

## ***no images of God, except***

### **Let's pray.**

This morning we're going to explore **the power of images**.

Do you ever think about how much you are affected by **images**?

It's worth considering – we live in an **image-saturated, image-driven** culture.

Even just a hundred years ago, the western world was still predominantly a **word-based** society. Words dominated Western culture, but now images are *everything – and everywhere*.

All I have to do is look around my office to see the profound shift that's happened in the last century. Even just the last few decades.

I've got a great archive of **Leadership Journal** (a journal for pastors and Christian leaders), and in the last 20 years the **covers** went from being **all text**, to **mostly words** with a little image, to being **almost entirely** about the image (you only notice the words after you see the image).

**And they've done this because this is how we function now – we are an image-based, image-saturated, image-driven** society.

And not without impact, right!

***Do you ever think about how much you are impacted by images? How much they affect you?***

Consider the image on the screen. It's a simple image – and yet it says so much – and evokes so much.

I'm sure I'd have to say a lot of words to equal the impact of this one image.

Images **impact** us so deeply. We don't just see them. They **move** us, **affect** us, **grip** us – and **form us**.

***They can even transform us.***

And they are **everywhere** – especially these days. **Everywhere** we look, we are confronted by images. Images that shape us, much more than we could ever grasp.

And this isn't just a secular world reality. Images **play a huge role in** all religions, in our perception of God or the gods, & how we live & worship.

**We don't think about this that much** - cause we don't live in an "overtly" religious society, but travel the world, or visit a Buddhist or Hindu **temple in town**, or step back into other times and places in history, including biblical history, and everywhere you look you will be confronted with **images of the gods** – and the power of those images to shape people's lives, not just their worship.

**So, let me ask you: **when you imagine God**, what image or images come to mind?**

**And HOLD that THOUGHT** – cause everything we're gonna talk about today comes down to this...

Have you ever wondered about the fact that we don't have an image, a picture or a statue of God up front at Lambrick?

Or that most Christian churches do not have images or statues of God up front (or anywhere for that matter)?

And that if you were to visit a **Jewish** synagogue, you would never see a picture, or an image, or a statue of God?

*We're used to this – in the Christian or post-Christian west. **But this is not the norm.** Not globally, not historically. Including today.*

Step into a Hindu or a Buddhist temple, and **the first thing you** will see is **an idol** – an image, a statue of god or the gods, or many images or many statues of god or the gods – of Buddha, Vishnu, Shiva, Brahma.

Idols – that is, **images made to represent god or the gods** – play a **central** role in the worship of almost every religion in the world in history.

Were we to go back to the time of Israel's enslavement **in Egypt** (as we study in the opening chapters of the book of Exodus), everywhere we'd look **we'd see idols**, images, statues that represent the gods of the Egyptians... Idols, statues made *in the image of the gods*.

We'd **see the sun-god Amon-Re**. We'd see the crop goddess, **Isis**. We'd see the fertility goddess, **Afis, depicted** as a bull. And another fertility god, **Heqt**, portrayed as a frog's head. And on and on...

Idolatry – that is, images made to represent the gods – has always been intimately involved in the worship of the gods.

**But not so for Israel, and not so for us** (those of us who follow Jesus).

### **Why?**

Because of **Exodus 20:4-6** - the **2nd of the 10 Commandments**.

Let me read it for us. I'll start in verse 1.

**And God spoke all these words:**

*"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.*

*You shall have no other gods before me.*

**You shall not make** *for yourself an image in the form [or an idol in the likeness] 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 parents 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."* (NIV)

**You shall not make for yourself** *an image in the form of anything.*

There's a lot here to talk about, lots of questions that this passage stirs up. So, let's start at the beginning with **what this command means – and what it doesn't mean.**

So, let me say right from the start that contrary to how **some** Jewish and Christian groups, and the majority of the Muslim world, interpret the second commandment, it was not and is not **an outright ban on all images**. You don't need to run home and burn all of your paintings and

photographs and pencil drawings and doodles, and smash all of your woodcarvings or old sports trophies, and melt your Barbie toothbrush or Donald Trump bobble-heads. No!

On its own, it is **understandable** to interpret the 2nd commandment as being **a ban on all image-making**. "*You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of **anything** in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.*" Seems pretty straightforward and all-encompassing. And to be honest, when I first studied this, my thoughts ran in that direction.

But all you have to do is turn ahead a few chapters (**Ex 25 & Ex 35f**) where God gives instructions for the building of the Tabernacle and there we find **God Himself** instructing the Israelites to decorate the Temple and its furnishings **with all sorts of images in the form of things in the heavens above and the earth beneath** (cherubim, almond flowers with buds and blossoms, and more).

Clearly, with the second commandment, God is not **outlawing** all **image-making**. This is where it's important that we take to heart **the whole** of God's commandment here.

As v.5 reveals, the second commandment relates to **imagery in worship**. But more than that, it is a ban on creating images **to represent God**, as the other nations did to represent their gods.

***That's the heart of this commandment.***

Not only was Israel to have no other gods before Him (that is, to **not** worship the gods of the nations around them), but they were **not** to worship the LORD their God **the same way** that the other nations worshipped.

They were not to make idols to represent their God. They were not to involve any images or representation of the LORD their God in their worship.

**Why?** Well God tells us. The end of v.5f reads,

*"For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents 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."*

What are we to make of this - God being a **jealous God**, who punishes – or *visits the iniquity of the fathers* on their children?

At first glance [and maybe second], it seems cruel and grossly unfair.

***Until we remember or realize the true cruelty and horrific destruction of idolatry – of worshipping a lie or even a half-truth about God... which Israel experienced firsthand in Egypt.***

As we mentioned the last two Sundays, we need to **always** make sure we hear this commandment in the light of what God has already said in **Exodus 20:2** – the preface of all of the commandments.

*"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery."*

We need to **always** have this verse in our **thoughts** as we approach **any and all** of the commandments – to anchor us in the confidence that each and every commandment flows **out of God's saving love** for Israel

(and for all) – a God who seeks to save us from the oppression of idolatry. We can trust then that God is not about to unfairly or cruelly treat Israel (or us). **He wants what is best for Israel – and for all...**

Secondly, it's important to understand that the word "**jealous**" here is a word used **uniquely** in the Bible **for God**. There are other words in the Bible that describe **human jealousy**, but not the word that is used **here**. God's jealousy is not to be compared to our jealousy. It's not a **defect** in His character. The God of Exodus is not insecure.

Rather, as J.I. Packer, a wise Christian theologian explains,

**"In the Bible,** *God's jealousy is His zeal to maintain His own glory.*"

Which could sound like a selfish thing, but when we understand it, I think we'll see that it's not. *It's actually the opposite!* Honestly, the more I understand this, the more **I'm thankful that God is a jealous God!**

**He loves us too much not to be!**

"God's jealousy is His zeal to maintain His own glory."

Which is to say, that He is zealous – He is **passionately concerned** that you and I would not have a false or distorted view of Him; that our image or perception or knowledge of GOD would not fall short of His glory – because, as we've talked about before, **a false view of God will destroy us.**

Think about it. Say your father was **perfect**. The perfect Dad: full of love for your mom and you, the wisest man, the kindest man, totally trustworthy and patient, perfectly just and totally compassionate.

But here's the thing: It doesn't matter how incredible your dad could be, if you **perceived** him to be **far less** than he is... If you **perceived, believe** him to be cruel, unjust, untrustworthy, indifferent, and volatile, **you would be a shell of yourself**. You would be incredibly bent out of shape – full of fear and self-loathing, insecurity and anger.

### ***All the more so with God...***

Again and again, God shows Himself to be a God worthy of Israel's love and trust, worship and devotion... A God who was and is utterly loving and good, merciful and just, compassionate and faithful.

And because of this, God was and is **passionate concerned** that their perception of Him would **never** be distorted – because God knew (and knows) that ***the degree to which our image*** or perception of God is distorted, *our humanity will be distorted*.

If we perceive God to be anything less than the glorious God that He is... If we perceive Him to be anything other than totally and utterly good and faithful, trustworthy and merciful, just and compassionate, then we have a false view of God – ***and this will oppress us***. It will ruin us. And it will lead us to oppress and ruin others. As the false gods of the Egyptians oppressed them and others...

Which, I think, helps us see why **God's jealousy**, His zeal, his relentless pursuit of His own glory – for you and I to know and live in the truth of God – is not an expression of His cruelty. It's actually an expression of **His love... His goodness...**

He knows that **where** our image or perception of Him goes awry, our lives go awry. And **the consequences will be reaped** not only by ourselves, but by our children and our children's children – to the third and fourth generation.

As one commentator distills this: "the evil people do... plainly does not die with them but infects succeeding generations" (Holbert, 31).

Some of us know this by experience.

Many of us are reaping what our parents or others have sown.

Simply put: sin rarely impacts just the individual. **Three or four generations is a pretty honest description of the aftermath.**

And because of this – because God knows this and loves us – He **commands Israel (and us) to not only** have no other gods before Him, but also, to not make any images or idols to represent Him. He's so serious about this that He warns us that our false worship will wreak havoc not just in our own lives, but our children – down to our great-grandchildren...

**Why? What's the big deal?** As long as we aren't worshipping other gods, what's wrong with an image or an idol of **the One True God?**

Because – as I'm sure we all can easily grasp – **no created thing, no image we could ever create could ever fully and rightly represent the one true God. *No created thing could ever truly represent the one true God.***

It would always, in some way, be **false**.

It would always, in some way, **distort, obscure** or **misrepresent** God – both to us and to others. It would always, in some way, **dishonor** God, because it would **fall short of His glory**.

And consequently, it would mislead men and women, and ultimately, oppress them. For, as we've said again and again, when our image or perception of God is distorted, we ourselves end up distorted.

**Exodus 32**, Israel's golden-calf episode, is a sad example of this.

In **Exodus 24**, we read that Israel had been told all of the LORD's words and laws (including the 10 Commandments), and they had responded with one voice, saying, "**Everything the LORD has said we will do.**" And with this, Moses ratified the covenant between the LORD and Israel, and then He went up on the mountain to meet with God for 40 days and nights.

And in Exodus 32 we're told that, after a while the people got impatient. And "**they gathered around Aaron** and said, "Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him." (v.1)

So, (v.4) Aaron called for all of their jewelry and "**made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf**" – just like they'd seen in Egypt.

And the people said, "**These are your gods** [this is your god], Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt."

Do you hear the lie there? Who brought Israel out of Egypt?

**Yahweh did! Not some golden calf.**

And the next day they gathered to worshipped before the idol. We're told, (v.6) "**The people rose early** and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry."

**Their worship descended into a drunken orgy!!!**

*They embraced an image of God that was a distortion and perversion of God's true character, and they ended up distorted and perverted themselves. They embraced an image of God that did not and could not represent anything of God's moral character, and they ended up themselves lacking any and all moral character.*

Idolatry – whether the worship of other gods or the worship of **the one true God** by means of an idol – always results in the destruction of our humanity. **And God won't have it! He loves us too much not to be jealous!!! Thank God He is jealous for us!**

**The second commandment** is an expression of **the saving love of God** for us. Because any image we could ever make would always and only

distort our perception of Him and ultimately oppress us and others. And so in His perfect love, God commands us to not make anything in His image.

Because **no created thing could ever rightly represent God to us.**

**UNLESS...** And this is where my head spins!

**Unless God chose to make something in His image!**

Listen to the words of **Genesis 1:26-31.**

*"Then God said, 'Let us make humanity in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.'*

*So God created humanity in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."*

Against the backdrop of this command to Israel and to us – to never make anything to represent God – **God Himself** chose to create something in His image – **US**. That **WE**, not some idol, but that **WE** would be His representatives on earth... *his revelation!* That others – the world – would catch a glimpse of the beauty and truth of the **One True God** – not by seeing a picture or statue or idol of God among us, but by seeing **us alive in Him...**

But, as we all know, God's intention for us – his image-bearers – has been hijacked – by sin!

As the Apostle Paul says in his letter to the Romans (**Romans 3:23**), "For all have sinned". And **what?** "and fallen short of the glory of God".

We haven't represented Him rightly. We've **mis**represented Him.  
We've, in some way, in many ways, been **a false image**.

Because of sin, we have not reflected God's glory as we should – the image of God in us has been defaced. Not **obliterated**, but **defaced**.

And again, we come back to confess that **no created thing could ever represent God perfectly.**

**UNLESS...** *And this makes my head spin even more!!*

**Unless** God **Himself took on flesh!** *Unless the Creator entered into creation and became one of us. Which is exactly what the gospel tells us!*

Listen to the words of the gospel-writer – **John 1:14,**

*"The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us."*

Up until the Incarnation, God had **always** and **only** been known by His **VOICE**. He was and is a God **who SPEAKS**.

Think of God's revelation to Moses – in **Exodus 33**.

Moses asks, "**Show** me your glory". And what happens? Moses doesn't **SEE anything**, but he **hears a Voice**. **God's Voice** proclaiming His character.

**But here**, in **John 1:14**, speaking of Jesus, John says, "*And the **Word** became flesh and made His dwelling among us.*"

Years later, reflecting on this, the Apostle Paul in His letter to the church in Colosse (**Colossians 1:15 & 19**), declared,

*"The Son [that is, Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation... For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him."*

**Hebrews 1:3** – *"The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being."*

**John 14:9** – Jesus says, *"Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father."*

**When you imagine God, what image comes to mind?**

**To what image do you bow?**

**What image commands your worship?**

In love, God invites us to

***let no image come to mind – but JESUS!***

***The image of the invisible God.***

For He alone is *"the radiance of God's glory and **the exact representation of his being**".*

**And this is the gospel.**

Knowing how easily and how often we are misled and oppressed by false and distorted images of Him, **God has come to us** – *to shatter our false perceptions about God and restore us **in and through Jesus.***

**But the good news doesn't stop there.**

Not only is Jesus "*the image of the invisible God*". Not only is He "*the exact representation of God's being*", but, as Paul says in **Romans 8:29**,

*"For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed into the image of His Son..."*

Conformed to the image of His Son...

**Oh, the grace of the gospel** – that God has **not only** come to reveal Himself to us in Jesus, but He has offered up His life for us on the cross – died in our place (the judgment we deserved for misrepresenting Him) – that now, through faith in Him,

**Jesus** might come,

by His Spirit,

to live in us

**and transform us:** *to conform us into His likeness...*

*For God's glory, for the sake of the world, and for our joy in Him...*

This morning, the Saving God of Exodus, commands us, in love, to **fix our eyes on Jesus – and be saved...**