

The Second Commandment

What is the second commandment?

You shall not make for yourself a carved image—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; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments (Exodus 20:4-6).

How is the second commandment different from the first?

The first commandment (You shall have no other gods before Me) forbids the worship of false gods, whereas the second forbids the false worship of God. The first tells us whom to worship; the second tells us how to worship him.

What is required in the second commandment?

The commandment forbids us to make and worship images of God. We are called to know God as he revealed himself, and to serve him according to his ordinances, not in any other way devised by human wisdom. "Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it" (Deuteronomy 12:32).

Does the second commandment prohibit the making or use of all images?

The second commandment does not prohibit paintings and sculptures which are not intended to be used in the worship of God. This is clear from the words "you shall not bow down to them nor serve them". Moreover, shortly afterwards giving the Ten Commandments, God instructed Israel to make two cherubims of gold for the Ark of the Covenant, and later on, a bronze serpent (Exodus 25:28; Numbers 21:9). Solomon decorated the temple with twelve oxen, and its walls with carved images of cherubims (1 Kings 7:25; 6:29). In all these instances, the Israelites were not called to "bow down" or "serve" the images. When the Israelites began to burn incense to the bronze serpent, the godly king Hezekiah broke it to pieces.

Can we make an image of God?

We should not make any image of God. When God made a covenant with Israel, the Lord spoke to the people, and they heard the sound of his voice, but they did not see any form. God did so on purpose. "Take careful heed to yourselves, for you saw no form when the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, lest you act corruptly and make for yourselves a carved image in the form of any figure: the likeness of male or female..." (Deuteronomy 4:15, 16). Elsewhere the Scripture reproves us, "To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare to Him?" (Isaiah 40:18).

Can we make an image of Christ since he was made flesh?

No, not least because we do not know how he looked like. The hundreds of different pictures of Jesus testify against each other that they are false images. What is called a picture or a statue of Christ is not his true likeness. Like the idols of old, the modern portrayal of the Lord is "a teacher of lies" (Habakkuk 2:18).

Moreover, Jesus is the true God, and therefore the only appropriate response to seeing his image is worship and adoration. Sadly, the "Jesus" imprinted on the mind by artistic creations is "another Jesus" – an idol. False images lead to false worship.

Did God give us an image of himself?

God has revealed himself in his Son; "He is the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15). Christ is the perfect icon of God.

But then, how can we know Christ in truth? The Lord himself answers, "You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of me" (John 5:39). We know Christ in Scripture, not in the imaginations of sculptors.

During our pilgrimage on earth, we are called to live by faith and not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). The apostle Peter reminds us that we believe and rejoice in him even though "now you do not see him" (1 Peter 1:8). Yet we have a living hope. Eagerly we await that glorious day when "we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). Then our joy will be complete.

Why should we obey the second commandment?

God threatens severe punishments on those who disobey and promises great blessings on the obedient. If we love God, let us worship him as he has commanded. If however we attempt to worship him by graven images, contrary to his commandment, we are found to be haters of God and worthy of his wrath.