity and know God or understand God...God meets us in His own way, on His own terms. In fact, He meets us at the Cross.

The first of those terms that helps us overcome our propensity to make 'graven images' is to come to Him in Spirit. That God is a Spirit means first that we come to Him through His own Holy Spirit; for the *Bible* urges us to pray in the Spirit. That means we must humble our humanity and come to him in our spirit as well. Over and over the *Bible* reminds us that we are dust and ashes compared to the Living and the True God. That said, however, we are spirits in flesh and bone houses; and we must obviously come to God in our spirits, humbling our flesh. Those who fast know the meaning of that more than those who do not.

Second, as Jesus said, we must come to Him In Truth. That takes the awful acknowledging of our human condition, that we are sinners at war with God, and we must acknowledge that with the prayer of repentance. When I have done all I can do that is not enough. I cannot please God with my humanity. I must renounce my self-centered-sensuous-self and seek Him in the humility of my broken spirit. When I do so, I have broken the one 'graven image' that always keeps me from meeting God, the 'graven image' of my own sinful self.

Soren Kierkegaard once said, "God creates out of nothing. Wonderful, you say. Yes, to be sure, but He does what is still more wonderful: He makes saints out of sinners." When I realize that I am set free, free to seek God who in His freedom finds me, then the 'graven image' is not a problem, then I worship the Lord God in Spirit and in Truth. In fact, the Father seeks such to worship Him.