

*Arvy Dupuy*

## NO IDOLS

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*Exodus 20:4-6*

*One Main Thing*

Idolatry is a constant temptation for humans that always leads to disastrous results and distorts our view of God.

*Introduction*

Margaret Heffernan, in her book *Willful Blindness*, explores why we choose—sometimes consciously, but mostly not—to remain unseeing in situations where “we could know, and should know, but don’t know because it makes us feel better not to know.”<sup>1</sup> We might see something a certain way and never consider any other option.

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1. Margaret Heffernan, *Willful Blindness: Why We Ignore the Obvious at Our Peril* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2011), 248.

Could this be the case with the second commandment of the Ten? We understand that commandment so well, we do not even have to give it a second thought. But it is the second thought that brings it into modern application. It is the second thought that will challenge us to open our eyes to our condition and possibly to our own denial of the truth within.

### *Going Deeper*

What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you hear the word "idol"? An ancient carved image to which people bow down? Perhaps we make a connection with Hindus, Buddhists, or other modern-day idolaters praying at public temples to a variety of carved images. In Fiji, my wife and I befriended a sweet lady of the Hindu faith. She invited us to her home and proudly showed us her private shrine. There were several statues representing the gods that she and her family prayed to daily. That is the image that comes to my mind when I read these verses. I want to leave the meaning there with the idolaters, because it makes me comfortable. If I can leave it there, I feel secure—I definitely do not violate this edict from God.

If we dare to take a second look, we have to begin with the ideology behind the theology. What caused God to tell his people this? Was God threatened by a carved block of wood or a molded piece of clay? Certainly not. Of course, he did not want Israel to be like the nations around them that ran after others gods while

forgetting him. But if we could reason out the full intent of the command, we might be able to apply a broader definition, even one that confronts and warns us today.

The book of Judges shows us the outcome of willful blindness to this commandment, the application and non-application of this command. Judges 2:2–3 might lead us to ask how false gods can be a thorn and a snare. God knew that idols would cause Israel great harm. Idolatry goes far beyond just turning from God; it is about our well-being and success. Today we might worship money, a career, material possessions, making those things our sources of security, identity, happiness, and joy. An idol is anything that we add to God as a requirement for being happy and complete. When we make something into an idol it will eventually make us miserable because it has the capacity only to hurt us and rob us of joy. An idol cannot offer us forgiveness. If we make our children or grandchildren our idols, and they begin having problems, we are robbed of joy because what we worship has not lived up to our expectation. These things become a snare to us because idols enslave us. We must possess it to be happy; we cannot say “no” to it; we become addicted.

We see this pattern with Israel in the book of Judges. Every time Israel worshiped the idols of another nation, that nation ended up oppressing Israel. In Judges 10:6, the words used are “served” and “sold.” Then in verse 11, seven nations oppressed Israel, which directly parallels the sevenfold idolatry of verse 6. Their

idolatry led to slavery, and their slavery led to idolatry. One would think that if a nation were oppressing Israel, the Israelites would hate the gods of that nation. But Israel ends up serving the gods of the nations that conquered them, and that, in turn, just leads to greater enslavement.

Despite pain and anguish, the people of Israel continue to worship the same idols that have done nothing for them but brought them trouble. We do the same thing. We become blind to the warnings of God. We idolize the very things that bring us pain and disappoint. When we do this, we only magnify our pain and disappointment.

When God “sold” the Israelites because of their idolatry, he did not abandon them or nullify his promises to them. But he did stop protecting them in some ways. He let the things they had been serving actually begin to dominate and “own” them.

### *Application*

Paul provides a fascinating parallel passage in Romans 1:24–25, where the word “lusts” appears—a word that, in Greek, means an overwhelming drive, an enslaving, uncontrollable desire. God “gives up” people, indicating that he allows the things we trust—that substitute for God in our lives—to become ruling powers over us. It is a punishment of “natural consequences.” Idolatry and slavery go hand in hand. Idolatry leads to slavery, and slavery to idolatry.

Today our greatest danger is not that we will have no gods at all—that we will become atheists—but that we will have too many gods, allowing idols to have a part of our hearts where only God belongs.

Moreover, if we were to make an idol, something physically representing the true God, we would be exhibiting only part of God's character while concealing other parts. If you painted a picture of God, would it show him smiling and loving, or furious and majestic? An image cannot express the full range of God's glory; idolatry necessarily distorts our view of God.

When we begin to shape God so that he is manageable and controllable, we tend to omit the parts of his character that we do not like. Worshiping God with images reveals that a spirit within us that does not want to submit to God as he truly is, but that wants to pick and choose attributes in order to create a God who is agreeable to us.

This is why God commands us to submit to his revelation of himself. How do we violate this today? It is as simple as refusing to let God be himself in our lives. We filter out—consciously or unconsciously—things about God our hearts won't accept. We say, "I don't believe in a God like that! I like to think of God as . . . ." That is worshiping God through the work of our own hands.

We can be guilty of this strategy both intellectually and psychologically. Most seriously, we intellectually

reject part of the Scriptural revelation of God. We do this whenever we say, "I can no longer accept a God who does this, or who forbids that." When we use the term "no longer," we wrap ourselves in the mantle of progress. We are really saying, "Our culture's distaste for this idea means we must drop it! We must have a God who fits our culture's sensibilities." We reshape God to fit our society and hearts instead of letting God reshape our hearts and society.

We can also (psychologically) ignore or avoid aspects of revelation we don't like. God is very strong on forgiveness and grace, yet we may be very judgmental and unforgiving. We may know about passages on grace and mercy, but we have never really "heard" them—we have not really "seen" God for who he is. The bottom line and greatest dilemma is that it makes it impossible to have a truly personal relationship with God. In a genuine relationship, the other person can contradict us, upset us and then we have to wrestle with and work through those emotions to deeper intimacy. But when we simply ignore (intellectually or psychologically) the parts of God we don't like, it means we do not have a God who can ever contradict our deepest desires or say "no" to us. We never wrestle with him. He never makes demands on us.

In reality, the root of almost every personal problem is a refusal to let God be himself. It is a failure to accept and embrace God as he truly is.

Why does God forbid making images of him? For all these reasons and more, but the bottom line is this: he forbids because he has already given us an image of himself. Jesus Christ is the literal image of the invisible God (Col 1:16). He fulfills our need for a concrete way to see God's glory. Christ reveals to us God's perfect image.

### *Conclusion*

Does the second commandment apply to me today? Absolutely, in ways we might not have ever considered but in ways that open eyes and with which receptive hearts will wrestle every day. Theologian Tim Keller says that the sin behind the sin is always idolatry. In the end, we all want a God that does not make demands on us.

### *Discussion*

1. When you think of the word "idol," what is the first thing that comes to your mind?
2. What things or people determine your emotions?
3. How does worry derive from a distorted image of God?