



“You Cannot Be Serious!”

The Ten Commandments

Exodus 20:1-17

Questions, Questions, Questions!

It is always a good idea when you begin to explore a passage of Scripture to slow down long enough to carefully read the text and seek to understand what it means.

A few weeks ago I came across the following: “Yesterday at the lunch counter, I said to the young man serving me, ‘I would like to buy a ham and cheese baguette with pickles.’ He responded by saying, ‘I’m sorry. We only take cash or credit cards.’”

When you first read these words about attempting to buy a baguette with pickles, it takes a moment to understand what is actually being said. It is funny only when you slow down enough to read it carefully.

The reason I am mentioning this is that within biblical studies, there is a discipline called hermeneutics, which focuses on how to understand a passage of Scripture. At times biblical interpretation can be a little complex, yet in asking the following questions, we can better understand a passage and then apply it to our lives:

1. What does the passage actually say?
2. What does the passage say about God?
3. What does the passage say about me?
4. Is there something I should do?

In Exodus 20:1-17, we find the Ten Commandments. I recently explored the second commandment with my congregation and suggested using these four questions to understand the relevance of the second commandment: “*You shall not make for yourself an idol.*”

As we began to explore the second commandment, we also considered other questions: If I am not going to create an image of clay, stone, or wood and bow down and worship it, how does the second commandment apply

to me? When it comes to the worship of God, isn’t how we worship simply a matter of taste and tradition? If some people find that images, pictures, or statues help them draw nearer to God, what harm can it do?

I think you would agree that these are good questions, but what if the second commandment was written with a much broader intent? Could it be that the second commandment is not simply talking about false gods made of clay or stone?

Let me ask you this: Have you ever read a passage of Scripture that describes God in a particular manner, or have you been involved in a discussion with someone about God, and you think to yourself, “I cannot imagine God being like that. I like to imagine God like this...” If you have, you are creating a mental image of God. When we do this, we are attempting to create God in our own image. God as we think he should be. A god we are comfortable with. A god we approve of. A god that conforms to what we want to believe.

This is precisely what God is addressing in the second commandment.

“I am...” (Exodus 20:5)

Let me suggest why creating a god in our own image is unhelpful: we end up with a god created by our imagination rather than one we come to know through revelation.

In the closing chapter of Luke’s Gospel, Jesus walks alongside two of His disciples on Easter Sunday. Listening to them describe what has happened over the last few days, He asks several questions to help clarify what has taken place. As the conversation develops, Jesus asks, “*Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter His glory? And beginning with Moses and all the Scriptures concerning himself*” (Luke 24:26-27). Later that day as the disciples looked back on what they had experienced, they said, “*Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?*” (Luke 24:32)

The events of that first Easter weekend were made clear by Jesus when He explained to the disciples from the Scriptures exactly what had taken place, including why he had to die and

the immense profoundness of the Resurrection. Then the disciples understood. The purposes and plans of God were revealed to them and they got it. Likewise, for us, we discover the transforming love of God through revelation rather than through imagination. That is why, when we come to a passage of scripture, we ask, “What does the passage actually say? What does the passage say about God?”

The second reason we do not create God in our own image is that we are tempted to think of God as we want Him to be: a father, not a judge. We like to think of Him as forgiving, but not correcting. Obsessed with our happiness, but not with our holiness. Indulgent toward our own pet sins and impatient with everyone else’s.

So why does the commandment focus on worship, and why is that relevant? Occasionally on a Sunday morning, someone will say, “I didn’t get anything out of worship this morning. It did nothing for me.” When we find ourselves thinking in these terms, we need to remember that worship is not primarily designed for us, but for God.

When we focus on the feelings of the worshiper rather than focusing on the love and grace of God, we have shifted the emphasis of worship from God to us. When we believe that we should be satisfied rather than that God should be glorified, we put God below ourselves, as though He was made to satisfy us rather than we being made to glorify Him.

Does this mean there is no place for emotion or response to God’s love and grace in worship? No; there is always a place for a heartfelt response in worship.

When we worship Him as He is, we discover that our love for Him grows and deepens. Our prayer becomes transparent and unhindered, with no pretense. In genuine worship, commitment is birthed, perseverance is tempered with grace, and we sense God’s deep enabling to live out our faith each day.

For all of these reasons, the second commandment is as relevant today as when it was first written.

“You shall not make for yourself an idol.”