

No God Images: 2nd Commandment - part 2 Exodus 20:1 Samuel 4:1-11

For those of us who are reading through the bible in one year we read this Samuel story a few weeks ago. It struck me then and speaks to us today. In that story of the battle between Israel and the Philistines we see how even the things of God can become idols. Last week we talked about the big heavy weight counterfeit gods of our time. Money, sex, power, and even family. After our service last week I was talking with Jay and he mentioned that for sure all those super power gods in our culture have a way of wedging us away from the God and luring us to put our trust in earthly things - with devastating effects. And often it is those good things we cherish, those good things God gives us that begin to control us and leash us to a life of joyless slavery.

In my former life I had an idol like that. I was drawn during my late teen years to a life of service in the kingdom of God. I felt the call to ministry and I became a teacher in a wonderful Christian School where I served for 12 years. What a gift of God. But as I worked in that school the power of earthly things began to dominate my life and my heart. Being a Christian teacher and serving a Christian school became my source of meaning and value and my identify as a person and went after it with passion to the harm of my marriage, my family, my community, and my spirit. In my heart I made that school and the idea of Christian education my idol. It distorted my thinking of God, it limited my understanding of his kingdom and myself; and made me and my family miserable. And God intervened and recaptured my heart through a series of very difficult circumstances.

In that conversation after church last week Jay mentioned there are still many of those old fashioned idols in our lives. And he suggested that maybe we should have a part two for the Second commandment. I agreed.

As Christians we know from the Bible – the Spirit of God - that our hearts are idol factories. It is hard for us to worship and serve a God we cannot see and feel and understand. To serve the Great I AM, the I will be who I will Be. What kind of God is that? And so our hearts and our minds are always on the lookout for things and ideas and feelings that will help us understand and see and feel and trust God. But God told us in the second commandment: “Do not make for yourself a physical, mental, emotional, or cultural image of God, to help you worship God and bow down to him in a real and powerful way.” A distorted unbiblical image of God can ruin your life and the lives of your grand children.

In the Bible God graciously tells us how we CAN understand him and CAN worship him and CAN pray to him, and CAN know him. We come into the presence of God, into his holiness, into his spirit and his truthfulness by participating in the Temple worship. We experience God by immersing ourselves in the people, and the activities and architecture and the furniture and the art and the symbolism and the maintenance and mission of the temple. By going through God designed rituals and actions in a God designed sanctuary we are mysteriously drawn into a biblical understanding of God, a biblical experiencing of

God with us. We are drawn into God's blessings of forgiveness and grace and love and identity.

In the biblical temple form of worship there was no image of God we can look at. God is spirit and truth. God's presence in the temple was symbolized by a dark empty room called the Holy of Holies. And no one was allowed to look inside, or go inside, or even get near it. In that Holy of Holies was a golden box with two angels on it. Angels are physical or mental messengers of God – physical even dreamlike manifestations of his word. Angels are not god. They are agents of God – and so we don't worship angels. And in that golden box were three things. The tables of stone with the ten commandments written on them by God himself, a jar full of manna - the bread of heaven God gave to feed his people in the desert, and Aaron – the high priest's staff made of dead wood but had living branches and flowers and fruit on it. These were not God. They were physical reminders of God in action in the past, and they assured us that God will there for us in the future too. That God is Our help in ages past and our hope for years to come.

Through God's word, through God's care for us, and through God's blessings we begin to understand what is incomprehensible and beyond understanding, beyond visualization and imagination. We begin to see and feel and are drawn into the mystery that is God. God says if we want to live in a right relationship with God, to enjoy all the blessings of life with God, we cannot and will not make a physical or mental or emotional image of God to worship. If we do make for ourselves an image or an idol it will undo us and it will undo our relationship with God.

In this Samuel story the people have made an idol of the ark of the covenant. Instead of the ark being a reminder of God's help in the past and their hope for God's presence with us, they have made for themselves a distorted image of god. They think that those messenger signs of God, those angels, those tablets, that flowering staff, and that bread have magical powers. They think that God can be controlled and channeled through these physical things. If only they would take god out of that dark empty room and bring the angel ark to the battle field God would be with them and save them from the hand of their enemies. And when the ark came into the camp they shouted to the Lord their praise to God. Shout to the Lord they sang to the ark. It threw quite a scare into those idol worshipers from Philistia. They too believed that god had come into the camp and that God would fight for the Israelites. But God is not someone we control or use for our purposes or put in a box or picture.

God was not pleased. God is a jealous God. Thinking that God and the power of God are in the ark is making an idol, a distorted image of God. There is nothing that can reveal the character and the glory and the power and ways of God that is made from anything on earth or in the heavens or things under the sea. So don't make for yourself an image or an idol to hang on to or trust in so you can get god to do what you want, or think God will listen to

you in a special way. God is not a god of magic. He will be who he will be. God paraphernalia, and god art is not a good luck charms to insure power prayer.

Many people, even Christians today still think and act this way. They believe that a concrete model of the 10 commandment on display has special powers, that the cross around one's neck or in a worship room has magical powers to bless your life, some people see the presence of god in people in saints, or in the mother of Jesus, they believe they can access the power of god magically through these special people, even ministers are sometime thought of in these terms. Some people believe if they hang a picture Jesus in their house or in the church that is good luck charm, or a statue of Jesus in the car protects you from accidents. Some people have made the bible their idol, they revere the King James version and will kiss the pages of the book to show their devotion to the commandments. Some people have given the doctrines of the faith godly status or put their trust in a seminary education. Some people imaging God as an old man in the sky dotting over his grand children, some imagine him as the great policeman of the universe. Some even think having a statue of Buddha or Shiva doesn't hurt or they believe hanging the Jing jang pennant around their neck will bring balance to their life.

But God is not pleased. The God of the Bible is a jealous god. If we want to live in a right relationship with him we will not and cannot make a physical mental or even theological image or idol of God to express our devotion and to channel God's grace. The only authorized image, the only near representation of God, the only created thing that even comes close to the understanding of god is the human being. Male and female God created them in his image. But even that image of God after the fall into sin is a distorted and broken image and definitely ought not to be worshiped, even the American idol version of it.

Why is idolatry harmful for yourself and the grand children? You have probably heard the expression you are what you eat. One of the reasons idolatry is harmful is we become what we worship. If our image of god is that of warrior and we worship him the tendency is we become warriors. If we think of God as the cosmic Law maker and police man we will become legalists and Pharisees and take our physical and literal copies of the bible into our battles. If we imagine God as the great grandfather who over looks our mischief and just wants to hug us, we will become libertarians and believe truth is relative and in the eye of the beholder. If we imagine god a father we may become authoritarians and express our love in inappropriate ways.

Last week we looked at Ezekiel 14 where God tells us that it is his mission to recapture our heart and to set us free from the idols that enslave us. This is God's Jesus project. In Jesus we are told in Colossians 1: 13 God rescued us from the idols and images of darkness and through Jesus brings us in into the holy of holies of his light and his love. In Jesus we have redemption and the forgiveness of sins including idolatry.

Our hearts are idol factories. We need images and concrete things to help us know God and experience his presence. Well the bible tells us that Jesus is the temple of God. Jesus is the God designed sanctuary of his spirit. Jesus is the perfect image of the invisible unknowable God. Participating in Jesus and the worship of Jesus we are drawn into the mysterious incomprehensible being and presence of God. When we look to Jesus and worship Jesus, when we see his immense love, and grace and truth especially in his dying on the cross we are seeing right into the heart of God. When we worship Jesus and trust Jesus we become like him. We are what we eat. We become who we worship.

In Jesus the Spirit of God makes us new people. The spirit of God restores the image of God in us. In Colossians 3: 9 we are told that this new self is being renewed in the knowledge and in the image of our Creator. When we look to Jesus and worship Jesus we begin to look like Jesus. Humility compassion the ability to forgive, patience, they all become our second nature when we give our heart to Jesus.

Do not make for yourself and an image, or picture and idol to help you know God; rather let the person of Jesus rule your heart, let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and encourage each other though psalms, and hymns and spiritual songs, singing your gratitude to God in your heart. Set you heart on things above where Christ is, set you mind on those things hidden with Christ in God. You children and your grand children and your great grandchildren will thank you for it.