

No Graven Images

Exodus 20:4-6

Phil Johnson

We're returning to our series on the Ten Commandments, and we'll be looking this morning at the Second Commandment. You'll find it in Exodus 20:4-6:

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth:

5 Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me;

6 And showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.

The Ten Commandments are found not just here in Exodus 20, but you will find them repeated again in Deuteronomy 5. If you want to compare the cross reference for this commandment, you will find it in Deuteronomy 5:8-10. I won't read it, because the two passages are essentially identical.

But I want you to notice as you look at Exodus 20 (and you'll see the same thing in Deuteronomy 5), that the Ten Commandments are pretty clearly delineated in this passage.

What I mean is that when you read this passage, it is pretty easy to count off exactly *ten* commandments. Look at Exodus 20, and you will see what I mean. Verse 3, First Commandment: "**Thou shalt have no other gods before me.**" Verse 4, Second Commandment: "**Thou shalt not make . . . any graven image.**" Verse 7, Third Commandment: "**Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain.**" Verse 8, Fourth Commandment: "**Remember the sabbath day.**" Verse 12, Fifth Commandment: "**Honour thy father and thy mother.**" And verses 13-17 give the Sixth through Tenth Commandments rapid fire; each verse is one commandment:

13 Thou shalt not kill.

14 Thou shalt not commit adultery.

15 Thou shalt not steal.

16 Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.

17 Thou shalt not covet

That's how the Scriptures set forth the Ten Commandments, both here and in Deuteronomy 5. Both passages have them in the same order, and in both cases, the commandments are stated clearly, and they are clearly differentiated.

But if you grew up in the Roman Catholic Church, you learned a different version of the Ten Commandments. In every Roman Catholic catechism and official Roman Catholic church resource, the Second Commandment is omitted. And in order to arrive at exactly Ten

Commandments, the Roman Catholic Church subdivides the tenth commandment, making it into two separate commandments: "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife," and "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's goods.

In every one of the major Roman Catholic catechisms, that is how you will find the Ten Commandments numbered—including the Baltimore Catechism, The Catechism of St. Pius (the Tenth), and the New Catechism of the Catholic Church, the Second Commandment is blended into the first and essentially explained away, and then the Tenth Commandment is broken into two parts. Thus the Roman Catholic Church has in effect, eliminated the Second Commandment from the list.

And it is no wonder, because Roman Catholic worship is heavily dependent on the veneration of graven images. That is the very kind of externalism and ritual that this commandment forbids.

By suppressing this commandment in their catechisms and doctrine, the Roman Catholic Church has for generations attempted to obscure from their people this part of the law of God. In other words, the popes and councils of the Roman Catholic Church have deliberately silenced that portion of the decalogue that was given expressly as a corrective to the form of religion they have adopted.

And you'll see this very clearly, I think, as we study the Second Commandment. There is no way to reconcile this

commandment with the gross ritualism of the Roman Catholic Church, because what this commandment expressly forbids is the very thing Roman Catholic worship encourages.

This is true of Eastern Orthodoxy as well, by the way. If you visit an Eastern Orthodox church, you won't find the statuary and three-dimensional imagery you see in Roman Catholic churches. Instead, Eastern Orthodox Churches venerate icons—sacred paintings that they hang in their churches. The Eastern Orthodox interpret "graven images" to mean statues, sculptures, and three-dimensional images, but they believe it's OK to pay homage to a painting, which they do not consider a painting a "graven image." That's why even the style of artwork on most Eastern Orthodox icons has a kind of flat, two-dimensional look to it. They imagine that this fulfills the commandment of Exodus 20:4, but it is still an image and a likeness before which they bow and show adoration, and therefore it is still a violation of the Second Commandment.

Wherever you find a style of worship that tends to be overly formal, overly concerned with external elements, you will find this tendency to make graven images. It was a powerful and pervasive tendency in Old Testament Judaism. Repeatedly in the records of the kings of Israel and Judah we read of kings who sinned and incurred divine disfavor by erecting images for the people to worship. The same

tendency is just as powerful in fallen human hearts today. People who do it usually think they are doing something religious, something pleasing to God, but here God Himself makes clear what He thinks of this type of worship. He forbids it, and he does so in plain and unmistakable language.

Notice, in fact, how much space is given to this commandment, compared the last five Commandments in the decalogue. They are all single sentences, straightforward imperatives. In fact, each of the final five Commandments takes just one verse.

But *this* Commandment—the Second Commandment—is a complex injunction, and it takes three verses to spell it out. Let's dissect the passage, and then we'll talk about the principles that underlie it.

Notice first of all that this is a twofold commandment, and both parts of it are prohibitions. In other words, the commandment is framed in completely *negative* terms (verse 4): "**Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image . . . [and, verse 5] Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them:**" Don't *make* images for worship, and don't *worship* images someone else has made.

And notice how exhaustive the list in verse 4 is: "**Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.**" That covers pretty much

everything in the material universe, doesn't it? Nothing in the heavens, nothing on the earth, and nothing in the waters. The Lord explicitly rules out every kind of image; *nothing* is to be made into a likeness for the purpose of worship.

This doesn't rule out artwork and imagery for secular purposes *per se*. The context makes it clear that this speaks of images whose purpose is to represent God, or to be an object of worship in the place of God. It would be OK to make a statue of a man to put in the city square to honor the man. And it's OK to paint portraits and hang photographs and other likenesses of people on the walls of your house as a remembrance. *Merely* the making of a likeness for such secular purposes is not what prohibited by this commandment.

At Grace to You we used to send out a magazine that was illustrated with photographs and various kinds of artwork. These were never religious images, but photographs of people and scenery, and diagrams used for illustrative purposes. But there was a woman on our mailing list who used to send those back to us every month, and she would take time to go through every page of the magazine, and across the face of every photograph or drawing, she would write, "Idolaters!" "Graven images!" and things like that.

She was a member of a small cult where people were taught that all imagery of any kind is forbidden.

But that is a misunderstanding of this commandment. It is speaking specifically of worship, and the context makes that clear.

We know that imagery *per se* was not forbidden even in the Old Testament, because God commanded that certain images be made for decorative purposes in the Tabernacle. The lid of the ark, for example—the mercy seat—had two angels with their wings stretched across the ark, and the angels were made of beaten gold. You'll find God's own instructions for how to make those golden angels in Exodus 25:17-20.

Also, when the Israelites were bitten by serpents in the wilderness, God commanded them to make a bronze serpent and put it on a pole, as an emblem of redemption, so that whoever looked at that brazen serpent would be healed of their snake bites. But that image was not to be worshiped or made into a sacred object.

Do you know what happened to that brazen serpent? Years later, during the reign of King Hezekiah, people began to worship that serpent on a pole. Look at 2 Kings 18:3-4:

**And [king Hezekiah] did that which was right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that David his father did.
4 He removed the high places, and brake the images, and cut down the groves, and brake in pieces the brazen serpent that Moses had made: for unto those days the**

children of Israel did burn incense to it: and he called it Nehushtan.

When that bronze snake on the pole became an object of worship, Hezekiah broke it into pieces. And notice that God explicitly commended him for doing that.

Our own church auditorium is decorated with a large cross at the front. It's OK as a *decoration*, but if it ever became an object of worship—if people treated the piece of wood itself as something sacred and worthy of veneration; or if they ever started bowing before it and showing reverence to the image itself—I would be the first to argue that we should make it into firewood and burn it.

So be sure you understand what this commandment forbids: it is not imagery *per se*, but graven images made as objects of worship, or visible representations of God, that are forbidden by this commandment.

So that is the commandment: don't make such objects for worship, and don't worship such objects even if someone else has made them.

Notice next that God gives a reason for this commandment: "**for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God.**" We're going to look more closely at that part of the commandment next week, but for now I just want you to notice that it is there, and it is given as a reason for not making graven images. At first glance, you might think it would be a better reason for the first commandment: Don't

have any other gods before Jehovah, because He is a jealous God. He won't tolerate competition.

But it appears after the Second Commandment with good cause; it gives us a reason for *both* commandments. God is not only jealous about being the only God we worship; He also jealously desires that we worship Him with a suitable worship. His holy resentment is aroused not only when we worship false gods; that same holy resentment is aroused when we worship the true God in a manner of our own devising.

And that is precisely what this Second Commandment prohibits. It forbids us to worship God in any way that we have invented when God Himself has not commanded it.

If you have been coming the past few weeks, you will recall that in our introduction to the Ten Commandments, we stressed that these commandments are merely a summary of the moral law. They are broad restrictions that imply much more than they actually say. And that is why Jesus taught in His Sermon on the Mount that when the law forbids adultery, it also forbids everything that causes adultery. So a lustful thought violates the seventh commandment just as surely as a full-fledged act of adultery does. And when the law forbids murder, it also forbids all the motives for murder. So Jesus said in Matthew 5:21-22 that hatred towards your neighbor will put you in danger of hell fire just as surely as if you literally killed someone.

And by the same token, when the Second Commandment forbids the worship of graven images, it also rules out every form of worship that falls short of the worship God Himself prescribes.

So the First Commandment rules out false gods; and the second commandment rules out false worship of the true God.

And the commandment homes in on the issue of graven images, because the worship of images pretty much epitomizes everything that is false in man-made forms of worship. In every sin-stained, carnal heart, there is a tendency to engage in forms of worship that are external, ritualistic, mechanical, earth-bound, and materialistic. And *all* of that is forbidden under this simple commandment in Exodus 20:4: "**Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image . . .**"

In our carnal minds, we have a tendency to regard all religion as noble and honorable. We often tend to think that a non-Christian who is devout in his or her religion is somehow morally superior to the wanton sinner who openly traffics in drugs or pornography or some other gross sin. But let's be honest: that is not a proper biblical perspective. False religion *is* gross sin. The person who worships a false god is as abhorrent to God Himself as the publican or the prostitute. And even the person who worships the true God in a false or hypocritical way is engaging in wanton sin just as surely as

the thief or murderer. Pharisees always *think* they are morally superior to publicans and sinners, but the ministry of Christ gave ample proof that they are not.

In fact, nothing is more offensive to God than false religion. And each of the first two commandments underscores this truth. I am inclined to think that the order of the Ten Commandments is significant. By ruling out false religion *before* He forbids murder, adultery, and stealing, I believe the Word of God aims to teach us that false religion is the greatest of sins.

Think of it: you can be a religious person, and even devote your whole life to religion in a way that gains you the respect of all society, but if you worship the wrong god—or even if you worship the true God in a wrong way—you might be worse off, and your life might be even *more* of an offense to God, than the lowest criminal or most degenerate social outcast. That is the very truth Christ stressed again and again with the Pharisees.

I hope that puts human religion in perspective for you. No sinner is more lost than the *religious* sinner, and if you have ever done much personal evangelism, or if you have unbelieving family members who are in bondage to religion, you know what I am talking about. Because there is no salvation for the person who thinks his religion can earn him a righteous standing before God. Jesus said in Mark 2:17, **"They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that**

are sick: I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." False religion lures people into a sense of self-righteousness, where they see no need for salvation. And that is why it is so wicked. I have often thought that of all the wickedness that runs rampant in this fallen world, nothing is quite as wicked as the wickedness of false religion.

Now, let's look at this commandment: "**Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God.**" What this expressly forbids is the worship of God in any man-made form. And it categorizes all man-made worship under that which epitomizes human religion—the worship of graven images.

Proof that the human heart is relentlessly drawn to imagery is seen right here in the context of Exodus, where the entire Israelite nation fell into idol-worship before Moses even came down from Mount Sinai with the original tablets containing the Ten Commandments.

We looked at this a few weeks ago, so I won't review it in depth again, but let me remind you that all Israel had received these Ten Commandments when the thundering voice of God first gave them to the entire congregation before Moses ever went up on the Mount in the first place.

They knew full well what God had commanded, and what He had forbidden, and yet almost immediately, according to Exodus 32, they took their golden jewelry, and they **"brought them unto Aaron. And he received them at their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool, after he had made it a molten calf: and they said, These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt."** They could not do without a visible representation of God.

Now, they were not seeking to worship another God. They were simply wanting to make an image that would represent Jehovah to them. We know this because Exodus 32:5 says that **"when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation, and said, To morrow is a feast to the LORD"**—Jehovah. As far as they were concerned, they were worshipping Jehovah, but they were doing it in a way He had not prescribed. In fact, they had devised precisely the sort of graven image He had explicitly forbidden. They broke the law before God had even had time to deliver it to them on tablets of stone. Such is the tendency of every carnal heart.

There are multitudes today who call themselves Christians who see nothing wrong with that. As we sit here this morning, there are churches all over our community where people are bowing before statues and icons, rendering worship that they believe is acceptable worship to the true God. But it is *not* acceptable worship. It is as wicked as

murder, or adultery, or any other sin that violates the God-given moral code of these commandments.

Why is it so wicked? What is so wrong with representing God by graven images? I want to give you three reasons why such worship—and all other forms of false worship—are nothing more than extreme evil masquerading as religion. I'll give these to you and you can write them down as we go.

1. BECAUSE THE ONLY TRUE GOD IS A SPIRIT.

If God were a material being, it might be right to worship Him in some material form. If God were made of some substance that is visible to the human eye, it might be acceptable to portray Him in some tangible and visible form.

But God is pure Spirit. According to 1 Timothy 1:17, we worship a King who is "**eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God.**" But John 1:18 says, "**No man hath seen God at any time.**" First John 4:12 reiterates it again: "**No man hath seen God at any time.**" Hebrews 11:27 refers to God as "**him who is invisible.**" Colossians 1:15 calls Him "**the invisible God.**" First Timothy 6:16 says God alone "**hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see: to whom be honour and power everlasting. Amen.**"

God is not only beyond our earthly vision; He is far beyond our comprehension. Our imaginations cannot conceive Him; He is far above every human notion. And

therefore to portray Him in any visible form is to diminish what He is. It is an affront to His glory.

We're not even supposed to form any mental image of God. If you imagine God in any form when you pray to Him—whether you picture Him as a white-bearded man on a throne or some angelic being floating in mid-air—you are guilty of making a graven image in your heart. You have devised an image in your imagination, and that is a violation of this commandment just as surely as if you built a golden calf.

Augustine said, "When I am not asked what God is, I think I know. But when I try to answer that question, I find I know nothing." Scripture reveals to us much about the character and the heart of God, but nowhere does the Bible ever attempt to explain to us what God looks like. Wherever Scripture even touches on any description of the grandeur of God, it relies heavily on symbols and figures designed only to emphasize for us the sheer incomprehensibility of the divine glory. When Ezekiel described the glory of heaven, he focused on the creatures around the throne of God—and even *those* are incomprehensible to us. He wrote about a wheel in the middle of another wheel, and spectacular lights that reminded him of gemstones, and other glories that are beyond the human imagination. Listen to Ezekiel 10:10: **"And as for their appearances [describing the creatures around God's throne], they four had one likeness, as if a wheel had been**

in the midst of a wheel." What does that mean? I haven't got a clue. I can't picture it. I'm looking forward to seeing it one day so that it will make sense.

When they went, they went upon their four sides; they turned not as they went, but to the place whither the head looked they followed it; they turned not as they went.

12 And their whole body, and their backs, and their hands, and their wings, and the wheels, were full of eyes round about, even the wheels that they four had.

13 As for the wheels, it was cried unto them in my hearing, O wheel.

14 And every one had four faces: the first face was the face of a cherub, and the second face was the face of a man, and the third the face of a lion, and the fourth the face of an eagle.

And those were just the creatures around God's throne! In Ezekiel 11:22 says, "**Then did the cherubims lift up their wings, and the wheels beside them; and the glory of the God of Israel was over them above.**" He doesn't even *attempt* a description of the divine glory!

When Paul was caught up into the third heaven, he simply said in 2 Corinthians 12:4 that he "**heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.**"

Nowhere in Scripture are we given any description that encourages us to form any mental image of God. God is a

spirit, and you cannot form a mental picture of that—much less a graven image.

There are places where Scripture speaks of "the arm of the Lord" and "the hand of the Lord" and "the feet of the Lord" and even "the face of the Lord." But we're not to think God has literal hands, or feet, or a visible face. Those expressions are merely an accommodation to our human limitations. It is picturesque language, but we're not supposed to devise a picture in our mind of what He looks like. We are certainly not to think of Him as human in His form. Numbers 23:19 says, "**God is not a man.**" In Psalm 50:21, God Himself says, "**You thought that I was altogether like you; But I will rebuke you.**" We are not supposed to build an image of God—even in our imaginations—that makes Him in the likeness of a man.

There's a small cult that has its headquarters not far from here—a cult that was actually started by a man who was disciplined out of our church. This is the group that from time to time has passed out literature on the sidewalks in front of our church. Their leader's name is Darwin Fish. Many of you have encountered him either on Roscoe Boulevard or on the Internet, where he recruits people for our cult. One of the things he teaches is that God is a man. He has an article on the Web titled, "The Lord Is a Man." And in that article, he writes, "Contrary to popular opinion within the false Christian world . . . God is a man, as Exodus 15:3 plainly declares." Exodus 15:3 says, "**The LORD is a man**

of war: the LORD is his name." According to Darwin Fish, that means God exists in human form. He insists that God has a bodily form, and it is the form of a man.

But John 4:24 expressly says, "**God is a Spirit.**" And Jesus said in Luke 24:39 that "**a spirit hath not flesh and bones.**" Here's how Darwin Fish replies to that verse: he writes, "[Jesus'] statement about 'a spirit does not have flesh and bones' simply reveals what is true about any spirit, including the human spirit that does not have flesh and bones." In other words, Mr. Fish believes that God *has* a Spirit; he denies that God *is* a spirit. He has remade God after the image of earthly beings, and that is precisely what the Second Commandment forbids.

The only true God *is* a spirit, and that is precisely why we are not permitted to worship Him with graven images of any kind.

Here's a second reason why graven images are forbidden:

2. BECAUSE THE ONLY TRUE WORSHIP IS SPIRITUAL WORSHIP.

True worship of the true God is *spiritual* worship. It pertains to that which is heavenly, not that which is earthly. It is an internal response of the heart, not merely external actions such as bowing and genuflecting and making bodily motions. It is a spontaneous result of true love for God, not something that can be prescribed by forms and rituals. And its only proper object is God, not some visible representation of Him.

Charles Spurgeon said, "[We are not] to fancy that bodily exercise in worship profiteth anything, that genuflections and contortions are of any value, but that acceptable worship is wholly mental, inward, and spiritual." The apostle Paul said, "**present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service**"—and the literal sense of those words is, "this is acceptable worship: present your bodies as a living sacrifice."

OK, someone says, but that speaks of presenting your bodies to God as acceptable worship. It speaks of worship in bodily, physical, external terms. Yes, but how do we obey this command? How do we present our bodies as a sacrifice to God? By some mechanical, external activity? No. The very next verse tells us how we do it: "**be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind.**" The physical aspect—serving God and serving one another

with our hands and feet—is the result of renewing our *minds*, and it is that mind-renewal that is the very essence of true worship.

That is the kind of worship fallen men will not render to God. They will worship Him in any way *but* that. They will follow the most rigorous kind of asceticism or do any kind of external, ceremonial observance. They will dress in black and stand praying beside a wall for hours, the way many do in Jerusalem to this day. Or, like some Hindu mystics I have seen, they will go barefoot and abstain from bathing or cutting their hair for decades. But they will not bow their hearts to God.

Our carnal tendency is to reduce worship to the external, formal, ritualistic elements we associate with worship. But those things are not *true* worship. True circumcision "**is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God**" (Romans 2:29). All the ritual elements of religion, even under the Mosaic Covenant, were merely symbolic representations of greater spiritual realities.

And even in the Mosaic covenant, the external and visible symbols of the divine presence were largely hidden from view. Most Jews living in Israel—except for those who lived in Jerusalem proper—saw the Temple only once or twice a year. In the place where daily sacrifices were offered, no one was to enter in but the priests. Most of the sacrifices were hidden from the rank-and-file Israelite. And as for the ark,

and the cherubim, and the golden menorah, those were kept behind the veil, where no one but the high priest could enter, and he could only go in once a year. *There was nothing whatsoever visible for the Old Testament believer to worship.* There was no image or holy relic for them to bow before. There was no physical object before which they were commanded to bow or render homage. So even in the Mosaic economy, there was a great stress on spiritual worship, as opposed to that which was earthly and visible.

But the carnal tendency toward worshipping objects was obvious in the idolatry to which the Israelites were constantly prone. Even in the age of the patriarchs you see evidence of this. You'll recall that in Genesis 31, one of Jacob's wives, Rachel, stole images from the house of her father, Laban. Laban pursued Jacob on a seven-day journey as far as Gilead, partly in order to recover his household gods. Though Laban and his family worshiped Jehovah, they succumbed to the tendency of worshipping Him through the medium of images.

And according to 1 Kings 12, when the kingdom of Israel split off from the kingdom of Judah, one of the first things Jeroboam did was erect two golden calves—one in Bethel and one in Dan—so people could worship Jehovah in that form without having to go to the Temple in Jerusalem. Those idols became a stumbling-block to all Israel, and came to

epitomize the idolatry that led to the ultimate judgment God brought upon Israel.

Those in Judah were also constantly falling into forms of idolatry, and that is why King Hezekiah ultimately destroyed the bronze serpent, so that the people would not worship the object rather than rendering true worship to God.

Even the legitimate symbols of Old Testament Judaism were easily corrupted by carnal superstition. That is why God constantly reminded the Israelites that He preferred obedience to sacrifice. First Samuel 15:22: **"Samuel said, Hath the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams."** In Hosea 6:6, God says, **"I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings."** Proverbs 21:3: **"To do justice and judgment is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice."** Ecclesiastes 5:1: **"Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools."** In Isaiah 1:11, the Lord declares His contempt for empty religious ritual: **"To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith the LORD: I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats."**

Over and over, Scripture—even in the Old Testament—emphasizes that true worship is to be *spiritual*. True worship is not external; it is not merely ceremonial, and

above all, it is not supposed to focus on that which is tangible and material. The ceremonies and symbols of Temple worship were mere shadows, and the apostle Paul repeatedly emphasized that even those God-ordained symbols were nothing but a form of bondage to those who could not see the spiritual realities behind them.

So first, we're not to worship graven images because the only true God is a Spirit. Second, we're not to worship graven images because the only true worship is *spiritual* worship. And finally, we're not to worship graven images—

3. BECAUSE THE ONLY LEGITIMATE RELIGION IS THAT WHICH IS CONCERNED WITH TRUTH.

Since God is invisible to human sight and incomprehensibly glorious, graven images inevitably portray God in a way that is untruthful. Images cannot serve the cause of truth because they themselves are nothing but visible, tangible lies. Listen to Jeremiah 10:14-15 (NKJV):

Every metalsmith is put to shame by an image; For his molded image is falsehood, And there is no breath in them.

15 They are futile, a work of errors; In the time of their punishment they shall perish.

False worship always undermines the truth. It perpetrates lies and errors. And a graven image is the very epitome of lying

false religion. It reduces God to a corruptible image and therefore completely misrepresents Him.

Genuine worship, on the other hand, is wholly concerned with truth—truth, not appearances; truth, not mere ritual; truth, not just emotion.

Here is why we place so much stress on sound doctrine at Grace Community Church and here in GraceLife: because the truest worship of God is that which flows from our hearts in response to God's truth.

Ritual has its place—though it is a much less important factor in worship than most people imagine. Emotion has its place, too—but only insofar as it is prompted by our hearts' response to the truth of God's Word. Emotion for emotion's sake is not true worship, no matter how good it makes the worshiper feel. Worship that is not grounded in the truth of God is not true worship at all—it is a human invention. It's what the Puritans used to refer to as "will worship"—worship that pretends the human will is sovereign rather than recognizing the utter sovereignty of God's will.

Colossians 2:20-23 condemns every kind of worship that stems from the human will. Listen to it:

if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances,

21 (Touch not; taste not; handle not;

22 Which all are to perish with the using;) after the commandments and doctrines of men?

23 Which things have indeed a show of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh.

Here's how the New International Version translates the sense of that verse: "**Such regulations indeed have an *appearance* of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.**"

Human religion may have the *appearance* of wisdom, but it is entirely devoid of divine truth and power. It is useless. It is religion divorced from truth, and therefore it is utterly opposed to genuine holiness. It is the religion of hypocrisy. Genuine worship is that which is grounded in God's truth.

There are many very practical applications of these principles that we must constantly and consciously seek to apply. If you are going to worship God in truth, it means you must engage your intellect. And this is true in our singing, our praying, and every aspect of our worship. It's easy to fall into carnal habits of worshiping by rote—following the external forms of religion without engaging the heart and mind. And this is true even when our worship isn't laden with ritual and ceremony. We tend to sing the hymns without thinking of the meaning. We tend to let our thoughts wander in prayer.

Listen to Spurgeon again:

It is not your worshipping God by words in hymns and prayers, or sitting in a certain place, or covering your faces at certain times that is acceptable to him; true worship lies in your heart paying reverence to him, your soul obeying him, and your inner nature coming into conformity to his own nature, by the work of his Spirit in your soul; and because men can scarcely get the idea of this till the Holy Spirit gives it to them, this is a reason why it is so rare, so exceedingly rare.

Now think about this for a moment. Review these three main points we have been discussing: We shouldn't make graven images because the only true God is a Spirit; because the only true worship is spiritual worship; and because the only legitimate religion is that which is concerned with truth. Isn't that exactly what Jesus said to the Samaritan woman in John 4:24? **"God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth."**

Remember what she asked him that prompted those words? She wanted to know where to go to worship. She said, **"Our fathers worshipped in this mountain; and ye say, that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship."** And she raised that question because Christ had confronted her with her sin. She was trying to avoid real, serious spiritual matters focusing on that which was earthly and tangible. Let me quote Spurgeon one more time: "The carnal heart dreads

the contact of spiritual truth, and finds a most convenient way of avoiding it by running to questions of holy places, holy times, and holy customs."

That's why people prefer graven images to spiritual worship. It is an evasion. It's an attempt to avoid what God really demands of us. It is the epitome of all that is wicked.

Worship, if it is to be *true* worship, must be the kind of worship God Himself has prescribed. To invent our own forms of worship—or worse, to worship God in a way that violates what He has commanded—is an insult and an affront to Him.

Do you see why this commandment is so high on the list? God seeks spiritual worshipers—men and women who will worship Him in spirit and in truth. It is not easy to worship that way. As a matter of fact, it is the most *unnatural* thing in the world for sinners. What is easy, and natural, for our carnal hearts is to fall into mechanical and ritualistic forms—reciting hail Marys and repeating by rote the prayer of Jabez. It's easy to do those things because they pose no challenge to the sin that has found shelter in our hearts. Reciting prayers and going to church X number of times per week is a cheap duty; you can do it and still be a hypocrite. But if you once worship God in Spirit and in truth—if you bow your heart in submission and adoration to God—you will find that your heart cannot be a willing shelter for sin. Worshiping God as we ought to worship Him will

completely break the heart over sin—even the hidden sins we might otherwise try to cover with our religious activities.

And that is why if our worship is to be true worship, it must be energized by the Spirit of God. We cannot do this on our own. But we must constantly seek the Lord's enablement, and constantly repent of our earth-bound thoughts.

Otherwise, we are spiritually no better than those who would fall before a golden calf and claim to be worshiping Jehovah.

May God give us grace to worship Him with the genuine worship He demands—in spirit and in truth.