

a sermon on EXODUS 20:4-6

THE SECOND COMMANDMENT AND THE SIN OF IDOLATRY

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## I. A PROPOSITION

Let us not in our lives make or bow down to idols of any kind, nor worship them, but worship only The Almighty in all we do and all that we are!

## II. THE TEXT – EXODUS 20:4-6

[1 And GOD spake all these words, saying,]

4 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 shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love Me, and keep My Commandments.

## III. INTRODUCTION – DO WE STILL HAVE IDOLS IN THIS MODERN AGE?

The early Church Father Tertullian observed, “The principle crime of the human race, the highest guilt charged upon the world, the whole procuring cause of [Divine] judgement – is idolatry!”<sup>1</sup> “Ah,” you may say, “That was then! This is now! The human race has advanced beyond the ignorant worship of idols!” Well, my friends, are you sure of that? Let us ask these questions, “What is an idol?” and “Do we still have idols in this modern and supposedly enlightened age?”

You may say, “I see no men bowing down and worshipping idols of Baal today, nor the sacrificing of live infants in the flames thereof!” But what then for example is the abortion holocaust, if not the sacrifice of our living children to the false gods of promiscuity, fornication, freedom from responsibility, convenience and me-first-above-all-else? Or you may say, “In our land of great wealth and wisdom, men are too educated to worship idols made of metal and wood or images of things of this world!” But what then for example is this supposed “American dream,” where everyone is called to bow down and worship before the idols of material possessions, manmade prestige, the hallowed halls of secular education and godless science, unrestrained personal liberty at all costs, the unbridled love of money and those idealized nonexistent lovers peddled in today’s phony flesh markets?

No, my friends, we still have idols and graven images to which men bow down and worship today, though they have taken on often externally different forms from those of the ancient world! Noah Webster’s 1828 Dictionary defines an idol as “an image, form or representation, usually of a man or ...animal, consecrated as an object of worship; a pagan deity ...usually statues or images, carved out of wood or stone, or

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<sup>1</sup> 1, Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs, “Idolatry,” 2<sup>nd</sup> entry for Tertullian, page 350.

formed of metals, particularly silver or gold.”<sup>2</sup> But then Webster adds, “a person loved and honored to adoration.”<sup>3</sup> And further, “any thing [or any one] on which we set our affections ...to which we indulge an excessive and sinful attachment.”<sup>4</sup> And most convicting of all, “an idol is any thing which usurps the place of GOD in the hearts of His rational creatures!”<sup>5</sup>

Following our text from EXODUS 20:4-6, we shall look at four key points: First, that GOD forbids the spiritual adultery of idolatry! Second, that The LORD our GOD is a Jealous GOD! Third, that GOD’s punishment is upon the idolater and his children up to the third and fourth generations! And fourth, that GOD’s mercy is upon the faithful and his children up to the thousandth generation! But first we must ask ourselves this question: Whom do we love, “The LORD our GOD or our idols?” For we can not serve both our Lord JESUS CHRIST and at the same time bow down to idols in our lives!

#### IV. WHOM DO WE LOVE – THE LORD OUR GOD OR OUR IDOLS?

We have heard in The First Commandment The Words of GOD, spoken by Him to us through Moses, which command men to have no other gods but The LORD. Recall His Word in EXODUS 20:3, “Thou shalt have no other gods before Me!”<sup>6</sup> We now come to The Second Commandment, “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image... Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them!” Why? The Almighty offers us two choices here: 1) If we choose to do this thing which He forbids us, then because He is The LORD our GOD and because He is a Jealous GOD, our sins in such offenses will bring His judgement. 2) But if we choose to obey GOD and not do this thing which He forbids us, then because He is The LORD our GOD and because he is a Jealous GOD, He will show His great mercy to us. And though great is His judgement against those that hate Him, The LORD’s mercy is far greater towards those that love Him and thus keep His Commandments!

The question is this: Do we love GOD with all our heart, mind and soul, desiring to obey His Commands and worship Him in spirit and in truth, rejoicing in obeying Him and receiving His great mercy upon ourselves and our children? Or do we hate GOD so much that, knowing His prohibitions against such things and the consequences to both ourselves and our children, we still choose rebellion against Him? As Joshua told ancient Israel at the end of his earthly life of service to GOD and to GOD’s people in JOSHUA 24:15, “And if it seem evil unto you to serve The LORD, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve The LORD!”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> 2, Noah Webster’s 1828 Dictionary, entry for “Idol,” page IDL – IDO, definition 1.

<sup>3</sup> 2, Noah Webster’s 1828 Dictionary, entry for “Idol,” page IDL – IDO, definition 3.

<sup>4</sup> 2, Noah Webster’s 1828 Dictionary, entry for “Idol,” page IDL – IDO, definition 4.

<sup>5</sup> 2, Noah Webster’s 1828 Dictionary, entry for “Idol,” page IDL – IDO, definition 4.

<sup>6</sup> 3, KJV, EXODUS 20:3.

<sup>7</sup> 3, KJV, JOSHUA 24:15.

## V. GOD FORBIDS THE SPIRITUAL ADULTERY OF IDOLATRY!

EXODUS 20:4-5a commands, “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...”<sup>8</sup> Does this mean that godly men are not to engage in artwork? Not at all, for under Divine instruction through Moses, the Israelites made great ornate works of art for The Ark of The Covenant, The Tabernacle, its coverings and instruments of worship! But recall the practices of the pagan Egyptians and the heathen Canaanites, in that they were forever fashioning statues and engravings for the purpose of worshipping them as gods! And what is the disgrace of the heathens should never be found among covenantal GOD’s people!

Here we have the words in Hebrew “PESEL” for graven image, which means “statuary” and “TEMUNAH” for likeness, which means “resemblance or form.”<sup>9</sup> As Walter Kaiser observes, here The LORD commands that His people not make “...gods of silver or gods of gold, ... [or] images carved from stone or wood... or metal” to which worship is given.<sup>10</sup> Recall this is exactly what the heathen world did, and which was a constant temptation for ancient Israel, to which they often fell into in spite of GOD’s repeated calls for them to avoid idolatry and worship Him alone.

This is the idolatry of foolish pagan hearts and corrupted outpouring of vain imaginations of darkened souls of the ancient world that Saint Paul exposes in ROMANS 1:22-25, “Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, And changed the glory of the uncorruptible GOD into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things. Who changed the truth of GOD into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than The Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen!”<sup>11</sup> And what does The Almighty do with such men who hate Him? As Paul observes in ROMANS 1:28, “...GOD gave them over to a reprobate mind...!”<sup>12</sup> He will eventually abandon them to their abominations and bring His judgement against them!

## VI. THE LORD OUR GOD IS A JEALOUS GOD!

EXODUS 20:5a continues, “...for I The LORD Thy GOD am a jealous GOD...”<sup>13</sup> Now we must not understand this as meaning the character of The Almighty is somehow flawed with human emotions or responds in some unstable mortal manner to offenses. For The Creator is not somehow filled with human envy when men give what is due to Him alone to idols. Rather, this phrase “jealous GOD” means that The Almighty is zealous to protect His holiness against the spiritual adultery inherent in the

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<sup>8</sup> 3, KJV, EXODUS 20:4-5a.

<sup>9</sup> 4, Expositor’s Bible Commentary, EXODUS 20:4-6, page 422, paragraph 1.

<sup>10</sup> 4, Expositor’s Bible Commentary, EXODUS 20:4-6, page 422, paragraph 1.

<sup>11</sup> 3, KJV, ROMANS 1:22-25.

<sup>12</sup> 3, KJV, ROMANS 1 :28.

<sup>13</sup> 3, KJV, EXODUS 20:5a.

idolatry of men. As Walter Kaiser notes, it means that "...any kind of rivalry to the honor, glory and esteem due to The Lord will excite His jealousy for the consistency of His own character and being."<sup>14</sup>

Matthew Henry states that GOD's jealousy is "...the care He has for His own institutions, His hatred of idolatry and all false worship, His displeasure against idolaters, and that He resents every thing in His worship that looks like, or leads to, idolatry. ...Idolatry being spiritual adultery, the displeasure of GOD against it is fitly called jealousy."<sup>15</sup>

This is why Joshua, recognizing that The LORD is indeed a jealous GOD, said to Israel in JOSHUA 24:19-20 when they renewed their covenantal vows to serve and worship The LORD and Him alone: "...Ye cannot serve The LORD: for He is an holy GOD; He is a jealous GOD; He will not forgive your transgressions nor your sins. If ye forsake The LORD, and serve strange gods, then He will turn and do you hurt, and consume you, after that He hath done you good!"<sup>16</sup> As The Israelite leader who stood before The LORD in the place of Moses - who had been at the side of Moses as his minister and chief captain, who had heard and seen close up the majesty and might of The LORD, to whom also GOD spoke - Joshua feared for the people because of their weakness for idolatry and the zealous holiness of GOD for His Name.

But when the people pressed him and declared in JOSHUA 24:21, "...Nay; but we will serve the LORD," we see in Joshua's reply the fearful and great thing to which GOD's people vowed themselves to again in The Covenant with The LORD: "We will be true to GOD! We will serve and worship only The LORD! We will never turn back from Him into idolatry, as did our fathers!"<sup>17</sup> So we read in the next verse, "And Joshua said unto the people, Ye are witnesses against yourselves that ye have chosen you The LORD, to serve Him. And they said, We are witnesses!"<sup>18</sup>

## VII. GOD'S PUNISHMENT IS UPON THE IDOLATER AND HIS CHILDREN!

EXODUS 20:5b states, "...visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate Me;"<sup>19</sup> Though children are not literally judged for the sins of their fathers, yet when a father sins in idolatry and hates The LORD, his children learn of his sins - excepting the intervention of GOD's Grace to break the cycle - and walk in his footsteps of rebellion. Therefore, says Walter Kaiser, "children who repeat the sins of their fathers [in denying GOD and bowing down before

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<sup>14</sup> 4, Expositor's Bible Commentary, EXODUS 20:4-6, page 423, paragraph 2.

<sup>15</sup> 5, Matthew Henry, Volume I, EXODUS 20:1-11, III, 2. The Second Commandment, (2), [1], page 359

<sup>16</sup> 3, KJV, JOSHUA 24 :19-20.

<sup>17</sup> 3, KJV, JOSHUA 24 :21.

<sup>18</sup> 3, KJV, JOSHUA 24 :22.

<sup>19</sup> 3, KJV, EXODUS 20:5b.

idols] evidence it in personally [also] hating GOD [and] hence they too are punished like their fathers” up to three or four generations!<sup>20</sup>

There are further different classes of idolaters: There are those who bow down and worship literal false gods made by the hands of men in the forms of statues of gold, silver and stone, or graven images depicting things and creatures within creation made by The Creator. There are those who openly and knowingly hate GOD, worshipping the false idols which they set up in their lives of the world, the flesh or the devil. These also are haters of GOD. There are those who feign worship of GOD in their religious lives, but secretly or openly also worship other things in spiritual adultery. These also are haters of GOD. And there are those who, though they believe they are true in their worship to GOD alone, have within their chosen system of worship dangerous things that may become - or are in fact - idols to them. Such men dance close to the edge of spiritual adultery and are in danger of becoming themselves haters of GOD.

So if we are fallen into any form of idolatry, it shows a hatred in our hearts towards The Almighty, with Whom all men are called to worship alone. And it is most especially grievous to be in Covenant with The LORD, but then to turn from Him and offer our love to idols! For idols are not GOD and can not themselves love us back! But if they do in some small measure, they can not love us as does GOD, but return only a counterfeit and consuming affection for us! Therefore Matthew Henry observes of idol worship that GOD “...will severely punish it, not only as a breach of His Law, but as an affront to His majesty, a violation of The Covenant, and a blow at the root of all [true] religion! ...[For Idolatry is] a sin for which Churches shall be unchurched and a bill of divorce given them, the children together with the parents, as with the parents the children were at first taken in. Or He will bring such judgements upon a people as shall be the total ruin of families...!”<sup>21</sup>

Recall the chastising Word of GOD to unfaithful Israel through His prophet Ezekiel, where the people with one hand worshipped their false gods – even sacrificing their very living infants to death in flames to their false pagan gods adopted from the surrounding heathens – then with the other hand came before The Almighty in The Temple to give Him their superficial songs of worship! There they stood before The LORD, one hand dripping with the literal blood of their own sacrificed children given up to their idols in their spiritual adultery, while the other hand lifted up in praise to GOD!

So we read in EZEKIEL 23:37-39, “...they have committed adultery, and blood is in their hands, and with their idols have they committed adultery, and have also caused their sons, whom they bare unto Me, to pass for them through the fire, to devour them. Moreover this they have done unto Me: they have defiled My Sanctuary in the same day... For when they had slain their children to their idols, then they came the same day

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<sup>20</sup> 4, Expositor’s Bible Commentary, EXODUS 20:4-6, page 423, paragraph 3.

<sup>21</sup> 5, Matthew Henry, Volume I, EXODUS 20:1-11, III, 2. The Second Commandment, (2), [2], page 359.

into My Sanctuary to profane it; and, lo, thus have they done in the midst of Mine House!”<sup>22</sup>

If we therefore love idols of whatever kind and therefore hate GOD, do we not teach our children the same love of idols and hatred of The Creator? What does our Lord JESUS CHRIST say of this in LUKE 16:13? “No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve GOD and mammon!”<sup>23</sup> We can not give our worship to both The King of The Universe and also to our chosen idols! And we can so violate GOD’s Second Commandment ourselves in our homes and families and not expect our children to be tempted to follow suit, thereby reaping the judgement of Heaven upon themselves as we reap in upon our own heads!

#### VIII. GOD’S MERCY IS UPON THE FAITHFUL AND HIS CHILDREN!

And in EXODUS 20:6 we have, “And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love Me, and keep My Commandments.”<sup>24</sup> The justification of the father before The Almighty is not directly attributed to his children for each son and daughter must be justified before The Throne of Grace individually. Yet, if a father is elected, redeemed, renewed and sanctified by The Almighty, so his children will learn from his love of GOD, his keeping of The Commandments and his right worship; they will learn from him to seek The Creator. Therefore The Almighty’s great mercy showered upon the justified father who walks uprightly before GOD shall be showered upon his children for thousands of generations!

Matthew Henry offers us these four points here: “[First,] Those that love GOD will make it their constant care and endeavour to keep His Commandments, particularly those that relate to His worship. [Second,] ...Those that love GOD, and keep Those Commandments, shall receive Grace to keep His other Commandments. [Third,] ...GOD has mercy in store for such [faithful men]. [Fourth,] ...This mercy shall extend to thousands [of generations of a faithful man’s children], much further than the wrath threatened to those that hate Him, ...[which] reaches but to the third or fourth generation.”<sup>25</sup>

Those who love GOD will not worship before idols of any kind, but will seek to remain true to Their Covenant in which they are bound to worship only The LORD in joy and thankfulness. The keeping of This Commandment in the lives of the saints is seen in their love for GOD and all His Commands as a faithful and loving wife in true love does for her husband. And though GOD’s longsuffering is there even for those lost in the sins of idolatry for a time, it must because of The LORD’s holiness and righteousness come to

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<sup>22</sup> 3, KJV, EZEKIEL 23:37-39.

<sup>23</sup> 3, KJV, LUKE 16:13.

<sup>24</sup> 3, KJV, EXODUS 20:6.

<sup>25</sup> 5, Matthew Henry, Volume I, EXODUS 20:1-11, III, 2. The Second Commandment, (2), [3], page 359-360.



an end. And then their iniquity must be visited upon them and their children up to the third and fourth generation if they persist in their hatred for GOD. But for those that love GOD and keep His Commandments, The LORD gives His great mercy upon them and their children up to thousands of generations, for they show by His Grace their love towards Him!

For as David cried out in thankfulness to The Almighty in PSALM 103:17-18, so may we who are saved by His Grace join in that glad song: "...the mercy of The LORD is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear Him, and His righteousness unto children's children; To such as keep His Covenant, and to those that remember His Commandments to do them!"<sup>26</sup> For if we love our Lord, we will worship and serve Him alone, and His Commandments will not be grievous unto us, but rather a joy and blessing! So our Saviour JESUS CHRIST tells us in JOHN 14:15, "If ye love Me, keep My Commandments!"<sup>27</sup>

#### IX. IN CONCLUSION – DO WE LOVE GOD OR NOT?

We began today by asking these two questions: What is an idol? And do men in this supposedly modern and enlightened age still bow down and worship idols? An idol is anything in the lives of men that displaces their right worship due to The LORD GOD alone. And though we in this nation today do not bow down to statues of Baal and the like, nor do we today offer up our live infants into the superheated and flaming arms of Baal, we still have idols! They have merely taken on a different external form!

If we do not have idols in our nation today, what is this cry that ascends to Heaven from our sin soaked soil of the shed slaughtered blood of tens of millions of innocent preborne babies in The American abortion holocaust? If we do not have idols in our nation today, what is the constant ungodly bleating that ascends to The Throne of GOD from men running about bowing down, serving and sacrificing all for money, material things, worldly power, manmade prestige and fleshly pleasures which many call "The American Dream?"

Let us recall that Joshua called the ancient Israelites under The Old Covenant to put away their idols, gods of silver, gods of gold, graven images of worship and spiritual adultery. He called them to renew their obedience and worship of The LORD and serve Him alone in JOSHUA 24:14-15: "Now therefore fear The LORD, and serve Him in sincerity and in truth: and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood, and in Egypt; and serve ye The LORD. And if it seem evil unto you to serve The LORD, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve The LORD!"<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> 3, KJV, PSALM 103:17-18.

<sup>27</sup> 3, KJV, JOHN 14:15.

<sup>28</sup> 3, KJV, JOSHUA 24:14-15.

What then does This Second Commandment direct men to do in the worship of GOD? As Walter Kaiser states, It rejects "...every form of substitution, neglect, or contempt, both public and private, for the worship of GOD!"<sup>29</sup> Because GOD is just, and because He had rescued Israel from their terrible bondage in physical Egypt and was now by Covenant their GOD and they His people, GOD had a calling on their sole worship of Him and Him alone. And does not CHRIST have the same calling upon we who are rescued from our terrible bondage in spiritual Egypt and Who is now by Covenant our GOD and we His people? Does not The Saviour have, by virtue of His Body and Blood given up for us at The Cross, a calling on our sole worship of Him and Him alone?

So we have seen together that GOD forbids the spiritual adultery of idolatry; that The LORD our GOD is a jealous GOD; that GOD's punishment is upon the idolater and his children to the third and fourth generation; but that GOD's mercy is upon the faithful and his children to thousands of generations! My friends, let us put away any idols we may have in our lives of whatever kind, and worship only The LORD our GOD! Let us hold fast to The Cross of CHRIST our Redeemer wherewith we are saved from out of spiritual Egypt and brought into His Promised Land! Let us not in our lives make or bow down to idols of any kind, nor worship them, but worship only The Almighty in all we do and all that we are! In The Name of GOD The Father, and The Son and The Holy Ghost, AMEN!

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<sup>29</sup> 4, Expositor's Bible Commentary, EXODUS 20:4-6, page 423, paragraph 2.

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