



## SESSION 3

# GOD CANNOT BE IMPROVED

I get the feeling that many of us don't pay much attention to the Commandment against making a graven image. You're probably thinking, I don't own any idols or statues. I sure loved my Superman action figures or my Barbie® dolls when I was a kid, but I never remember worshiping them. Is this Commandment even relevant today?

It is. Incredibly relevant, actually. This Commandment is broken regularly by people inside and outside the church, and just as we will see in the passage, disobedience has devastating consequences for us and our families.

In the Second Commandment, God condemns idolatry because of His passionate jealousy for our worship. Idolatry is dangerous because it distorts our view of God and corrupts our behavior, leading us away from God as He has revealed Himself and toward a false god who is powerless to save and transform us. In order to engage in God's mission, we need the power that comes from a Spirit-transformed heart.

# The Second Commandment...

## Shows That God is Jealous For Us

Our first reaction when reading this passage may be relief: Whew! I'm glad I've never made an idol with my hands or bowed down to a statue! But the idolatry condemned in this Commandment is more than merely crafting a statue to represent God. It's about making God in our image, rather than realizing we are made in His.

We break the Second Commandment whenever we define God in our hearts as we want Him to be rather than believing what He has revealed Himself to be. We create an image in our mind of the God we want, not the God who is.

► Have you ever heard the phrase “My God is like...” or “My God would never do that...”? What do these phrases communicate about one's view of God?

Why are we constantly tempted to form and shape a god we want rather than believe and worship the God who is? If we're honest, we will admit that we like to be in control. A god we can shape and form and manipulate is a god we can control. On the other hand, if God is outside of our control, that means we are the ones who must submit to His will.

The problem with breaking the Second Commandment is that we rob ourselves of the joy of really knowing God—knowing God for who He is, not just what we think about Him.



### Deuteronomy 5:8-10

*Do not make an idol for yourself in the shape of anything in the heavens above or on the earth below or in the waters under the earth. You must not bow down to them or worship them, because I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the fathers' sin to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing faithful love to a thousand generations of those who love Me and keep My commands.*



This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are approximately 20 lines visible. The paper has a slightly textured appearance, typical of standard office paper. There is no handwriting or other markings on the page.

How do you know if someone is following after God or following after a fictitious image of God they have created in their own minds? While there's not just one answer to that question, we can at least look at one major red flag that, if raised, may indicate a relational problem between someone and God. Let me illustrate what I'm talking about by sharing a conversation I had some time ago with a friend.

After that, I asked him to explain why he thought God was okay with this behavior. He responded by telling me that it was okay because he and his girlfriend loved each other and planned to get married someday. He said it was okay because God wants them to be happy. He even said, “if God is really like what the Bible is saying, then I don’t want anything to do with that.” I knew at once that not only was there something going on in the heart of my friend, but also that my friend had made the mistake of trying to make God fit his personal lifestyle. He wanted a god who simply agreed with him and approved of the things he did.





# Helps Us Have a Proper View of God

Read Exodus 32:1-4.

So what did they request? Not a new god, but an image of God they could hold on to. Something to give them comfort and to go before them. The bull was something God had told them to sacrifice in worship to Him. To ancient people, the bull represented strength. What better attribute of God to cling to during uncertain times and difficult circumstances? His strength. And what better way to represent God's strength than to make a bull that would guarantee their protection?

► **Why do our hearts make idols? How can our view of God get distorted by idolatry?**

This distorted image of God came from frightened hearts. The people of Israel were worried. They failed to trust God. They didn't find their satisfaction in God, which is why they felt like they needed something more, something in addition to Him if they were going to be protected.

## Idols of the Heart

You may not know this but there was a time in American history when the White House, the home and office to the American President, was intentionally burned to the ground by hostile British troops during the War of 1812.<sup>1</sup> It is somewhat crazy to think that this could have happened; I mean, the White House as we know it today is more protected than Fort Knox. Not only are there fences, attack dogs, armed troops, and missile defense systems on the property, but the airspace around the White House is off limits and highly guarded. To hear that at one point we actually lost this iconic house almost seems too laughable to believe.

But the fact remains that Americans at that time did lose it, and not only that, but they lost it



Right here, we see idolatry on full display. When we are worried and insecure, we seek to shape our view of God in a way that brings us comfort, hoping that this image of God will guarantee our future peace and happiness.

► **What are some areas in your life where you have the tendency to want God plus something else? Why?**

#### **Exodus 32:1**

*When the people saw that Moses delayed in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said to him, "Come, make us a god who will go before us because this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt—we don't know what has happened to him!"*

to a foreign enemy on their own soil. Can you imagine what that must have felt like for them? Imagine waking up to the buzz and chatter that a foreign enemy had destroyed something as symbolic as the White House. How do you think you would feel? My guess is that the majority of Americans would feel quite concerned for their own safety. Why? Because the White House isn't just any house. It symbolizes some of the things Americans cherish most about their country—protection, freedom, and democracy. If it were destroyed by an enemy threat, Americans would naturally feel that those things they cherish are being threatened as well. They might feel as if they are no longer protected and that they should be fearful for their safety.

Idols of the heart work much the same way. If I'm allowing an idol to meet a certain desire in my heart, such as the desire for protection, then it follows that I'm not completely trusting that God alone is the One who protects. What I'm trying to do is have God plus a backup, but this won't work. It is like the thirty-year-old who says that he's no longer afraid to sleep in the dark but won't go to bed without his safety blanket.

1. [www.history.com/this-day-in-history/british-troops-set-fire-to-the-white-house](http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/british-troops-set-fire-to-the-white-house)





# Protects Us From Corrupt Behavior

The story doesn't end with a distorted view of God. As we read on, we see how a corrupted vision of God leads to corrupted behavior:

The event began as a worship festival in honor of the Lord. At least that was the spin Aaron put on it. It ended with a raucous party of immorality. (The word in Hebrew translated here as *play* has sexual connotations to it.) God told Moses to go back down the mountain because the stiff-necked, hard-hearted people had corrupted themselves.

## Exodus 32:5-6

*When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; then he made an announcement: "There will be a festival to the LORD tomorrow." Early the next morning they arose, offered burnt offerings, and presented fellowship offerings. The people sat down to eat and drink, then got up to play.*

### ► What are some choices we make that come from a wrong view of God?

There's an important point to be made here. The children of Israel created an image that gave them a distorted vision of God. They worshiped this depiction of God for less than a day before they were involved in immoral behavior. Idolatry distorts our vision and then corrupts our behavior.

The Bible teaches that we become like what we worship. Jeremiah 2:5 says that when we worship worthless things, we become worthless. The apostle Paul echoes this truth in Romans 1:21-22.



## Where Actions Come From

Have you ever considered the connection between beliefs and behavior—between the way one thinks and the way one acts? It may seem like a common sense notion that beliefs influence actions, but there are, in fact, some very illustrative examples within psychology that demonstrate this reality.

Consider the example of Jane Elliot, a schoolteacher who conducted an experiment with her students over thirty years ago. The experiment revolved around her telling students that those with brown eyes were smarter than those with blue eyes. She also treated those with brown eyes better than the rest. Not only that, but she put a collar on the blue-eyed students to symbolize their inferiority. The results of these actions were quite revealing. The blue eyed students were affected academically when they put the collars on, performing in ways that aligned with what they had come to believe about themselves.

Things like this remind me of something I heard years ago in regards to all of the propaganda that Nazi Germany used on their own citizens during World War II against Jews, Gypsies, and the disabled. The reason they invested money into propaganda was because they wanted to change the beliefs of their citizens, thereby changing the way they felt and acted toward certain individuals. Hitler said, “If you tell a big enough lie and tell it frequently enough, it will be believed.”<sup>1</sup> He invested so much into lies because he knew that beliefs motivate actions.

In the same way that wrong beliefs lead to wrong behavior, idolatrous hearts also lead to behavior that is corrupt and dishonoring to God. If our aim is to live wisely and godly in the present age, then we must begin with a right vision and knowledge of God, free from idols of the heart.

1. [www.goodreads.com/quotes/553-if-you-tell-a-big-enough-lie-and-tell-it](http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/553-if-you-tell-a-big-enough-lie-and-tell-it)

When we worship money,  
we become materialistic  
and anxious all the time  
about getting new things.  
When we worship fame  
and popularity, we become  
codependent and obsessive  
about what others think.  
When we worship romance,  
we become possessive in  
our relationships. Whatever  
it is you worship, you reflect.

► **How does our view of God impact the way we treat others?  
Why is idolatry a hindrance to our mission and message  
as Christians?**



# GOD'S STORY, YOUR STORY

One of the things this session illustrates so clearly is the connection between our beliefs and our behaviors. We saw this principle illustrated through the life of the Israelites. Because they didn't have a proper view and understanding of God—an understanding that comes from God Himself—they were easily led astray into an immoral lifestyle. This story reminds us that we behave according to what we believe.

*If our beliefs are connected to our behavior, why is it so important to have correct Christian beliefs?*

A correct knowledge of God, however, extends beyond the way we behave. For instance, it is not uncommon for young Christians to rely completely upon their feelings for God as a way to measure spiritual growth and maturity in their lives. Having greater affection for God is part of that equation, but so is growing in a correct knowledge and understanding of Him as well. When you think about it, one can have great affection for God, but that affection may not be in accordance with an accurate knowledge of who God is and what He has done. This is why greater love and affection for God should always follow a greater understanding of who He is and what He has done.

*Why are feelings not the sole measure of spiritual maturity? Why is it important to have feelings along with proper beliefs and knowledge?*