

Worshiping the Living God
 Exodus 20:4-6
 Tampa Covenant Church
 14 June 2026

Proposition: Because God alone is worthy of our worship, we must worship him according to his self-revelation rather than according to our selfish wills and desires.

FCF: Our tendency is to reshape God according to our own image rather than receive him as he has revealed himself.

RHF: Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God and through his person and work we have been restored to true worship and are being renewed in his likeness.

(#1) Introduction:

This is the third week of our series entitled, *The Ten Commandments and the Gospel of Grace*. We've already looked at the prologue and discovered that since the LORD was Israel's God who brought them out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; per the first commandment, they were to have no other gods before him. And now in the second commandment, God teaches his people that we keep covenant loyalty with him by worshiping him according to his self-revelation rather than our own selfish wills and desires. So a prohibition is forthcoming.

If we pause and take inventory of our spiritual lives this morning perhaps we can agree there's something in all of us that's constantly tempted to trust in other things over God for our security, significance and comfort. Even after experiencing God's grace, there's still that tug on our hearts to live our lives trusting in the things we can see and control; over trusting in the true and living God who we cannot see nor control. And when we succumb to that temptation, we're exchanging the wonder of our creator with something in the created order. And church this is the danger of idolatry. So this morning we'll look at this prohibition, examine the faulty exchange that takes place in all of our hearts, and conclude with the realization of God's covenant promise to us.

The Prohibition: *Making idols for the expressed use of worship (vv.4-5a)*

(#2 Blank) At first glance, we don't see much difference between the first and second commandment. The first commandment calls for absolute covenant loyalty; "*You shall have no other gods before me.*" Meaning, God is to be the sole object of our worship and devotion. And the Second Commandment addresses how we worship the one true God. Because if God is to be the sole object of our worship, then he alone has the right to determine how he's to be worshiped.¹ **(#3)** So we look at this commandment and acknowledge the prohibition, "*You shall not make for yourself a carved image or the likeness of anything that is in heaven above or the earth beneath or that is in the water beneath the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them,*"

Now, we may walk away saying to ourselves this commandment forbids the making of any and all images. But there is nothing explicitly written in scripture that suggests the making of images is always wrong.²

(#4) In Ex. 25, God instructed Moses to make two golden cherubim for the mercy seat. These images symbolized the Garden of Eden, recalling the cherubim who guarded the entrance after Adam and Eve

were expelled. God didn't intend for these kinds of images to be objects of worship and Israel never bowed to them. They were symbols intended to teach and remind Israel of God's gracious dealings with them and serve as representations of his heavenly dwelling. So the commandment isn't forbidding all artistic (#5) representations.³ But the commandment is teaching us that we're forbidden from making images for the purpose of bowing down to them and serving them. (#6) The word translated "*carved image*" always refers to an image used for idolatrous purposes. So God is forbidding the use of carved images or the likeness of anything in creation to serve as representations of himself or of false gods in worship. Therefore God's people must not worship him through images of their own making but according to his self-revelation. Why is this?

We look at Deut 4, and Moses the (#7) reminds the people in v.15 to watch themselves carefully because *they saw no form on the day the LORD spoke to them at Horeb from the fire*. Now, although the people saw no form; they heard the LORD's voice. Sure, he could've provided them a material representation but he chose instead to reveal himself through his Word. Thus, God's people then and now are called to worship him according to his self-revelation. And this is important because if we try to contain our infinite God; through an image in worship then we're misrepresenting who he is.

So each Lord's Day, we don't gather to worship God through an image; rather we gather to worship him according to his word. Today, we joined with the (#8) psalmist in extolling God as our King, declaring his unsearchable greatness, commending his mighty acts to the next generation, meditating on the glorious splendor of his majesty, and proclaiming his abundant goodness. Therefore, true worship of our living God entails standing in awe of the wonder and majesty of his greatness. And so the LORD is clear, You shall not make images for the purpose of worshiping them or even worshiping me through them. And here in the back (#9) half of v.5, he tells us why: "*For I the LORD your God am a jealous God.*" This leads to our second consideration....the (#10) faulty exchange.

The Faulty Exchange: *Exchanging the truth about God for a lie (v.5b)*

When we hear the word *jealous*, we often think of an insecure person who's fearful of losing someone they love to another. But that's not God's character. (#11 Blank) Remember, Israel is his treasured possession and in the context of a covenant relationship; his jealousy points to the intensity of his covenant love.⁴ Therefore, his people giving their hearts to another wouldn't provoke insecurity but holy jealousy because he wants the absolute best for them. Nowhere in scripture do we see this more clearly than in Ex. 32. (#12) Moses is on the mountain receiving the law and the people are growing restless because of his delay. So they say to Aaron, "*make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.*" And we know rest of the story, Aaron calls for all their gold jewelry and makes a golden calf.

Now, Aaron wasn't introducing another god. The calf was intended to represent the LORD himself. (#13) And when the deed is done, they say "*These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.*" Next, Aaron builds an altar and proclaims, "*Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD.*" (#14 Blank) What has Aaron done? He's led the people in exchanging the invisible God for a tangible representation of their own making. Church, this is the essence of idolatry. Because something of the sanctity of God has been attached to the image itself; thus the distinction between the creator and the created order has

collapsed.⁵ Even if they grasped that the calf wasn't God himself; in their minds it could be manipulated through their false worship in serving their selfish wills and desires.⁶

We turn to Rom 1, and Paul sheds more light (#15) on this tragic exchange how, *Humanity exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling created things; mortal man, birds, animals and creeping things. God gives them over... to the lusts of their hearts, to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies... Because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the creator.*" Herein lies the heartbreak of idolatry. (#16 Blank) A holy God created us in his image so that we might reflect his glory but idolatry reverses that order. Instead of reflecting God's glory, we seek to remake him in our own image. Rather than trusting him for our security, significance, and comfort, we look to created things. And this exchange never begins with behavior; it starts in the heart. Before Israel ever bowed the knee, the faulty exchange had already taken place in their hearts. Trusting in something of their own making and choosing over the living God.

And the same is true of us. When we exchange our ultimate trust in the living God for something of our own making and choosing; we've succumbed to the folly of idolatry. And we may think we're in control. We've designed this "god"; therefore, it's tailor made to suite our wants, needs and desires. But the truth is whatever we've put our ultimate trust in for our security, significance and comfort becomes our master. And it never delivers what it promises because it was never designed to bear the weight of our expectations or satisfy our deepest longings.

Many of us are familiar with Calvin's (#17) famous statement that, "*man's nature, is a perpetual factory of idols.*"⁷ So we name the idol; it could even be a good thing but when we place our ultimate trust in it; it becomes a bad thing for us. And whatever it is, it will always leave us desperate and wanting. (#18 Blank) If we worship at the altar of perfection, we become enslaved to perfectionism...and what happens when we fail? We're crushed under the weight of our unrealistic expectations. If we worship at the altar of approval, we become addicted to being validated by others. We put out a post on social media then check and recheck if people simply liked it or did they love it. And we obsess over what they think about us. If we worship at the altar of success, we become addicted to ambition, always striving to achieve out fear that someone's striving a little harder than we are. And we grow envious of others at the mere appearance of their seeming success. And in the end; the very things we look to for security, significance and comfort, simply (#19) bind us in chains. As G. K. Beale said, "*We resemble what we revere, either for ruin or restoration.*"⁸ In other words, all of us have been created to be reflecting beings and we'll reflect whatever we're ultimately committed to, whether it's the true and living God (restoration) or something else in the created order (ruin). But thanks be to God this isn't the end of the story... (#20) And this leads us to our final consideration; the realization of God's covenant promise.

The Covenant Promise: *Jesus Christ as the image of the invisible God to us (v.6)*

In v.6, the LORD's final word isn't one of judgment but a promise of grace and mercy. Whereas he will punish those who persist in sin to the third and fourth generation; he also promises to *show steadfast love to thousands of generations of those who love him and keep his commandments*. The point is not to calculate the ratio between God's justice and his mercy. Rather, the point is marvel at the far-reaching extent of his covenant love for those who love him and keep his commandments. To which none of us can

attest to doing perfectly in our lives. In the aftermath of the golden calf, Moses returned to the mount seeking to atone for the people's sin. (#21) He pleaded with the LORD to forgive their sin. He even asked that his name be blotted out of the book God has written. God responded that those who've sinned will be blotted out. Moses was the divinely ordained mediator but he couldn't atone for Israel's sin. He may have been their leader but he was capable of being their redeemer.⁹

(#22) And so the covenant promise in v.6, has to point a greater mediator, one who perfectly embodied the condition of loving God and keeping his commandments. Jesus Christ fulfilled the condition perfectly; where Israel failed and where we oftentimes fail; he's the only one who could truly say, *"I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart."* Listen to Paul's (#23) declaration in Col 1, *"He is the image of the invisible God,"* Meaning, Jesus is the living image and likeness of the invisible God.¹⁰ Therefore, he's the very realization of God's steadfast love poured out on his people. (#24) There is no other. Paul continues, *"for by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible.."* He is before all things and in him all things hold together. And Paul brings it all home in v.19, *"For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell."*

Brothers and sisters, this is the good news of the gospel that we no longer have to trust in the empty promises of idols for our security, significance and comfort because we've been redeemed from that futile way of living. (#25 Blank) Through Christ's death and resurrection, we've been forgiven, the enslaving power of sin is broken and we've been reconciled to God; therefore, we are free. Free to worship the living and true God in the manner he prescribes. And that means, we don't worship him in order to get something from him but out of sheer joy and gratitude as beloved family members in his household.

Practically speaking, we recognize that perfection is found in Christ alone. Therefore, we can rest knowing that life is not a stage calling for our best performance but a gift to be lived in humble response to God's grace. Our standing before God doesn't depend on our ability to get everything right but on Christ, who got everything right on our behalf. We also recognize the approval we long for has already been secured in Christ. Therefore, we no longer have to live for the validation of others or measure our worth by their acceptance. The verdict has been rendered. In Christ, we're loved and accepted because we're forgiven. Thus, we can serve others with pure motives. And we learn to put success in its proper place. Every achievement eventually fades, and every milestone gives way to another. But in Christ, we can work diligently without making success our savior. Because we already have a Savior who successfully passed through the heavens and is now seated at the right hand of God; reigning and ruling over all of creation and also in our hearts.

Church the moment we're tempted to worship at these altars or others... whatever that may look like in our lives. It's in that very moment, we must see our need for Christ and turn from what those things promise and run to him. This is worship! It is saying "no" to the false saviors that compete for our hearts and saying "yes" to the one who's already given himself for us. And as we behold him by faith, we're being transformed more and more into his image, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion:

Church, these are not techniques for becoming the best version of ourselves or somehow attaining super-Christian status. Rather, they're the fruits of our freedom in Christ. Therefore, may our lives be characterized by ever turning from those things calling for our ultimate trust and be ever turning to Christ in faith because we belong to him. And may our hearts be filled with awe struck wonder as we daily meditate, ponder and reflect on the greatness of God's **grace toward us (#26)**. And so we join with the song writer in saying, *"I know not why God's wondrous grace To me He hath made known, Nor why, unworthy, Christ in love, Redeemed me for His own. But I know Whom I have believed, And am persuaded that He is able To keep that which I've committed Unto Him against that day."* Amen.

-
- ¹ James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith: A Comprehensive & Readable Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 229.
- ² John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life, A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 451–452.
- ³ Ibid, 452.
- ⁴ Joyce G. Baldwin, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi: An Introduction and Commentary, vol. 28, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1972), 108.
- ⁵ Frame, 454.
- ⁶ Laura Brenneman, Brad D. Schantz, and Ben C. Ollenburger, *Struggles for Shalom: Peace and Violence across the Testaments* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2014), Logos Software.
- ⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1 & 2, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 108.
- ⁸ G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 22.
- ⁹ Richard Lints, *Identity and Idolatry: The Image of God and Its Inversion*, ed. D. A. Carson, vol. 36, New Studies in Biblical Theology (England; Downers Grove, IL: Apollos; InterVarsity Press, 2015), 93.
- ¹⁰ εἰκῶν (*eikōn*), 1. image, portrait (Mt 22:20); 2. likeness, having the same form as something else (1Co 15:49); 3. LN 58.61 representation, pattern (Heb 10:1)... that which has the same form as something. else (not a crafted object as in 1 above), *living image*.