

Exodus 20:4-6
And no re-invented “God” either

True worship of the true God

I don't know how often you get into a serious conversation with someone about God. I know I don't manage to anywhere near as often as I'd like to. I expect that for some of you, there is that dread of not knowing what to say.

It's a bit like when I used to play quite a bit of **Chess** back in my school days. Quite serious club chess, with **clocks** as well, and matches often lasting several hours. And I can remember sitting and staring at the board, thinking about all the various moves I would like to play ... but what if my opponent plays **that move**?

What if the person you're wanting to witness to starts giving a whole list of reasons why they don't believe in God? *How could you believe in a being who is supposed to ... this, and this?* And an appropriate answer, I've heard suggested, might be to say ...

Well, isn't that curious? That's a God that I don't believe in, either ... but can I tell you about the one that I DO believe in?

And also curious is that that atheist you're wanting to talk to is doing something similar to what is being spoken against in this Second Commandment - only, in some ways, getting it more right than we can sometimes do ourselves. They are rejecting false notions about God - though possibly tossing out the proverbial **baby with the bathwater**. And that, basically - well, baby excluded - is what this Second Commandment is about.

At first sight, those first two Commandments look confusingly similar. It could be very easy to just let them **diffuse** into a single idea. But I'm sure there are two different ideas here being countered.

The **First Commandment** says that we are not to worship any **false gods**.

The **Second Commandment** says that we are not to worship **the true God falsely**.

The first one can be quite subtle, as we saw last week. Actually, so can the second one. In fact, I think it might even be that, the more religious you are, the more easy it will be to fall down on that second point. The more you learn, the more it is possible to twist and distort or get things out of balance, and fashion an alternative God of your own to worship. Maybe not a literal idol, but still an idol, because **God's people are prohibited from worshipping their own perceptions or inventions of him**.

Though I also have to say, as we approach this Second Word, that we can be distracted by the couple of verses that follow on, too. We see that word “jealous”, and quite possibly react against it. We see what God says is consequent upon that “jealousy”, that “visiting the iniquity” down through generations, and we quite possibly

react against that, too. But did you realise, if your **hackles are raised** at this point, you are doing *exactly* what this Commandment forbids? You're setting up *your* idea of what God *should* be like, and complaining if he doesn't conform to it.

What, precisely, is prohibited here - and why?
How can God be "jealous"?
Why do the ripples spread?
What sort of things must I watch out for?

- **What, precisely, is prohibited here - and why?**

First, we've started not just with God's demand to be the Israelite's exclusive God, but *his* exclusive act of salvation:

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."

(Exodus 20:2)

In those days and in that kind of society, this is precisely the way that treaties and agreements were set up between a conqueror and a conquered people. The conqueror first of all identifies himself, and then sets the rules by which the conquered people are to live.

Only this is a very unusual conqueror. His victory hasn't brought oppression, but liberation. It's *from*, and *out of*, slavery, not into. Yes, the regular formula will continue, with the terms of the treaty about to be spelled out. But the rules, in this case, are going to be restrictive only in order to be beneficial. These are the boundaries that people need in order to thrive. The things that are declared off-limits are self-destructive, not fulfilling, no matter how attractively they are packaged.

So we start with the most fundamental of all. There is only one throne. There must be no other allegiances. There's no **fingers-crossed** behind your back as you say this, no secret reservations to keep in with Baal or Molech. Just simply ...

"You shall have no other gods before me."

(Exodus 20:3)

But maybe we could make some accommodations, do you think? Maybe it would be difficult for people who had lived among the idol-worshipping Egyptians all their lives to suddenly live without some physical symbol of this God they're worshipping? Surely it's too much to ask people to make such total changes to their whole outlook and lifestyle? Can't we just carry on with these idols ... but now write *Yahweh* on them instead? Actually, no. And we'll go on to consider why not, too. First, a very broad and all-encompassing ban:

"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."

(Exodus 20:4)

There's a principle being established here. It is not just that there is only one God. It is not just that we are to worship only one God. But we are to worship this one God only in the way *he* lays down. So no, it's not OK to just re-purpose an idol of Molech or whatever. That would imply several things that are wildly wrong - and that we need to realise are wildly wrong.

First, it could seem as if we're exchanging one deity for another, and they're all fairly much the same. It's just like changing between brands of **washing machines** or **cars** ... or even **football teams**. I know that for some people, **Manchester United** is the total opposite of **Manchester City**, but, at the end of the day, most people accept that they're really both just football teams ... and the way players change teams nowadays, there's not a whole lot of sense that we as mere spectators or supporters think there's a real significant difference between a red shirt and a pale blue one.

But God - *this* God, the one with that carefully-defined name, the LORD, the God who keeps his promises, the God who is unchangeably faithful to save - *this* God is not in the same league as any other so-called God. Despite the M&S adverts - and maybe their **caterpillar cakes** are not just any other caterpillar cakes - M&S *is* just another brand. But the LORD is of an entirely different order, when set alongside any other quote-marks "deity".

For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the LORD made the heavens.

(Psalms 96:4-5)

So we are *not* comparing like with like here. Those other gods do not exist, so however you carve a block of wood or cast a block of gold, it's just fantasy anyway. But the LORD has a very specific existence and character - and it *does* matter if you get that wrong.

And that brings us to a second reason why we are not permitted to make or re-fashion idols to represent the Living God. It's because it's impossible anyway. God does not have a physical form that you can represent with wood or stone or jewels or precious metals anyway. So whatever you make would mislead more than inform and help. It would not represent God; it would *misrepresent* God. So ...

"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."

(Exodus 20:4)

The classic example comes a few chapters further on - and which we might get to later in the year - where Moses goes back up Mount Sinai for an extended time, and then returns to find the Israelites falling foul on this particular command. The episode is usually referred to as "the golden calf".

All that golden jewellery that the Israelites had been given as they left Egypt - and, arguably, which might have been intended for the eventual tabernacle and Ark

of the Covenant and such - gets melted down and converted into a metal image.

And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf.

(Exodus 32:4)

And what is now *said* and then did is highly significant, too. Listen up to how the people tried to justify what they had done. It must be OK!! Our intentions were honest!! We are aiming to honour God in what we're doing!

And they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD."

(Exodus 32:4-5)

Don't be thrown by the "your *gods*", plural. That's the plural word that is at other times translated "God", singular, capital G. They're not suddenly doing multiple gods, but saying that this statue of gold represents their one and only god. That's why Aaron builds an altar to go with it, and specifies that this is all done in pursuit of the worship of Yahweh.

But that Second Word, or Second Commandment, is deliberately broad and comprehensive, leaving no wriggle room.

"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."

(Exodus 20:4)

No carved images. Or anything that is maybe not actually carved - you can't just say it grew this way, or we cast it rather than carved it. It's not good enough to say that it just turned out like this, like those supposed faces of **Mother Theresa** in the froth on a latte. Anything you claim is a "likeness", whatever its source - if it was "in heaven or on earth", which means everything, really, but someone could maybe try to wriggle round it by saying "oh but what about *under* the earth" ... no, that's listed too ... *anything*, from *anywhere*, that you claim is a "likeness" of God, *it's a no*.

But this isn't in the context of just everyday skill, like **painting** or **photography**. It's likeness put to use in the context of worship:

"You shall not bow down to them or serve them, ..."

(Exodus 20:5)

And perhaps I could suggest a couple of reasons as to why not, too. The first, as I've already mentioned, is that *any* image or likeness detracts way from our understanding of God than it helps us to understand one particular aspect of it.

So think about that **Golden Calf** again. There's already a problem implicit in Aaron choosing that shape, and that's that Egypt had a Bull God already. That's

already uncomfortably close, I would have said. But even if you didn't know that, what notions does a **bull** conjure up for you?

I would normally think in terms of strength - in which case a calf is a bit deficient already, surely?. But I think there was supposed to be some association with fertility as well, which could well explain the orgy that this turned into afterwards.

But yes, OK, bulls are OK for signifying some things - which might not all be particularly wholesome or desirable. But they're rather deficient in other areas. Remember the phrase we have, "as dumb as an ox". I'm sure that's not just about being speechless, but that what comes out of the mouth is not worth listening to anyway. Dumb, in that sense, stupid. And that is *not* a good image if you're trying to portray the True God who is all-wise, and who speaks.

But there's more to it as well, I think. Why are we not to use things from the heavens above or the earth beneath as images of God? Another answer is that *he has already given us approved images*. Go back to the beginning:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion ..." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

(Genesis 1:26-27)

You want an image and a likeness of God? Then don't look up at the **night sky**, or the **sun**, or the **eagle**, or the **whale**, or the **thunder**, or the **lightning**, or the **lion**, or the **lamb**. The nearest we've got is ourselves - even if that image is seriously fractured and stained.

But push that one stage further, too. Where do we see the image and likeness of God most clearly expressed? Not in humankind generally, but in one particular man - that man who was also God in a body.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, ... through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

(Colossians 1:15-17)

He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.

(Hebrews 1:3)

But I don't think that means that we're allowed *statues* of Jesus, though. We probably need to come back to this again this evening to think this through in a bit more detail, but with statues of Jesus - and it can be the same with just pictures of Jesus too, if we're not very careful - we can run into just the same problems as using bulls or eagles or whatever: in trying to portray *one* aspect of the character of Jesus, you risk obscuring others.

You see Jesus, "gentle Jesus, meek and mild", touching the leper, holding children in his arms ... but is that pushed at the expense of Jesus turving the money-

changers out of the Temple and scandalising the Pharisees as hypocrites?

In fact, doesn't that take us on to the final idolatry of all, the tailor-made God devised according to our choices? Like a theological **carvery** ... which meat would you like, Sir? **Vegetables**, madam? How many and how much of each? **Sauces** to accord with your own individual tastes.

And it dovetails into the First Word, too, about who we really believe is God.

So are we prepared to accept God as he declares himself to be? - even if that includes a few spiky bits that we are less keen on. Or are we going to design for ourselves the God - not sure whether to write it with the capital letter in this case - we would prefer to worship?

It's not just a question of literally **carved** images, but whether we have used a theological chisel to whittle our picture of God down to one that suits us. Have we taken out a theological **airbrushing tool** to do the precise opposite of creation: remaking *God* in *our* image, thinking that we know better than him what he should be like?

Are we going to accept God's order not just in creation, but in revelation? Are we going to subject our ignorance to his all-knowingness, and accept that when he at first appears unknowable - remember the words when Moses stood before the burning bush:

God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

(Exodus 3:14)

But things are different now. God reveals things about his character more and more clearly - in part through these Ten Words that we're studying. But our understanding leaps forwards when we get to God's self-revelation in person, not in only words, but *the* Word of God.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

(John 1:14)

No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

(John 1:18)

For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

(2 Corinthians 4:6)

But, even if I hope I have convinced you on that point, it doesn't mean to say that everything will fall easily straight into place. Questions *can* still arise, and it should always be fair to allow honest questions to be asked, rather than suppress them. So even if we've got all our **ducks in a happy row** with the start of that

Second Word,

“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, ...”
(Exodus 20:4-5)

... what comes next might still sound odd to you, or to any 21st-century ear. We have to move on and let that question be asked.

- **How can God be “jealous”?**

“... for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, ...”
(Exodus 20:4-5)

Surely jealousy is something bad? You hear it called “**the green-eyed monster**”, and you see it in any number of TV dramas wrecking relationships. The person who can never trust their partner out alone, always over-the-top suspicious of anything and everything.

I think I have to say that that is a total misunderstanding of jealousy. I could argue that what I’ve just described is really no more than a terrible, destructive and *self*-destructive lack of trust. But I also have to get real, and admit that it is what most people nowadays would *call* jealousy.

So maybe there is no good word for it nowadays, but what I’m sure it’s talking about is an incredibly potent emotion that is meant to be protective, rather than destructive. It is so potent, though, that it’s always difficult to handle well - a bit like anger, really, and jealousy, in this original sense, is simply a particular and an appropriate application of anger. So it’s a bit like a **raging lion** ... which is mostly fine if it’s on your side, but you’d still not want to get too close to, even so.

Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm, for love is strong as death, jealousy is fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the LORD.
(Song of Solomon 8:6)

The picture there is that the grave *doesn’t give back* what has been become its own. It is mine, and it stays mine. And I will fight for what is rightfully my own.

And in its proper place, that protects a relationship. If someone makes a move to intrude upon the exclusivity of a marriage, jealousy is the instinct that reaches out ... maybe even lashes out ... to protect that marriage.

And if Israel has been claimed by God, to be his own special possession ...

“... I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

(Exodus 19:4-6)

... then there is something akin to marriage there. The LORD can rightly expect exclusive devotion from this people - and he states as much:

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.”

(Exodus 20:2-3)

And if anyone tries to make a move on his own people, his treasured possession ... then he will fight to defend them. He will not have them spiritually seduced. Jealousy - a totally *holy* jealousy - must fight to protect his people from the peril of committing spiritual adultery.

Folks, do not fear this jealousy of God, for he is only fighting for the eternal good of his people. It is *good* to worship the true God, and only him. If we worship anything else - including a manipulated and distorted image of God - we poison our own souls. Do you want God to just stand by and watch you pour your life away?

But ... one more question, in that case, as the passage continues ...

- **Why do the ripples spread?**

“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 the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.”

(Exodus 20:5-6)

I've included the final portion of that verse, because it's part of the answer, but your eyes might have become rather fixed with maybe even horror by that "visiting the iniquity" bit. I can totally understand that. It does rather stop you in your tracks! What is going on here? We've just sorted that jealousy thing, hopefully, but now *this!*

But as I stopped and started at these verses for a while, one word started to stand out: ***hate***. This is talking about people who have set themselves against God: "those who *hate* me".

And then I remembered that these commandments, all ten of them, can be summed up in terms of *love*. Jesus did that, remember? I think we read this last week.

And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself.

(Matthew 22:37-39)

So, I think I would probably answer, "those who hate me" are people who

have set themselves counter to the way that God has designed this universe to run. And you have to expect that if someone does that, there will be consequences, just as if you decide to **drive the wrong way** down a motorway. They are killing themselves inwardly, spiritually, by denying their own very nature, and that kind of growing inner chill is going to spread around to other people in their lives.

You can see that sort of thing surface in their children. Did you notice on the news reports about **disturbances in Northern Ireland** again this week? Teenagers out on the streets lobbing stones at the police. They're not old enough to have seen "The Troubles" ... so where did they learn this? Not that I know any specific details, but my suspicions would be that it's because they have been brought up in a community, and most likely individual homes, where those old hatreds are being fanned and kept alive by people who will not forgive.

The hatred of one generation can blight the lives of successive generations. I think that is what we see here. I think we can see it as just naturally understandable. But I think I also dare to say that there is something of a judgement of God in it too, though perhaps primarily through that process we *could* view simply in human terms alone.

But that is not any kind of delight for God. Look at the contrast, at how God delights to bless not just a limited number of generations, but vast numbers of people:

"... but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments."

(Exodus 20:5-6)

That, I suppose we could put it, is what God lives for. He will judge - and he will judge with total justice and fairness. That will bring a sigh of relief to the world, when we finally see it. But God's more positive delight is in blessing. Here's Moses' nearly final words, summing up all the giving of the Law at the end of Deuteronomy:

"I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them."

(Deuteronomy 30:19-20)

There is God's desire and delight: that *you*, too, would choose life - life, we'd now say, by believing in Jesus Christ - and that you may *live*, loving and obeying this great God of great grace.

But just to finish now - and we'll return to think this through a bit more this evening ...

- **What sort of things must I watch out for?**

So we come back to the summary of that Second Word:

“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, ...”
(Exodus 20:4-5)

As I've said, I doubt there are many *literal* carved images in our homes, and I'm sure that nobody has sneakily set one up at the Chapel while we've been elsewhere in the last year. And that means that we're not looking so much at *literal* body postures either. We need to think in terms of our thoughts and our attitudes and our feelings.

What do we “make for ourselves”, and then submit to and revere and even worship, calling “God”, trying to convince ourselves that these alternatives will do?

Folks, I think the things we maybe need to be most wary of are two: the things that we have become accustomed to, and the things that we naturally warm to. We can start to subordinate the Word of God to those personal preferences, and carve for ourselves the god we would prefer to worship.

So maybe think about our language, just as an example. For some people, true reverence for God can only be expressed by the use of Old English in our prayers. It's a sincere and honourable point of conscience, I have to grant those people that. But what does that perhaps betray of their preferred image of God? One who is extremely concerned about outward formalities, rather than the heart?

So can we start to tell God what are the proprieties he should insist upon? We re-fashion *him* to conform to our unexamined feelings as to “what is right”, instead of insisting that *our* understandings conform to what *he* has shown in his Word?

Or think about - I know I've said this not too long ago, as well, but this is a frightfully pernicious **weed** that we need to keep pulling out of our gardens - the “but I like to think that God ...”. That really is so much about subjugating God to our tastes and preferences. We maybe have a rather soppy and unbiblical notion of what love is, for example ... and then think that because, yes, it *is* true, that ...

God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.

(1 John 4:16)

So ... whatever / might think is “loving” ... God has to be in agreement, right? No wonder with this kind of idolatry abounding that a country thinks it should go ahead and try to redefine marriage, is it?

But what has happened, we have to ask, to that other statement John makes?

... God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.

(1 John 1:5)

... which John follows up by saying that it is possible that we walk in *darkness*, refusing to be informed by that light.

Folks, we will think this through some more this evening. But the basic question is whether we will accept what *God* says is true about himself, and worship that self-revealed God - and be changed into *his* likeness?. Or will we only bow down to a so-called God that we have just customised to reflect our own preferences, insisting that *he* should be refashioned in accordance with our ignorance, and then reinvent himself in *our* likeness?

The endpoint is just where we finished last week, really. Those final verses from 1 John:

And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols.

(1 John 5:20-21)

True worship of the true God