

No Images of God

TEXT: Ex 20:4-6

PHBF 09.23.12

Scr. Reading: Exodus 19:16-20:6

Walking Straight: Exodus, part 2

SOS verse:

Exodus 20:2-4 *"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. ³ You shall have no other gods before me. ⁴ You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth."*

The first and second commandments are obviously closely related. (Jews and some Christian traditions, in fact, take them together as one command. Jews add the prologue as the first commandment, and Catholics/Lutherans divide the tenth command into two.)

Here's the distinction: The first commandment forbids setting your heart on the wrong God. The second forbids filling your mind with wrong thoughts about God. The first commandment requires us to have the right God. The second requires us to have the right impression of Him.

What comes into our minds when think about God is the most important thing about us. – Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, p 1

So how shall we form correct notions about God? How can we think accurate and appropriate thoughts about Him? How can we know what He is really like?

NOT from any created thing

God doesn't just forbid physical representations of Himself and then move on: "No images of me." Notice how exhaustively God covers all creation in the prohibition:

Exodus 20:4 *You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.*

Why is He so explicit about this? To fully appreciate this passage, we have to understand what exactly happened when God gave Israel the Ten Commandments. Keep a finger here and turn back to Exodus 19.

- 19:3 "Moses went up to God"
- Then down to address the people (vv 6-7, cf. esp. v 14)
- God came down (vv 16-20) – thunder, lightening, thick cloud, very loud trumpet blast, smoke, fire, mountain trembled
- Moses went back up (v 20)
- Moses went back down (vv 21-25)
- God spoke the Ten Commandments to Moses *and the whole assembly* from the mountain.

The whole nation heard God's voice from the mountain, with Moses standing there among them.

Exodus 20:18-22 ¹⁸ *Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off ¹⁹ and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die." ²⁰ Moses said to the people, "Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin." ²¹ The people stood far off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was. ²² And the LORD said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the people of Israel: 'You have seen for yourselves that I have talked with you from heaven.*

Deuteronomy 4:10-12 ¹⁰ *[Remember] how on the day that you stood before the LORD your God at Horeb, the LORD said to me, 'Gather the people to me, that I may let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me all the days that they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children so.' ¹¹ And you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, while the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven, wrapped in darkness, cloud, and gloom. ¹² Then the LORD spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice.*

Deuteronomy 4:33 *Did any people ever hear the voice of a god speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and still live?*

Deuteronomy 5:4-5 ⁴ *The LORD spoke with you face to face at the mountain, out of the midst of the fire, ⁵ while I stood between the LORD and you at that time, to declare to you the word of the LORD. For you were afraid because of the fire, and you did not go up into the mountain.*

Deuteronomy 5:22-27 ²² *"These words the LORD spoke to all your assembly at the mountain out of the midst of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness, with a loud voice; and he added no more. And he wrote them on two tablets of stone and gave them to me. ²³ And as soon as you heard the voice out of the midst of the darkness, while the mountain was burning with fire, you came near to me, all the heads of your tribes, and your elders. ²⁴ And you said, 'Behold, the LORD our God has shown us his*

glory and greatness, and we have heard his voice out of the midst of the fire. This day we have seen God speak with man and man still live. ²⁵ *Now therefore why should we die? For this great fire will consume us. If we hear the voice of the LORD our God any more, we shall die.* ²⁶ *For who is there of all flesh, that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of fire as we have, and has still lived?* ²⁷ *Go near and hear all that the LORD our God will say and speak to us all that the LORD our God will speak to you, and we will hear and do it.'*

One more key text, and this one explains why the people are to make no form of God that corresponds to anything in creation:

Deuteronomy 4:15-18 ¹⁵ *"Therefore watch yourselves very carefully. Since you saw no form on the day that the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire,* ¹⁶ *beware lest you act corruptly by making a carved image for yourselves, in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female,* ¹⁷ *the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air,* ¹⁸ *the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth"*

Why no idols? "Because you saw no form on the day the Lord spoke to you." In other words, God says, "Do not make idols because I have no physical form. I choose not to represent myself that way."

We learn elsewhere in Scripture that *He cannot* be represented that way:

Isaiah 40:18-26 ¹⁸ *To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him?* ¹⁹ *An idol! A craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and casts for it silver chains.* ²⁰ *He who is too impoverished for an offering chooses wood that will not rot; he seeks out a skillful craftsman to set up an idol that will not move.* ²¹ *Do you not know? Do you not hear? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?* ²² *It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in;* ²³ *who brings princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness.* ²⁴ *Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows on them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble.* ²⁵ *To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One.* ²⁶ *Lift up your eyes on high and see: who created these? He who brings out their host by number, calling them all by name, by the greatness of his might, and because he is strong in power not one is missing.*

That question gets at the heart of what's wrong with idolatry: "To whom then will you liken God?" Nothing in all creation is adequate for the task. He is incomparable. Paul said it like this to the people of idolatrous Athens:

Acts 17:29 *Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.*

Why no idols? Because no created thing can capture everything about God. Fire is unstoppable and pure but not personal and intelligent. Gold is beautiful and valuable but not authoritative and kind. A bull has strength but not wisdom. A lion has dignity but not love. An eagle has keen sight but no way to express what it sees. A whale can sing but not speak. And none of these created things possesses its good qualities in infinite measure.

This is the reason for God's explanation in verse 5:

Exodus 20:5 *You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God...*

God's jealousy here is His passion for His own glory, His zeal for His people to understand Him and view Him as the glorious God He really is. And nothing in creation can help us here. He is incomparable, i.e., holy.

NOT from human speculation

We shouldn't miss the obvious here: God spoke. He didn't leave the people to their own speculations about who He is or how to live. He revealed Himself through spoken words.

This is a great gift. History tells us what happens when people invent or infer what God is like and what He expects. The Canaanites thought Baal demanded human blood, Asherah needed public orgies, and Molech required the death of their children. How pagan!

But these twisted, self-destructive religious ideas aren't unique to Israel's time. The Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, slavery mar *Christian* history—all ideas and movements claiming divine authority but sundered from the divine word. These are the Christian examples!

Not even to mention the gross and dehumanizing practices from other religions. How gracious it is for the real God to speak to us and say, “This is what I’m like. This is what I require. This is how you will flourish.”

Human speculation shows up personally: Beware of “I like to think…” or “I think…” statements about God. These are a hairsbreadth away from idolatry.

When people entertain wrong notions about God, their religion and their personal lives suffer. This is what God means when He goes on:

Exodus 20:5-6 *I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.*

“Iniquity” is from a root which means “bend, twist, distort.” “The iniquity of the fathers” is their distorted view of God. And it continues to affect their children after them. God isn’t promising to punish innocent kids for the sins of their parents. He’s warning about the pervasive effects of idolatry upon subsequent generations. Idolatrous fathers produce whole generations of “those who hate me,” and God punishes people for these less-than-worthy views of Himself.

From His self-revelation in His word

So how can we form right notions of God? How can we know what He is really like? Through His word. He has spoken. He revealed Himself. He speaks. Consider this: We have knowledge from outside this world. This is how God has determined that He is to be known—through His word, spoken to His people.

Deuteronomy 4:12 *Then the LORD spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice.*

Deuteronomy 4:15 *“Therefore watch yourselves very carefully. Since you saw no form on the day that the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire,*

Deuteronomy 4:36 *Out of heaven he let you hear his voice, that he might discipline you. And on earth he let you see his great fire, and you heard his words out of the midst of the fire.*

Christianity is inherently word-oriented. God does not invite us to see His face or His form. He wants us to hear His voice. This is profoundly counter-cultural in a world where “Seeing is believing.” All the more, in a culture where visual media dominate as they now do. TV, video technology, and visual marketing have changed how we learn, how we think, and even what we trust. This preference for the visual over the verbal—images over words—cuts at our understanding of the authority of Scripture and the priority of preaching. Prior generations were good listeners, who cultivated their aptitude for words through storytelling, memorization, and reading. This was of necessity, for they lacked the technology for anything else. Today, we prefer signs and pictures. This switch from verbal to visual doesn’t work when we come to God. He has revealed Himself through words, recorded for us in a book. Our part is not to see; it’s to hear, to submit, and to obey. We may not – we *must* not – ignore God’s words and instead reinvent Him according to our own intuition and preferences.

Applications:

1. Explore what your behavior/emotions say about your view of God.

If you want to know what you believe about God, examine your life, not your doctrine. (Hershberger:) “We don’t need to live what we believe. We already do. We can tell exactly what we really believe by how we live.” It’s impossible to keep our life sound and our emotions right while our idea of God is erroneous or inadequate. Spiritual power requires correct notions about God.

2. Be daily in the word.

This is where your view of God must be formed. Read the Bible. Memorize it. Meditate on it. Most of all, submit your thoughts—particularly your thoughts about God—to it.

3. Recover a sense of awe/majesty.

“Be still and know that I am God” is almost incomprehensible to people

whose lives are taken up with trivialities and trinkets. “Glory” comes from a root word meaning “weighty.” The church has lost—or willingly given away—its concept of the majesty of God. [Sproul’s concept of “threshold”]

Hebrews 12:18-25 ¹⁸ *For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest* ¹⁹ *and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them.* ²⁰ *For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned."* ²¹ *Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear."* ²² *But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering,* ²³ *and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,* ²⁴ *and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.* ²⁵ *See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven.*

4. Look to Jesus.

How does Jesus fulfill this command?

Matthew 5:17-18 ¹⁷ *Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.* ¹⁸ *For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.*

Matthew 11:13 ¹³ *For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John...*

1400 years after Moses, another leader went up a mountain and was swallowed up in a cloud of darkness. Transfiguration, not Sinai. Glory. A voice. The people who heard were afraid. But this time, instead of 10 commandments, God uttered only one, the true summary of all the Law and the Prophets: “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to Him!” (Mk 9:7)

How awesome and appropriate, then, that Jesus Christ is called “the Word.”

John 1:1 *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*

He is the full representation of the Father, the enfleshment (incarnation) of the glory of God – a revelation previously given to us only via words. But now, inexplicably, the word of God takes on flesh.

John 1:14 *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

Where before nothing in all creation would suffice to represent God fully and adequately, now God appoints a human being to do it.

Colossians 1:15 *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.*

Colossians 1:19 *For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,*

In Jesus, the word of God is captured in an image—a holy, divine image.

Remember the quote from Tozer?

What comes into our minds when think about God is the most important thing about us. ...We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God. ...Were we able to extract from any man a complete answer to the question, “What comes into your mind when you think about God?” we might predict with certainty the spiritual future of that man. – Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, p 1

Listen to what happens when we learn to “think about God” – and keep the second commandment – by looking to Jesus:

2 Corinthians 3:18 *And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.*

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