

I. Quotes

- A. The opposite of Christianity is not atheism, it's idolatry, Peter Kreeft.
- B. No religion is ever greater than its idea of God. A.W. Tozer.
- C. God created us in his image and we've been trying to return the favor ever since. Voltaire.

II. Intro

- A. One of my earliest memories is of getting in trouble because I let a neighbor kid - Jerry Stoffer - draw a picture of God on our garage floor.
- B. Jerry was a couple years older than I was and he and his older brother Jim used to beat me up and make me cry whenever they got bored - which was often. But there were a few times when they wanted something - and during one of those times Jerry and I ended up playing in the garage of my house. And Jerry found my dad's new permanent marker, which was on the work bench - high out of reach - and I knew that I was not supposed to touch it. But Jerry jumped up there, got a hold of it and proceeded to draw a picture - a pretty big picture, you might even call it a mural - on the newly painted garage floor. And it was a picture of God.
- C. I remember all this quite clearly for a couple of reasons: First, I got in big trouble. Fortunately, the drawing was good enough that my parents could tell I hadn't done it. Secondly, I remember the picture because I was scared to step on it. When we asked the people of Chicago what they thought people worshipped they said: themselves, money, social media and "wrong things." No one said, a "drawing on a garage floor," but amazingly, at the age of four, I was already a bit of an idolater. I showed this curious and easily misguided tendency to declare something holy and then worship it.
- D. Now to that end I am not alone. Making idols is part of our nature.¹ We need meaning to live, and if we are not gaining meaning from God, we look elsewhere - almost always to good things. We ascribe meaning and value to something beyond the meaning and value it should have. We promote it beyond its station. We give the honor due to the creator to some aspect of the creation.
- E. This morning we are continuing our series on the ten commandments by looking at commandment number two. Our goal is to promote some discussions - in families, small groups, car pools and break rooms, over some very important questions.

III. By way of quick review and overview:

- A. Two weeks ago, I argued that the Ten Commandments were a wonderful, gracious gift from a God who loved us and wants us to thrive. They are not a random list of his preferences, nor are they a list of restrictions designed to ruin our day. They are aspects of his character that are baked into the world he created. They are descriptions of the way things ultimately work. We do not break them, we break ourselves against them. Think of the Ten Commandments as headlights to help you drive in the dark.
- B. Last week, with the first commandment, I argued: 1) we all have a god (someone or something that is first in our life, we all worship something; 2) this god shapes us; 3) we often do not realize exactly who or what we are worshipping, and 4) life only ultimately works if God is our god. We need to worship the one true God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit.²

¹ We are so naturally prone to idolatry that John Calvin called us *fabricum idolarum* (man the idol maker).

² I went on to say: God is for us. The grand positive behind the first commandment is that there is an all-powerful, all-knowing, Holy, majestic creator. And He loves you and wants you to lean in.

C. The second commandment reads: **You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.**

D. My guess is, you hear this - “Don’t make any idols? Don’t bow down and worship them?” and you think, “No problems here. There are no statues in my house. No shrines. I saw some idols when I was in India – the taxi driver had the little Ganesh doll on his dash board. Or, I saw some idols in a family shrine in Japan, or when we visited the Mayan ruins in Mexico. But I’ve never bowed in front of any little carvings. I may be breaking most of the other commandments, but on this one I’m OK.”

E. In fact, if I were to give you a clean sheet of paper and invite you to come up with the ten rules you think are most important for you, idolatry wouldn’t make it on there.

F. My guess is you momentarily feel OK about this one. Then at some point you think, “It can’t be that easy. There has to be more to it than that. I don’t personally know anybody who’s praying to a carving. Woodruff is setting me up. I’m probably breaking this somehow.”

G. If some of you are still feeling bullet proof, let me note: not only was there never a period in Israel’s history when the Jews were free from idolatry,³ but idolatry is arguably the most common topic in the Bible because it is such a universal problem.

H. And the bad news is not just that we are all guilty of violating this, but it’s not a small offense.

IV. Exodus 20. **You shall not make for yourself an idol**

A. The word in the KJV was *graven image*. This is a pretty literal translation of the Hebrew term *pesel* and the Greek term *eikon*. Most modern translations have moved away from any reference to a statue towards the term idol because the context makes it clear that the problem is not limited to carvings. Both a wrong view of God, or some type of image of the right god, is trouble.

B. What is an idol? Anything we pursue over god. Anything we love more than God. Any aspect of creation we treat as god.⁴ An idol is anything, most likely a good – a marriage, the mountains, pleasure, a business – that we elevate above its natural importance or rank. We give it an undeserved role in shaping our identity or influencing our life.⁵ An idol is anything we look to for meaning it’s not able to provide.⁶

³ This isn’t just an Old Testament problem. We find Paul writing against it in Romans 1 and speaking against it in Acts 17 and Acts 19.

⁴ There is clearly overlap between the first and second commandment, but there is some difference. The first commandment focuses on worshipping the wrong gods, while the second also focuses on worshipping the right god in the wrong way.

⁵ I suspect this definition comes from Keller, but can’t confirm.

⁶ Augustine described an idol as anything we love more than god. Keller notes that idols are seldom bad things. In fact, we are far more tempted to make idols of God’s very best gifts. “The greater the good, the more likely we are to expect that it can satisfy our deepest needs and hopes. Anything can serve as a counterfeit god, especially the very best things in life.” We might think of idols as the ultimate example of the Peter Principle. They are promoted until they are incompetent. In Isaiah we read about the people fleeing from an attack on Babylon and the people have to carry the idols. They are not just worthless, they are a burden. The real God does not need our protection. And he is not a burden – his yoke is easy and the burden is light.

C. Perhaps the easiest way to figure out what idols you have is not to ask, “What am I living for?” That might work. Look at what you daydream about, spend money effortlessly on, that kind of thing.

D. But a better way to identify an idol is, “what is my biggest fear? What is unthinkable to me?” We can live without good things. But we cannot live without ultimate things. They cannot be replaced. And if we have promoted a good thing to an ultimate thing, our life becomes unthinkable without it.⁷

V. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.

A. Some say this refers to all art. No. It does refer to images of God the Father, images of the Holy Spirit and portrayals of heaven. But in other sections in Exodus we see that God instructs the Jews to decorate the tabernacle with images of animals and angels.⁸

VI. You shall not bow down to them or worship them.

A. Just so you know, this passage is part of what led to a big controversy about a thousand years ago. In the 8th century some things were set in motion that led to the Great Schism in 1054. This was the break between what we now call the Orthodox church – Orthodox with a large “O” – which was based in the East and the Western church.

B. There was, and is, a lot of overlap between these branches. They both organize around Jesus and affirm the first four creeds. But there was a variety of political and a few religious reasons for the split. And one of the latter was the use of icons - paintings that the Orthodox said could be aids in worship, windows into the spiritual world, and they wanted them (while not worshipped) to be venerated.⁹ The Western church said, “these are not *icons* they are *idols* and they violate the 2nd commandment.”¹⁰

C. Eventually Emperor Leo III orders the destruction of all icons throughout his empire, which sets off a big controversy which is part of what leads to the Great Schism.

⁷ God can never be lost, so we do not need to worry about that. // Problem is imagination is as corrupt as any other part of us. It can be great if filled with truth. We need truth to shape imagination not the other way. We cannot let imagination shape truth.

⁸ Note: Muslims have a similar “ban,” which is part of the reason they were so offended by cartoons of Mohammad.

⁹ Leontius of Neapolis saw images of Christ as an extension of the incarnation.

¹⁰ In 787 John of Damascus led the Eastern Orthodox church to declare that icons – special pictures of Jesus and the saints – were not only OK but that they were to be used in Christian worship. The Western church – which would eventually become both the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches – said that these icons were a violation of the second commandment. When you read the documents written by John of Damascus you see that he is very careful to state these icons are not to be worshipped. But he advances the idea that they are to be venerated, which means that they are to be held in special respect both because they are dedicated to God and because they are permeated with spiritual energies. And others who follow will also talk about them being a channel through which divine blessings and healings come.

VII. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

A. There are two things there that may alarm you. The first is that God is jealous. We generally do not think of jealousy as a good thing. It suggests people who are envious of things they do not have. But there is a different angle to it. For instance, I am jealous of my wife's affection, and not willing to share. In a similar, healthy way, God is jealous of our worship. He should be reserved for him and him alone.

B. The second is the threat. "for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Me." You do not find threats with other commandments. You don't find it with stealing, or lying, or even murder. Understand, it's not that God goes out of His way to persecute the great grandkids for the mistakes of their parent's parents. The Bible clearly develops the theme of individual responsibility. But ideas have consequences – and ideas about God have big consequences. And to the extent that we miss it here - and to the extent that we raise our children in error - we pass down big trouble. I think a better word for punish is consequences.

VIII. OK, so, let's step back and think about what God is saying here.¹¹ What can we learn? What should we understand? My read through Exodus suggests we want a god we can control or that at least gives us the illusion of control. We want a god we can understand. We want a god who doesn't scare or upset us. All of which leads us to idolatry (whether the idols is physical or mental). We see this idea developed in several ways in Exodus:

A. We see it in Exodus 14 when the people respond negatively to God letting them listen in to his conversation with Moses. When God prepared Moses to receive the Ten Commandments He told him that He would speak to Him in front of everyone. And the people were coached on how to prepare to listen to the giving of the law. Special instructions were given so that no one would actually be on the mountain when God came down to speak to Moses. And special instructions were given to be sure that the people were clean – that they had consecrated themselves for this big event. The punishment for going on the mountain or not being consecrated was to die. And then on the third day Moses brought the people out of their camp and to the base of Mount Sinai to meet God. And it was a dark and stormy morning. And supernatural trumpets were blowing. And God came to the top of the mountain in fire. And the smoke filled the place. And God spoke in thunder. And the sum total of this event was that the people were terrified. And they said they never wanted to do that again.

B. We get another glimpse of this in Exodus 32, when Moses goes back up to the mountain, is there a long time. The people panic, they say "he's dead," so they turn to Aaron and say, "Make us a god." And so Aaron asks for all of their gold, melts it down and gives them back ... a cow.

1. There are parts of the Bible that people find hard to believe. I no longer struggle to accept God creating the world or Jesus healing the sick or walking on water. But there are times when I cannot believe the choices that the people make, and this is one of them.

¹¹ I realized this week that I feel the same way about a study of idols as I do about a study of the Sermon on the Mount – any thoughtful look at this topic is going to undo me. I am going to realize things about myself I'd rather not see.

2. But please understand this about them so you can understand the same thing about you and me. I believe: 1) the Jews still wanted a god; and 2) they still wanted Aaron to be their priest; and 3) I further believe that Aaron did not think he was coming up with a new god. He was simply giving them a representative of the god who delivered them from Egypt.¹² Just a bit smaller, a bit less scary, a bit less holy and a bit more visible.

C. Men and women, what we want is a god we can understand and control. What we want is was some kind of very powerful good luck charm that makes our life easier – but who doesn't make many demands. We want God on our terms, not His.¹³

1. With very few exceptions even those people from ancient times and primitive cultures didn't start out thinking they were just worshipping a carved block of wood or stone. They thought they were worshipping something beyond that. The spirit that inhabited carving. There was always a deity behind the rock; or a totem behind the totem pole. They didn't believe that they were praying to something that they just created.

2. But in doing this – in using this visual aid they are either worshipping the wrong God or, in some cases, worshipping the right God in the wrong way.

D. But that is not the way it works. God doesn't come on our terms. He comes on His. And that is at the heart of the second commandment. He is who He is, not who we want him to be, not like we think him to be. Our image of God needs to be shaped by God's revelation of himself.

E. And lest you think you accept God as He is, we violate the second commandment every-time we say, "I just can't believe in a God who" ... fill in the blank (allows people to suffer in a storm like Florence, allows anyone to go to hell, says you can't sleep with whomever you want or... any of the thirty other things about God that we do not like.

F. The things that bother us now are not necessarily the things that bothered people in the past. But there are always things about God we may not like. The point is, God is who God is. And the second commandment is telling us that our view of God needs to conform to his revelation of himself.

G. This only makes sense. Last week I noted that we all discover that the person we married is not the person we think we married. Well, as we come to understand who we actually married, we need to embrace that person.

1. If a woman said, "I am married to Norm, but I like to think of my husband as a 30 year old former Navy Seal named Dante who now is a professional surfer and an expert on French wine with a net worth of \$10M dollars. Norm is none of those things. He's 52 and he works in accounting, but I like to think of him as something different."

2. Well, that marriage is in trouble. Norm is not happy. In a like manner, God is not going to sit back while we say, "I prefer to think of God like this..." We do not get to define our spouse, nor do we get to define God.

¹² F. B. Meyer writes: Had anyone suggested that Israel would apostatize from the God of Abraham, they would have stoned him to death. They had no desire to break the first commandment and to have other Gods before God, but they found the demand of the second commandment too vigorous. They must have an image, a visible representation, an idol.

¹³ By the way, this is not a new thing. Fifty years ago, J.B. Phillips wrote a book called, *Your God is Too Small*, in which he looked at a number of popular image of God: resident policeman, grand old man, God the managing director, God the Good Luck Charm. He argued, rightly, that none of these come close.

H. As it turns out, God is not safe: He is not tame; He is not always understandable; He is not a good-luck charm we can keep in our pocket and we do not get to pick and choose God's attributes.

I. Let me say it this way: you should expect to be surprised and confused by God from time to time. If you are not, you are not in a personal relationship with the God who is, you simply have your own golden calf.

J. The second commandment prohibits holding thoughts about God that are not true. Of entertaining a picture of Him that isn't complete. We may never pray to a stick or a stone statue. But we break the second commandment whenever we try to change God from who He is to who we'd like Him to be.

K. I do not believe the Jews thought they were serving another god. In fact, I suspect that if anyone had suggested to them that they sell out on the God of Abraham, they would have turned and stoned him. They just wanted God on their terms. They wanted Him in a manageable size.

IX. Which set up Three Reasons God is Against Idols.¹⁴

A. The first is because our idols will always be too small, too safe, too tame, too incomplete.¹⁵ Our idols will be projections of our own biases and likes.¹⁶ And they will conceal more than they reveal.¹⁷

B. Second: Idols will make us small. We will never rise above our image of God, so having a smaller view of god limits us.

1. It's not just that we have been made in God's image and should not stoop to bear the image of other things. And it's not just that idols fail to deliver because they have no ability to deliver, idols end up as cruel task masters. They are like addictions. Over time they take more and more while delivering less and less.

2. I was thinking of that again this week as it relates to the idol of money – which is common around her. I realized, virtually everyone I know is rich – not everyone. But globally, if you make \$25K you are in the top two percent of the world's wealth; \$50K – the top .3 percent and \$100K the top .08 percent. Everyone I know is rich but almost no one who is rich thinks they are rich. Because it is the nature of an idol to never be able to satisfy.

C. The third reason we do not need idols is because we already have the perfect image of God – Jesus Christ.

1. God has made himself visible. We see that in Hebrews, where we are told that Jesus is **the radiance of God's glory and the exact imprint of His being.**

2. We also get this in Col. 1:15, which reads: **The Son is the image of the invisible God.** Jesus is the icon of the invisible God. We do not need an idol. We have a vivid picture of God in Christ.

¹⁴ I wonder if there is a third reason. In *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Postman writes about the limitations of images as opposed to words. He argues that they are limiting in themselves and lead us in the wrong direction.

¹⁵ Do you picture of God, smiling or frowning? Has to be one or the other

¹⁶ Tom Skinner – who grew up in Harlem – didn't become a Christian growing up b/c pictures of Jesus he saw in Sunday school should a man who "wouldn't last one hour in my neighborhood."

¹⁷ The golden calf gave a picture of God's strength. But not the purity of God. Nor does it show personality of God

3. Most people look past Jesus because they do not understand Jesus. They have not really read. They think of him as a great person, a good teacher, a wise person on spiritual things and a moral reformer. But that is about it. In so many ways, people think Jesus is like them – with the same political views and interests, Jesus is just a bit nicer. They turn Jesus into a caricature of himself.

4. I lead a seeker study, and one of the things I can count on is that most people are going to be shocked about some of the most basic claims Jesus makes.

5. We do not need any idols, we simply need to let the Bible, which uses lots of different images, stories and descriptions of God - king, servant, Father, Husband, Judge, Comforter, Shepherd, Lamb, Fortress, Counselor and so on – shape who God is.

X. My challenge to you

A. Because the only hope we have of expelling false gods is by loving the true God, focus on the Word of God incarnate (Jesus) and the Word of God Written (The Bible).

B. And my challenge to you is that you make certain that you are worshipping Him in spirit and in truth.

C. If we stop making God into our likeness, he can start to make us in his image