

Hope PCA Sermon October 6, 2024  
“No Images in Worship” (Deuteronomy 5:8–10)  
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Continuing our series through Deuteronomy in this little section here on the Ten Commandments, this morning we come to the second commandment that is contained in Deuteronomy 5 verses 8–10. If you would, if you’re able, please stand in honor of the reading of God’s Word. Again, Deuteronomy 5 verses 8–10. This is the very living Word of our living God.

*<sup>8</sup> “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. <sup>9</sup> You shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, <sup>10</sup> but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.”*

May God bless to our understanding and application in our lives of this Word that he has given to us. Please be seated. Let me briefly pray again as we come to the Word.

Lord God, again we ask your blessing upon your Word. We thank you for it. May it be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path that we may walk as it teaches us to walk. As always, we pray it in Jesus’ name, amen.

It’s commonly described about the first and second commandments that the first commandment tells us who to worship And the second commandment tells us how we should worship him. Who do we worship? The LORD God and the LORD God alone. How do we worship him? Well, we do not make images. It seems pretty clear, it seems pretty comprehensive. *Do not make images of any kind, of anything in heaven, on the earth, in the waters. Do not bow down to them, do not serve them.* (A brief aside here: I haven’t talked about the different ways that different parts of the church number the commandments, and there are some minor differences between how they’re laid out in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. I don’t want to take the time to do that. It feels a little lecture-y, if I can put it that way. And Lord willing, I want to put something together in writing that I can give you that talks about those things. because there are those who view these first two commandments as one. In our tradition, they are separate.)

In any case, if the first commandment rules out worshipping false gods and having them before God in his presence, then the second commandment is not about images of false gods. We’re not talking here about idols that might be made to some pagan god, but they’re images that are attempting in some way, shape, or form to depict the LORD God himself. Again, it seems pretty clear, seems pretty basic, and yet surprisingly (at least to me), there’s a lot of disagreement on what it means to comply with this commandment and how to work it out in the practice of our faith.

A little bit of history: In the early days of the church, it was pretty clear and pretty consistent and pretty common in how they applied this commandment. We know in the New Testament

that Paul regularly encourages the churches to flee from idolatry. John, in his letter at the very end, says very simply, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols." (1 John 5:21) And the early church seemed to heed this instruction from what we know. They did not use images in worship. And this may have been to really distinguish them from the pagan religions around them. Think of the statues, the Greek and Roman statues, the Egypt filled with statues of the gods that they worshipped. So it may have just been a way of keeping themselves distinct from other practices.

They did have symbols. Symbols were quite common. They functioned more symbolically or allegorically. The cross was a symbol. The lamb, both of them pointing to Christ and his work. Interestingly, the peacock was a very common image in the early church. Why? Well, I had to look it up. They saw the molting of the feathers, especially of the male peacock, the brilliant feathers. The molting and then the regrowing of those feathers every year as an allegory, if you will, for death and resurrection. Very Christian idea. The anchor was a symbol. Hebrews 6:19 tells us we have an anchor, which is our hope in Christ. That seems to have eventually molded or evolved into what we call the Chi Rho symbol. We don't have any that I know of in our church, but it's the Chi and Rho, the first two letters of Christ's name in Greek, and it's the X with the Rho is a vertical stem with a, it looks like a P, but it's the Greek letter Rho. And then there was the fish, right? We all know about the fish. It used to be abundant on the back of people's cars. The two little arcs that resemble a fish, allegorically or apocryphally, we think that may have been a way for Christians to recognize one another. We approach, we draw a little fish. If the other guy completes it, okay, we know we're both Christians. But really, the idea seems more to come from the letters in the word fish which in Greek would stand for: Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior, *Ichthys*.

So there was a practice of using symbols but not images as part of worship. It seemed to evolve, historians tell us, after Constantine recognized Christianity as a legal religion. It became the official religion later. And so images came to appear in churches as decorations, paintings, frescoes, statues. But it was still opposed in the eastern parts of the Christian church and in some of the more remote areas as well. There were early fathers who were opposed to images. Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Justin Martyr, Eusebius, the great early church historian. In later centuries, a man named Claudius, who was a bishop of Turin, wrote strongly against images. This was in the 700s or 800s. There was even a synod held in southern Spain in a little town called Elvira that condemned images completely in Canon 36. It was quite a big controversy in those early centuries of the Church. Finally a council was held in Nicaea in 787 A.D. and iconoclasm (opposition to icons or images) was condemned and it remained the teaching and practice of the Western Church. In the East, Eastern Orthodoxy doesn't use statues and they don't use realistic paintings or pictures either. Their icons are meant to be stylistic and capture the person they portray in a very symbolic form. In the West, statues, paintings, various kinds of images. Interestingly in Asia, in the church that's been in Asia for at least 1800 years, they continue to forbid images of any kind in their churches and in their worship.

Then you get to the time of the Reformation, we're trying to reform various issues that are seen in the church, and even the Protestants didn't agree among them, and we still don't. Lutherans still to this day allow some forms of images and some statues. Anglicans as well. Both of them are very clear about trying to say that we don't worship these things. In Lutheran and Anglican circles, they're almost more decoration, or in some cases seen as a

teaching tool. Maybe in some Anglican circles, objects of veneration, but it's not a common thing. The Reformed camp rejected images completely. And yet in our day, many in our circles adopt it as art, maybe for the home, maybe to hang on a church wall, or to use as a teaching tool.

Now having said all that again, the second commandment as I read it, as we read it and heard it earlier, seems pretty clear: no images of any kind. So I want to talk about that and hopefully clarify at least what our church historically has taught and believed. And then also address a couple common related questions. What about images that are not used in worship? Are those okay? And then the big question: what about images of Jesus that are not used for worship, but for other purposes? In Sunday school materials, or in a picture Bible, or in movies, or plays, or that sort of thing.

So, let's look at the commandment, and I want to kind of look at it here phrase by phrase. The first is the very simple statement, *"Do not make a carved image or any likeness."* So that encompasses both what we typically think of as idols, which are statues of wood, stone, or clay, or precious metals, but also any likeness. That's pretty broad. It takes us beyond just things that are carved and set up in a home or a church or an alcove or something like that. Beyond paintings or frescoes or that sort of thing. So already just that first phrase makes a pretty far-reaching statement: don't make any graven, carved images, or any likeness. All right.

And then the second phrase, *"Don't make any image of any kind of anything in heaven, on earth, or in the water."* Now it says, *"in the waters under the earth"*. That doesn't mean underground lakes and springs and that sort of thing. Deuteronomy 4:18 uses similar language, it talks about the fish in that water. In the mindset of the people of that day, to go in the water (here's land, here's the water) is to go "under the earth". Because it's lower than the land, I guess. So it includes oceans and lakes in which fish and other creatures dwell. Again, that's pretty far-reaching. Heaven, earth, water? Nothing is really excluded. Far-reaching. No image of any kind, of anything.

Thirdly, *"You shall not bow down to them or serve them."* Those are good translations of the Hebrew words. That's how it's reflected in the ESV, it's how it's reflected in the New King James. The New American Bible (some of you use that) has, "Do not worship them or serve them". The NIV (if you still use that) renders it, "Do not bow down to them or worship them." And just a reminder (we talked about this in our class on the regulative principle of worship), most of the time, especially in the Old Testament, when you see the English word "worship" in your Bible, it's translating either the Hebrew word "to bow down", "to prostrate oneself" (face down), or "to serve". So do not bow down to them or serve them.

It's actually true in the New Testament as well. Tells us something about how we are to worship God. We are to bow down ourselves before him. We talked about being prostrate in prayer in Sunday school. We humble ourselves before him. We recognize how great he is, how holy he is, how small we are, and how sinful we are. But it also means we are to serve him, be his servants (sometimes even translated as "slaves", which means we do what he tells us to do. He's our God, he is our Master. We do what he tells us to do, and we do it how he tells us to do it. When he tells us how, that's what we do. And of course, those ideas are true not only

for worship, formal corporate worship, but for all of life. How we live, how we humble ourselves before God and serve him in every single thing that we do, day in and day out.

So when God tells us, when he commands us not to make images and worship him through them, bowing down to them and serving them, it seems quite clear: we just don't do it. He's told us not to. If we do it, there's an echo of the first commandment here as well, where we are in effect bringing other gods into his presence. And the objection might be, well, we're not making images of other gods. These are images that point us to God himself. Well, that's the excuse the Israelites had with the golden calf that Aaron made at the foot of Mount Sinai while Moses was up the mountain. Whether it's a golden calf or any other image, it's not God. We're bringing something other into his presence. "You shall have no other gods before me in my presence." And indeed, as Moses reminded the people (even we see it in chapter 4 verse 15): they saw no form of God when they were at the mountain. If God has no form, how can we make an image of him? How can we accurately represent him? God is creator. He's distinct from his creation. And so to represent God by his creation, by what he is not, is in effect creating a false God. A God who is not the LORD God. So again, in a sense, making an image of God is creating a false God and bringing that false God into the true God's presence. So really we're violating both commandments at the same time.

Then the second half of verse 9 and on gives reasons for this command. Scholars note that this kind of amounts to a summary kind of blessings and curses that we would find in an ancient covenant of those times. Firstly, God is "*a jealous God*". That's a word not being used of envy. "Jealous" in the Old Testament can refer to zeal for something, being zealous for something being done rightly, being passionate about it. We have an example of Phinehas in Numbers 25, who was jealous, we're told, for the right worship of God, and was commended for what he did to prevent false worship. He was zealous for it, that it would be done rightly. So God's jealousy here is a zeal, a passion for what is right. The right, the proper, the correct way of worshipping him according to what he's commanded us to do. God is jealous. He's jealous for his own glory, his own proper worship.

And then second reason is both curse and blessing. He says he will "*visit the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations*". But there will be blessing of his "*steadfast love*", that covenant word *chesed* (God's covenant love for his people) "*to thousands* (and implied thousands of generations) *of those who love him and keep his commandments*". Kind of a little goofy aside here. We typically think of a generation as 40 years. A thousand generations would be how many years? 40,000? I mean, if we're playing with numbers in the Bible, and there's 40,000 years of generations that need his blessing ... Jesus isn't coming anytime soon. Of course that's not what it means. It's an exaggeration, deliberately meant to impress upon us that God's mercy, his covenant love, far exceeds punishment.

But we shouldn't see that judgment as being kind of a generational curse on grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Often how it's interpreted and taught today, that is very wrong. Jesus took the curse for us, once for all. You cannot be cursed again. A believer with the Holy Spirit dwelling inside her or him cannot have a demon possess her or him. No demon can drive out the Holy Spirit. No curse can come again upon those from whom God has removed the curse. "There is therefore now no condemnation." Generational curses, put it out of your mind. It's a dangerous teaching. More likely, what is meant here is that the consequences of a father's sin can impact his family for generations. And that's, we see that, maybe you've

experienced it in your own life and in your own family. In fact, Deuteronomy 24:16, when we get there, we'll see that it prohibits punishing children for the sins of their fathers. Also in mind here, maybe a man, a parent who lives a long time, may very well have the privilege of seeing his or her grandchildren and even great-grandchildren. And if that person, that parent, is not following God's commands, if you had a grandparent or a great-grandparent who had an influence upon you, think of, hopefully a good one, think of what a bad influence can do. The consequences of not following God's commands indeed can affect our progeny for generations.

But the blessing is to thousands of generations. Blessing and mercy transcend judgment. There's a similar idea expressed in chapter 7 verse 9: "Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations." God's mercy, his love, his covenant love, now ours in and through Jesus Christ, far transcends any curse, any punishment, wipes it away. So the commandment, to me at least, seems clear: don't make any images, don't worship God through them. There are consequences for disobeying the commandment. There are blessings for obeying it.

What about the first question I brought up? Can we use images outside the context of worship? You know, they're okay as long as we're not worshiping them. It's kind of the Lutheran argument, the Anglican's argument. And it's really at the heart of the Roman Catholic distinction between worship and veneration or reverence of the things depicted. For me, as I think about that, I have to be honest, I think it's a distinction without a difference. There's still the danger of worshiping God via these images. Worse, bowing down to them, prostrating oneself before them, or serving the people they depict, whether saints or whoever, rather than focusing our service upon God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And I can say from my own experience, being in a Lutheran church for a while, putting such images in places of worship, the temptation inevitably arises to worship them, to look upon them in a worshipful manner. And even though these churches may forbid that officially in their teaching, the practice has the danger of drawing people into a form of idolatry nonetheless. The wise thing, and I think this was the response of The Reformed Protestants was, let's just get rid of them altogether so that the temptation isn't there. Just wiser not to even go there. But for me, the answer is in the command itself: "*Do not bow down to them or serve them*".

Again, all of life, not just formal worship and worship times and worship settings. And I think that's especially true in the word "serve". Again, we are God's servants, his bond slaves, as it's put in the New Testament. To create any image of God, of anything, anywhere, is to not serve him as he has commanded. We serve God, we serve our masters, we serve our boss at work by doing what they tell us to do and doing it how they tell us to do it. This is what God has told us to do, what God has not told us to do, and how he's told us not to do it. And I think that includes art. I love the Sistine Chapel. The art is magnificent. But Michelangelo's grandfather in the center of it is a little bit irritating. Biola University down in California has a two or three story image on it, and a friend of mine who did some adjunct teaching there would tease some of the folks: "Boy, I saw your picture of Moses over there." "Oh no, that's not Moses, that's Jesus." And you would go, "How do you know?" The danger is there. We don't know what God looks like, and to depict him in human form degrades him to our level. We're not serving him as he has called us to serve him.

And then finally, what about images of Jesus? People will argue a couple points mainly. On the one hand, they will point out (rightly so): Jesus is a human being. He is fully God, he is fully man. Colossians 1:15 says “He is the image of the invisible God” as a human being. May we not depict Jesus as a human being. The other argument is basically a practical argument. Having images of Jesus is a valuable teaching tool. It helps those who can’t read. That was one of the main reasons for the iconography in Europe in the Middle Ages. People couldn’t read. Here’s the story of the Bible in pictures. You can look at it. Maybe some people are more visual learners. Maybe they have some sort of a learning challenge or disability. Or just it benefits children in a general sense.

The first idea, yes, indeed, Jesus is God incarnate, fully God, fully human. He is that today, he is that now, the risen Christ at the right hand of the Father. But in that passage from Colossians that’s often cited, Paul goes on to describe how Jesus is “the image of the invisible God. By him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities. All things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together (verse 18). He is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.” And then in verse 19, “in Him, the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.” Paul’s letter to the Colossians, one of the main themes of it, is he’s arguing the superiority of Christ and his work versus the heavenly beings that were so much a part of the Colossian culture of worship. Jesus is far greater and far above and more powerful than these heavenly spiritual powers that were worshiped in that area. So in other words, Paul’s not emphasizing so much the humanity of Jesus, though it’s present, the firstborn from the dead. He’s emphasizing the deity of Jesus. In this, he is the image of the invisible God. He reflects those attributes, those characteristics. He’s above visible and invisible thrones and dominions and rulers and authorities. So the image isn’t meant so much to refer to Jesus’ physical humanity, but much more to his being God himself, the eternal God, who was before all things, who created all things.

The more practical question is the one that divides so many in our own circles and elsewhere in the broader church. Now, in the PCA, our own denomination, we don’t print Sunday school materials that have images of Jesus. Officially, that’s our position as a denomination, and for what it’s worth, I support that. I agree with it. But there are many good men in our denomination and in other Reformed denominations and other non-Reformed denominations, strong believers in Christ, preaching Christ and him crucified, biblical pastors who are very much okay with images used, for example, for teaching purposes. The problem, I think, with images of Jesus, I think the problem reveals itself the minute we begin to create such an image. What did Jesus look like? Is that Moses on the wall at Biola? Is it Elijah? We don’t know. We don’t know what he looked like. “To what can we compare him?” (using the words from Isaiah earlier). So we’re already making something up. Something that reflects in some way our own opinion, our own thoughts, maybe our hopes or desires for what Jesus would look like.

It’s been problematic throughout church history. People around the world complain that in so many Western publications that use images of Jesus, he’s a tall, blonde, blue-eyed, fair-skinned man. There are Jewish people who look that way, but they are few and far between. Did he have long hair? Did he have short hair? Was he tall? Was he short? I just came across an article this week arguing that the short person in the story of Zacchaeus may have been

Jesus, not Zacchaeus himself. The grammar is a little ambiguous (the article argues), and so because Jesus was short, Zacchaeus had to climb a tree to be able to see him in the crowd. Was he tall? Was he short? Was he beautiful? Was he desirable to look at (as the bridegroom is described in the Song of Songs)? Or was he nothing special to look at? “No form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him”, as Isaiah describes Messiah in chapter 53 verse 2. Have you ever seen a portrayal of Jesus that was ugly? No beauty? Nothing desirable about him? No, we don’t do that. We don’t want that kind of Jesus, do we?

And therein is the problem, isn’t it? We’re creating a Jesus according to our own preferences, making him look the way we want him to look. What we like versus, I would argue, what God commands. But we hear the argument, I’ve heard this: Jesus is God. He’s majestic. He is holy. He is wonderful. He should look attractive. Making Jesus look attractive reflects the glory and majesty of God. But again, what are we saying here? Or what are we not saying but implying? That an unattractive person made in God’s image does not reflect God’s glory? Are we really willing to say that? I hope not.

Here again, I go to the commandment’s language of serving God, in this case, serving Jesus Christ. Let me give you maybe a little bit of an odd example. Say there’s a man married to the stereotypical girl-next-door in America. She’s short, she’s athletic, she’s blonde, she’s blue-eyed, fair-skinned, attractive to many people. But he’s in a group of people who don’t know his wife. “Hey, tell us about your wife.” And he says, “Well, she’s tall, she’s statuesque, she has dark hair and deep brown eyes and olive skin.” Again, an attractive description to many people. “Wow, you have an attractive wife!” What a compliment. How do you think she thinks if she hears about that? No, she’s not going to like it. She’s not going to appreciate that kind of description of her. That’s not accurate. Any of you married men here want to be that guy with your wife? No, thank you. He might protest to her. Well, the description was attractive, and you’re attractive, and the description was attractive, so what’s the big deal? But you know, and I know, that that kind of excuse is going to fall flat. And this is from a man who knows what his wife looks like. If that would be inappropriate here at a human level, is it not much more inappropriate to do it with the God who we don’t even know what he looks like? Yes, Jesus is human, but we don’t know what he looks like. Is that man serving his wife by describing her differently from what she actually looks like? Are we serving Jesus by making images of him that we have no clue if that’s what he really looks like. The images we create are necessarily going to be false. It doesn’t matter how lofty or how good our intentions are.

And it’s not just teaching tools. I think that goes for plays and movies and TV shows. It’s no better. Now we’re adding not just what a person looks like, but the actor’s portrayal, their interpretation of how Jesus would speak, how he would act, his personality, and so on and so forth. It paints a picture that has no real basis in reality. So, “Jesus” movie? No, thank you. “The Chosen”? No, thank you. Those are all someone’s interpretation of what Jesus was like, and I can’t go there.

It brings me back to the idea of serving. We serve God by doing what he tells us to do, the way he tells us how to do it. We call that the regular principle in worship, but it’s true for all of life. And Jesus himself said quite clearly in John 14:15, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” Well, the second commandment is Jesus’ commandment. He is God. He is the Word who spoke this just as surely as that voice came down from the mountain. He is

God, he is the Creator, he is the King, he is the Lord. It is him we serve, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, with reverence and awe. The same fear of God, the same admonition to keep his commandments. So Jesus Himself is saying to us, "Don't make images of me. Don't bow down to them, don't serve them."

Of course, the key command that he gives in all of life is just to recognize and admit who we are: sinners who justly deserve God's wrath and punishment for sin, including our idolatry, our image-making. We admit that and we accept God's solution in Jesus as the substitute who took that punishment that we deserve as if it were his very own, hung on the cross and died to pay the penalty that we should have paid, and in exchange offers his perfect obedience as our own. So we can now stand before God and hear the verdict, "Not guilty". The call of God is to repent and believe, have faith in God. It's a call, it's also a command. We saw that in 1 Peter when we were there: refuse to repent and believe and you'll suffer the consequences for all of eternity. But again, mercy, mercy overwhelms punishment for those who repent and believe. Let the call for us this morning, let the call go out from us this morning to come to Jesus, not as a statue or a painting or some Hollywood actor's portrayal, but come to the real Jesus, the Jesus of the Bible, the Son of God who lived and died and rose again for us, for our salvation.

Let me pray.

Lord God, give us wisdom in this as in other matters of debate and discussion in our own circles and in the broader circles of the body of Christ. Give us wisdom, give us patience, help us to forbear with one another in love. But, oh Lord, we do want to be those who keep your commands, do so willingly, do so joyfully, and do so for your honor and for your glory, not to serve our own ends or our own desires or purposes. So teach us, help us, correct us where we are wrong (including me), and point us in the right path. We want to be your faithful servants. We cannot do it in our own strength, so grant us your Spirit, oh Lord, again, to will and to do according to your good pleasure. We pray it in Jesus' name, amen.

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