

CHAPTER 5

You Shall Not Make an Idol

servicing God according to his standards

Introduction

Idolatry is the oldest sin in the world. Literally. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve made the first idol. The idol was not a statue, or something material, but it was formed by their own minds. They made themselves the arbiters of what was permissible or impermissible. We are like our first parents. Since that day, mankind has been reforming the Maker of the Universe in their own image. As we look at the Bible's teaching on this issue, it will help us to recognize idolatry in our own lives, and in our children's lives, perhaps even some we have not thought of before. However, the first step is to understand the Bible's teaching on the second commandment.

Idolatry in the Bible

The first issue to be addressed in this chapter is the definition of an idol. Most will realize that idolatry can be defined much more broadly than simply bowing down and worshipping a statue.

Certainly the Bible's first encounter with idolatry, in terms of Adam and Eve's sin, is not along the lines of a shrine. On the other hand, many biblical accounts record idolatry using a physical statue representing a man-made god. For example, in the book of Daniel, his friends Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are thrown into the fiery furnace for their refusal to bow before the image of gold set up by the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 3:1-23). All Babylonian subjects were to bow down in worship before the idol. However, idolatry was not only reserved for those outside of the covenant family. In this case, the idolatry in no way pretends to worship the One True God of the Bible.

The people of Israel also engaged in idolatry very early on in their history. Even before they arrived in the Promised Land they already engaged in idol worship. Not only do they commit this act right before they enter Canaan, but it occurs at the foot of Mount Sinai, while the law is being given to Moses. The people tell Aaron, Moses' brother, to make an idol for them even while he is up on the mountain talking to God: "When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, 'Up, make us gods who shall go before us.'" (Exodus 32:1). Instead of doing what a true leader should, Aaron capitulates to the sinful desires of the people and collects articles of gold from them. In the end he even leads them in their sin:

And [Aaron] received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. 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)

So the Bible shows it is not only the heathen that practice idolatry. There accounts of Scripture also show the people of God bowing down and worshipping statues of gold and silver. However, this instance of idolatry is different from the one in the book of Daniel. The discrepancy is found in the claim that Aaron makes to Israel. When Aaron presents the golden calf to the people of Israel at the foot of Mount Sinai, he does so using the works and name of the Lord. He says the calf brought Israel up out of Egypt, and that when they have a festival to celebrate the statue it will be a "feast to the Lord." Aaron is not presenting this idol as a different deity. His claim is that the Lord is represented in the golden calf. The deception is breath-taking in its audacity. The first high-priest of Israel equates an animal fashioned out of gold by his own hand to the Creator of heaven and earth. He does not change the name of the one he claims to worship. He simply adjusts the way that worship takes place to suit his own purposes. So the idolatry of Israel is not about who they worship, but is found in the way they worship the God of the Bible.

Identifying the Issue

The idolatry of worshiping a different God is addressed in the first commandment. It deals specifically with *whom* man should worship. Consideration of the second commandment should have a different emphasis. Though related, it is of a different sort. This commandment does not deal so much with the example of idolatry in the book of Daniel, although there certainly will be some overlap. However, the emphasis in the second commandment is not on who should be worshiped, but *how* that should be done. So the question is not one about worshiping statues representing a false god. Instead the question is more if mankind is free to determine for himself the way God should be worshiped. The Scriptures do give examples of the significance of worshiping God using innovations.

One example can be found in Leviticus 10:1-2. There Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu offer incense on the altar in the Holy Place of the tabernacle. Earlier, God had given specific instructions about how that aspect of his worship should be guarded and kept. In Exodus 30:9 he instructed Moses: "You shall not offer unauthorized incense on it, or a burnt offering, or a grain offering, and you shall not pour a drink offering on it." But in Leviticus 10:1 we read that Nadab and Abihu "offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, which he had not commanded them." God's response to this false worship was far from positive. The very next verse shows the gravity of worshiping God contrary to his explicit command. There it is recorded that "fire came out from before the Lord and consumed them and they died before the Lord. In this case, the intentions of Aaron's sons is not known. They may have had sincerity on their side, but what they lacked was obedience to God's commandments. They did not worship God his way, but brought innovations to his worship. The consequence was detrimental for them.

A second example is found in Numbers 16. The people of Israel again rebel against the Lord, following Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. These men demand an equality with Moses and seek to usurp his place of leadership, and the earth swallows them up. However, what is sometimes overlooked is that they had 250 companions who had bronze censers and were offering incense before the Lord as part of the rebellion. After Korah and all his family are swallowed up by the earth, "fire came out from the Lord and consumed the 250 offering the incense." (Numbers 16:35). They were slain by the Lord because of sin (v. 38). The bronze censers of the dead men are gathered and at God's command they are hammered together to form a covering for the altar of incense. The reason behind this covering is extremely helpful to us. The covering served as "a reminder to the people of Israel that no outsider, who is not of the descendants of Aaron, should draw near to burn incense before the Lord, lest he become like Korah and his company." (Numbers 16:40). The 250 men were killed before the

Lord for their failure to obey his explicit command about who should minister before him. The issue of the way of worship is what is specifically in view when it comes to the second commandment.

Good and Necessary Consequence

To help give some clarity on this issue, the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* has helpfully summarized Scripture's teaching on this commandment. In stating what is required in the second commandment the writers give this explanation: "The second commandment requireth the receiving, observing, and keeping pure and entire, all such religious worship and ordinances as God hath appointed in his Word." (Q/A #50). Worship to God must be according to his word alone. It must be received, observed and kept pure and entire. That means it must be followed only according to his word, and completely according to his word. That is the goal of the commandment. On the opposite end the catechism tells us that the commandment forbids "the worshiping of God by images, or any other way not appointed in His Word." (Q/A #51). Only God is to be worshiped. However, the writers of the catechism add a new dimension that often is not considered any more. God should not be worshiped according to man's own pleasure. In fact, in summarizing the teaching on the second commandment, the catechism teaches worshiping God in any way not appointed in his word is forbidden. Said another way, worship is to be regulated by the directions given in the Bible. This lesson has been entirely missed on occasion, although it is very evident in Scripture.

Other teaching aides like the *Heidelberg Catechism* offer the same sentiments, stating God is not to be worshiped "in any other way than He has commanded in His Word." (Q/A #96). As its treatment of the second commandment continues, the writers of the Heidelberg seem to shift over to the making of images. Their concern over images stems from the Roman Catholic church using pictures to display the biblical accounts so that the illiterate would supposedly know the accounts of the Bible. According to the Heidelberg, the problem with that practice was that in doing so, the church is making a claim. It is, in essence, saying that God's method of communication is not adequate and that man needs to help him along. To address this trend Heidelberg asks if these images, called Books of the Laity, are permitted in the worship of the church. The answer comes back, "No, for we must not pretend to be wiser than God, who will have His people taught, not by dumb images, but by the lively preaching of His Word." (Q/A #98). The issue that sits at the core of the opposition to the use of images is that by using them man makes himself wiser than God.

What needs to be realized is that changing the way of worship is often the same as changing the object of worship. In that way the first and second commandments are closely related. In breaking from God's commanded way of worship, the creature is in essence putting himself in a superior position to the Lord, either in thought or practice. In doing so he sets himself up as god in his own tem-

ple and shrine. Returning to that painful illustration in chapter 1 about the pink polka-dotted socks. When your friend proceeds to buy you something they know you do not like they are not thinking of you. They purchase the socks because *they* love them, so in reality they are considering their own likes and dislikes, not yours. The same thing is true when considering love for God expressed in worship, whether it be congregational, family, or personal.

Last chapter clarified that God is to be loved by obeying him. He has said so very clearly in his word. “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments.” (1 John 5:3a). For the Christian, bought by the blood of Christ, this obedience should not be a painful drudgery. It is the way of expressing joyful thanks to your Savior. This way of worship, of demonstrating love for God, is not a mystery. Man shows God that he loves him by joyfully obeying all he has commanded. It is in this obedience flowing from love for the God that the second commandment is honored.

God is a jealous God, protecting the rightful affection of his children toward himself. That has an aspect of curse to it, meaning that God attributes generation judgment for generational sin stemming from breaking this commandment. But there is also a blessing associated with obedience to this commandment. To worship God, truly worship him, has the blessing attached that God will show “steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.” (Exodus 20:6). Parents are given the privilege of leading their children in obeying this commandment in the confident hope they will receive the promised blessing from the Lord.

In the examples from Scripture, this truth has been applied specifically to the corporate worship of God’s people. However the second commandment also has application to individual lives. All of life is to be lived to God’s glory, in worship to God. Paul observes as much when he begins in Romans 12:1 when he says, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” Man’s approval and opinions are not even mentioned in this verse. Instead the goal is to be holy and acceptable to God. Therefore it is important to consider in what ways families remain faithful to the Lord in worshipping him according to his desires.

What Will This Look Like in My Family?

Consideration of how the family will live in obedience to the second commandment must be done from two different perspectives. The first deals with how the parents in the home demonstrate the value of worship of God through their decisions throughout the week. The second deals with how parents help children to grow in their obedience to God in regard to this commandment.

Setting Up Idols in Your Life

It is right to begin this study by examining the lives of the leaders of the home: the parents. The reason to begin here is because much of what parents say to their children can be negated by what they do. This principle was explored extensively in chapter 2. It is precisely in the parents' own actions that their children see confirmation of the instructions received from them. Therefore, if you are going to insist on your children serving God according to his word, you must first demonstrate that you hold God to be the director of your own activities. In essence you must live according to God's word yourself if you expect to require it of your children. Below are some safeguards to help parents honor the Lord in their families.

Holding God in High Honor. In the previous chapter stressed the practice of private and family worship. When these disciplines are faithfully practiced in the home, you and your children will grow in your understanding of God's word. His commandments will be clarified as you consider the biblical applications and clarifications of the Moral Law. As understanding and knowledge of God's promises grows so should an understanding of the Christian's duties. When these are taught to the children there is an even greater responsibility to hold what is learned of God as pre-eminent. Where understanding is lacking, God being God should still be followed. If something he commands gives the Christian heartburn, the Christian should pray for a heart and mind that are in conformity with God. The opposite alternative is to know the commandments of God and say, "My god would never do that." The Almighty God of heaven and earth created the universe and all that is in them. He has the right to set rules before his creation and expect them to obey him. When man elevates himself above the plain commands of God, he has stepped into Nadab and Abihu's shoes. At that point he reasons according to his own pleasure, not God's. So willingly place yourself under the righteous directions the Lord gives in every circumstance.

Walking in Humility. Children watch their parents constantly. However good a job they may do at fooling those outside the family, children will know their parents' habits, hypocrisies and inconsistencies. No one should pretend to be something they are not to anyone, but that is especially of children. They know their parents are not perfect. But however imperfect parents may be, they should demonstrate a desire to live in perfect agreement with God's law. One of the ways to do so is to acknowledge your sin to your children. I am not saying that children should be privy to all the sins dad and mom struggle with. Much of that would not be helpful to them, and may even confuse them. But when your children see you acting against God's commandments, setting yourself up as the ultimate decider of what is good, it is right to seek forgiveness. If you have sinned privately against one child, you seek their forgiveness privately. If you have sinned against one child in front

of the other children, you seek their forgiveness in front of the other children. This process should include a clear recognition of failure and an expressed sorrow over sin. For example, if you have spoken impatiently or angrily to your child you would say, “Honey, when I spoke to you that way, it was a sinful way to talk. God tells us to be kind and compassionate, and I was neither. I was making my own feelings and frustrations more important than following him. I’ve asked God to forgive me for sinning against him. Would you also forgive me for sinning against you in that way.” To admit sin to your children is to admit that you have an obligation to live according to God’s commandments.

Parents can become exasperated with their children. There is a reason for that: children can be exasperating. But when sin is seen in the child most often it is a mirror of dad or mom, or both. So by walking in humility before them, you are teaching them what to do with their own sins against the second commandment. In Christian parents there should be no sense of “I can’t believe you did that...” Just a brief reflection on your own day should make it abundantly clear that they are acting out what they have inherited from you: sin. That does not mean it should be tolerated. It simply means parents should address their children’s sins patiently and humbly.

Teaching Your Children from Scripture. Every family has their list of “do’s” and “don’t’s”. There will be variety from family to family. As I have progressed through the process of parenting 11 children, sometimes it feels like I am five levels into the Gleason code of conduct. “According to rule 15, section 2, paragraph C, sub-point i of the Gleason code of conduct you may not put your foot on your brother’s chair during supper time.” Quickly the fog sets in, and the children learn to be legal experts. The point is not whether not touching your brothers chair is an acceptable rule or not. The rule may have very valid reasons for being there. However, parents should not be pointing the children to live according to house rules. Parents should be showing their children that it is God’s rules that they must follow. Parents do not have the option of letting their children disobey God’s commandments. God is to be worshiped according to his word, and parents must enforce that in their area of influence: the family. Therefore the justification for the rule not to set limbs on neighboring chairs must flow from a Scriptural principle or command instead. For example, you could turn to Jesus’ words in Matthew 18:6: “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.” There Jesus teaches that we are not to provoke each other to sin and sins you know it will make your sibling upset, you would not provoke them in that way. That is how God would have you follow him. Or from Galatians 5:20 you could show the one so irritated by the stray limb that anger is a manifestation of the flesh in the Christian. Either way, the goal is to show them they are to live in relation to God’s word. So help your children understand how house rules are derived from commandments or principles in Scripture.

Again, the need for personal study becomes apparent. To teach children the commandments of God there must be familiarity with them in the parents. Linguists are hired to teach the field they have studied themselves. Mathematicians can explain formulas because they are familiar with the steps leading up to them. So it is in parenting. To recognize the way on which the Lord instructs us to travel, parents must study and know that way themselves.

Parents must see with urgency what they are setting before their children through their own example. In a person's behavior he either sets God over everything else as king, or something else. If it is not God who directs and governs in your home, dear parent, you have made an idol. In that case we are serving him in our own way. When God's known commandment is replaced or modified, idolatry is begun. There is no simple band-aid for this problem. The only solution is a continued commitment to self-examination to make sure the world, the flesh or the devil are not leading you away from the Lord. When you realize that he has, you must repent of the sin you committed and turn from it to God asking him to give you the strength to will and work for his good pleasure (Philippians 2:13). Parents should seek forgiveness from their children for their bad example, at times. At the same time, do not loose heart. While God is sanctifying you, as parents, he also equips you to guard your children against making idols.

Idolatry in Your Children's Lives

Although parental obedience to God's commandments will be imperfect, that does not mean children cannot be instructed. If perfection was required before parental instruction could begin, no one could ever begin parenting at all. Instead, though weak and imperfect, parents are to study the Bible with their children, and be diligent to keep a watchful eye on how the children respond. Parents must be watchful of the ways their children will make idols though they likely will not make physical statues. When parents find these idols, they have to work to help them find ways toward repentance and instruct them in the way of the Lord. Below are some of the more common ways our children remake God in their own image as Aaron did.

Self-will and autonomy. I have gone through the process of seeing a child progress from newborn to toddler eleven times. Four times I have done so with little boys and seven times with little girls. I have observed a common trait in all these little lives. Never once did I have to teach any of them to disobey my instructions. At some point they all try it. Some are very bold in their transgression. One of my children was caught eating from our chocolate chip supply. He had chocolate everywhere and when we caught him he had his mouth full. Others are more subtle in their disobedience, choosing to do something mom and dad may on other occasions appreciate to avoid doing what they were instructed. For example, they may try to make your bed when you explicitly instructed them to clean

their own room. Children may even almost obey parental instruction. For example, they may sit in the chair right next to the one in which you told them to sit. Perhaps they will give you an instruction in such a cute and adorable way. “Mommy, you should clean up your mess. You’re messy Mom!” Though each of these behaviors are somewhat different in form, the root feeding them is the same. The child has rewritten God’s order. God has said children obey your parents. The child has decided to do things another way. This clash of wills is the eye of many family storms, and yet they are so often permitted in Christian homes. The issue is not whether parents can eliminate or erase their children’s sinful, autonomous desires. They will not be able to do so, and so should not be surprised when it rears its ugly head. The issue is whether children will be expected to follow the Lord in the way that he has prescribed. Parents can help children see the beauty of obedience, submission and service by talking to them about the blessing and joy they have in obeying God’s commandments.

Child-Centered Time. Another way parents open their children up toward disobedience against the second commandment is by setting up an unhealthy perspective of their role in life. Parents may inadvertently teach their children that the world should be ordered to satisfy themselves. They might even make this mistake when their children are very young: through how they manage their children’s time.

Parents may structure their child’s time in such a way that children are able to focus almost constantly on themselves. In doing so, children are taught with continuous reinforcement, that all the hours of the day are theirs. Sleeping in, lack of chores, large amounts of time spent in their own rooms choosing their own activities, or a full roster throughout the week where parents constantly drive children to their next enrichment program or recreational activity all foster this entitlement. Instead children should be taught not to think of self first, but rather to live in reference to the Lord. Christ thought of others first (Philippians 2:4-8), and children should not be allowed to establish patterns that contradict this example. To think of others first will allow children to live out, in summary form, the second table of the Ten Commandments: to love their neighbor as themselves. But equally important, they will learn to set God’s standards first. It is right to teach children that God calls them to serve one another and in doing so to glorify God.

What must be recognized is that, no matter what the issue, parents must continually be helping their children see that God must be loved how he would be loved: through obedience to his commandments. This statement is not legalistic. It is biblical. Christians do not obey to earn righteousness. Obedience is given because the Christian has already been declared righteous. Parents must not wait for salvation in the child before they expect them to live in obedience to God’s word. That time may never come, and it is outside dad and mom’s ability to convert their children. It is a work of the

Holy Spirit. In the meantime parents have, at the very least, the privilege of holding up the mirror of God's law to their children to help them see the sin that dwells in them and to help restrain that sin by requiring obedience to God's holy and righteous commandments. At the very best, parents are leading their children and showing them how they might glorify God and enjoy him forever in response to his grace in their lives.

Parents must learn to recognize their children's autonomous desires early so that we can learn not to feed them. Children begin to assert themselves early. For example they may argue with us about the clothes set out for them, the toy given for play, the lunch provided, or the movie put on for him, standards for modesty or restrictions on computer and cell phones. What I am not saying is that those choices are always inappropriate for children. Parents will want them to choose their own outfit, play with toys they love, eat lunch and watch appropriate films as they get older. However, the testing point comes when their desires conflict with God's commandments. The idolatry of self-will can be recognized when children choose happiness rather than holiness. When they ignore God's commands they are saying, "It is more important for me to satisfy my own desires, than it is to follow the path God has set before me." This statement is reflected in Adam and Eve's first sin too. They were tempted at the point where their autonomy was restrained. They wanted to be like God, and so they acted against his clear commandments, remaking God in their own image.

Conclusion

God protects the purity of his worship at extreme costs in the Scripture. Idolatry is always met with severe consequences because it is a rejection of the only True God. Whether we study the account of the golden calf set up at Sinai, or at Dan and Bethel in the kingdom of the northern tribes of Israel, the same sin is at its core. Like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, they would be their own gods. We must protect our families from that kind of idolatry. We must protect them by our own example, showing our complete allegiance to our Maker, Redeemer and Sustainer. We also must protect them by requiring them to walk in accord with the commandments of God. We know that our work in this area may only be external. We are not the changers of our children's hearts. However, we can pray that God would work through our imperfect and broken means to preserve for himself a generation of godly children. We can talk to our children about our love for God. We can implore our God that he would raise up the next generation of his church, bent on serving the Lord as he has prescribed they should.

Study Questions

1. Compare the idolatry of statue worship found in the Old and New Testaments with the definition of idolatry given by Richard Baxter.
2. Look at one of the Biblical examples of violating the 2nd commandment. In what way do these accounts help us recognize the difference between the 1st and 2nd commandments?
3. What does the Westminster Shorter Catechism have to say about the primary motivation for our worship of the Lord? Where does sincerity fall on that continuum?
4. Look at obedience to the commandments of God as an expression of love to him. If we are to worship God according to his commands, how does Romans 12:1-2 broaden the commandment?
5. From a human perspective, what are some steps that can be taken to curb the making of idols in our homes?

