

Beloved of God,

Many of us, I suspect, if not most have been to worship services in a church where we felt conflicted by something we witnessed. Or maybe you've heard stories of worship in other churches that raised some questions for you or maybe your children.

Worshipping the correct God correctly is what the second commandment is all about. Churches in the past few decades have become very innovative in order to attract people to their services. There is a lot of good that has happened through some new ideas. But sometimes church has fallen into entertainment... maybe bringing in a comedian to increase attendance. While that might be great for a different ministry occasion, a comedy show does not qualify as worship, even if the time is started and ended with a prayer.

God wants us to worship in the ways that he tells us, not simply doing whatever we want. So, let's think about worship together.

I said last week that I'd use the same 4 points for these 10 commandment sermons, points I picked up from author Ray Ortlund: Revelation, Confrontation, Instruction and Promise. So here we go.

Revelation

What does the second commandment reveal to us about God? What does God want us to know about him when he tells us, "Do not worship idols and don't try to worship me through idols?" Well, in **the** first commandment, God says, "Don't put anything ahead of me! No idols of any kind." In the second commandment God doesn't merely say, "Make sure you have the correct God." He adds, "Make sure you worship the correct God correctly."

That's the issue in the story of Aaron creating the golden calf. We could note that Aaron is not denying that God Almighty—the LORD—is God alone who brought Israel out of Egypt. But he's telling Israel that they can worship this God through a golden calf. In that sense, it's the right God but the wrong worship.

The words of Jesus to the Samaritan woman in John 4 and the words of our Heidelberg catechism point to an important truth. God is Spirit. As Spirit, God cannot be copied. He can't be adequately represented by anything in this world, not something of nature or something created by human hands or human minds. Any representation we make of God will be a misrepresentation at best. You can't see a Spirit so how can you make anything that looks like God? And that's part of God's point. Worshipping him through anything is going to ultimately make us focus on that thing instead of focussing on him.

The problem, you see, much like I said last week, is that pagan worship in ancient times was about controlling God. You make an idol to represent God, as you think he is. The idea is that you can then control that god. By doing certain rituals we will get him to do what we want. We bow before the gods in order to get our way.

Our God, my friends, doesn't operate like that. He is almighty Jahweh, our covenant God, the creator of heaven and earth, sovereign over the whole universe. He is God and he alone. He's the one before whom every knee will one day bow and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

And that brings us to the way God reveals himself to us. Hebrews 1:3 says,
Heb 1:3 The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.

We can't make idols through which to worship God. Jesus alone is his representation. Jesus is God's revelation. Just one verse earlier, Hebrews tells us:

Heb 1:1 In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe.

Likewise, the Apostle Paul wrote in Colossians 1:15,

Col 1:15 The Son is the image of the invisible God...

¹⁹For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, ²⁰and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

So the Bible teaches that the only image of God that we are given to worship God through is his Son, our Lord Jesus. Jesus, in other words, is the complete revelation of God for us. We do not need and cannot represent God in any other way than by looking—with faith—to Jesus.

The important thing to note, however, is that we don't look to Jesus in worship because we want to manipulate him in order to get what we want! No, dear people. As I said, that is the pagan way. Instead, we worship God in the person of Jesus Christ because he is Sovereign and also loving. He comes to us because we cannot in and of ourselves reach him. We need him to bring us to God, to restore our relationship to God. And he has done that through the cross. That settles our relationship: God loves us. No need to try to manipulate him like pagan do. So, any representation of God that we might try to create is only going to diminish Jesus. He is the full revelation of God on earth. And he is heart of our worship. That's what God reveals about himself.

Queen Elizabeth II passed away this past week. Despite all the secrecy of being such a public figure, she didn't hide her faith when it came to public worship. She had her a personal, reserved pew at Westminster Chapel, of course. But while there was some distance, she was not alone. She was surrounded by the congregation. Her noble station in life, didn't keep her from worship. In fact, worship shaped her life and her legacy.

What she said just a month ago is noteworthy: “Throughout my life, the message and teaching of Christ have been my guide and in them, I find hope.” Christ is her hope. She’s speaking as one who has obviously taken the time to intentionally connect with Christ. Undoubtedly that happened in private. But clearly it happened in public too when she gathered with God’s people to hear God’s Word and give him the worship he is worthy to receive.

It is very telling of her humility when you think that this woman holds the highest place of power in the country and the commonwealth—albeit symbolic in many ways. But that place of honour did not go to her head. She did not think that she as queen was exempt from bowing her knee before the King of kings or that she could worship however she chose because she is wealthy. No, she worshiped Jesus as Lord of lords and her King. She understood him to be God’s final revelation, worthy of worship on Sundays which spread to the rest of her life.

Confrontation

Now, then, we come to how this commandment confronts us. If God is revealed fully in Jesus because he alone makes us right with God and he alone gives us access to God, then how are we breaking the second commandment? In other words, what idols do we have through which we think we can get God to act for us? That’s what Israel was trying to do with golden calf. They wanted a visible representation of God. But it turned out to be an idol like the idols of their neighbours, a god of our own making, a god who ultimately is designed to help us get close to the divine. In that sense, it serves us rather than us serving it.

We are created as religious beings. We have—in the words of Augustine—a God-shaped hole in our hearts and our hearts are restless until they rest in him. People try to fill the God-shaped hole with all sorts of things, mostly, gods made in our image. In other words, gods who do for us what we want them to do. That can look like worshiping a golden calf in the days of Aaron because you don’t think the One True God is listening to you, acting fast enough or visible enough.

Today we don’t make an idol like a calf, the way Aaron did. I think, however, we still fall into the trap of saying things like, “O, yes, I worship the Lord God. I worship Jesus.” But then we don’t worship him correctly. I’ve heard people say things like, “I don’t need to go to church. I can worship God in nature.” We could also say, “I don’t need to worship in a church building on Sunday. I can worship God while I’m playing sports or out camping, at the opera, in the shopping mall or anywhere I choose.” That’s not necessarily untrue. You can worship God in all of life. And you should. But I suspect if we aren’t making a habit of worshiping God at church, most of us are probably aren’t worshiping him in those other things we are doing in place of formal worship.

Those other ways we claim to worship God are not the same as gathering with God’s people for worship. Covid has made it feel normal to worship alone. And granted livestreaming from home has been better than nothing. I do believe you can worship along with the congregation from home. The YouTube stats tell me, however, that a lot of people don’t watch it live. They watch it when it’s convenient, perhaps after doing some other things that are more urgent. My intent in saying that is not to lay a guilt trip

but to make us all think. I've worshipped on livestream many times and—like I said, it's better than nothing. It's great when we are sick or can't make it to church because we have to work or something like that. But it should not become a substitute because that's not what God has in mind for our spiritual health when it comes to worship.

Worshipping as God intends is about his desire for us to be strengthened in our faith in a world where we are pulled away from him more and more. When all is well and we are able to gather together with the church for worship, we ought to. That's what God has prescribed for his people. We can worship God outside of a church gathering which we call our formal worship service. That's absolutely true. Our life as a whole should be an offering of worship to God. How we live ought to honour and glorify him. But that doesn't mean we don't need to heed the call of God to come and worship among his people when that's what he says, and we are able to do so but we just don't want to. God wants us instructed by the living, preaching of his Word that is focused on his final revelation of himself in Jesus. That involves gathering with his people in worship, being present as the Holy Spirit works among us in the songs and other parts of the liturgy, as well as in the sacraments. And, of course, through the Word. It all points us to Jesus, the centre of our worship.

Brothers and sisters, I hope you let the Holy Spirit convict or confront you about ways you might not be worshipping the correct God correctly. The second commandment confronts us with the question: What are we focusing on—worshipping in that sense? Do we want to worship God as he has revealed himself and how he has instructed us? Or do we just want to have picture of God that we've created in our minds, a god of our own making who does our bidding? A God who has loving standards for us—obviously for our spiritual good—or an idol that won't say anything or make any demands on us?

That's some of the confrontation we must hear in the commandment.

Instruction

Thirdly, we come now to instruction. What does this commandment teach us about being better disciples of Jesus? What's the big deal about worshipping the correct God correctly?

In the second commandment, God confronts us with our heart and the corresponding actions. If we claim to believe in God alone as our God, as per the first commandment, then the second commandment calls us worship him faithfully through Jesus Christ.

God was not happy with being worshiped through a golden calf because that kept Israel from really knowing him! Jesus said in the Gospel of John, "God is Spirit and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth." I already mentioned that we can't see a spirit so we don't know what God looks like, except through the revelation of himself in Jesus, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

God is not a local deity as the neighbours of Israel pictured him when they worshipped their idols. He's not a god who has power over a small area of our life—like

Samaria—and can be worshiped only in that locality. Because he is Spirit, he may be worshiped in Samaria, Jerusalem, or anywhere else in the world. And because he is Spirit, our worship must be given to him as a spiritual being.

And that's where the truth is important. We need to worship God for who he really is. We can lose sight of that apart from studying God's word. We must listen to the Spirit and we pay attention to the truth.

Friends, God is our creator, redeemer and the one who knows what is best for us. He's the God who wants the best for us. That's because he loves us. And his commandments are all about what is best for us.

But we often have a tendency—born out of our sinful desire to have things our own way—to create an image of God that makes him more what we desire. He's a grandfatherly figure who gives us whatever we ask for. He's a God who doesn't care how we live as long as we confess Jesus as our Saviour. I don't like the Bible's teaching about greed, sexual immorality, adultery, or even the divinity of Jesus, for that matter. And God doesn't expect me—in the 21st century—to believe and live by outdated teachings from 2000-plus years ago. We can say those things but that's not worshiping the correct God in Spirit and truth.

We live in a society where worship has become a commodity. People go church shopping. They look for what they want and stay as long as a church is giving them what they desire. Israel too made worship about themselves. Make us a calf so that we can worship God like we did in Egypt.

So when it comes to worship, we might be tempted to make it about us. I didn't get anything of that sermon. I didn't like the old hymn. I don't like contemporary songs. I hate—okay, just strongly dislike—the drums, the guitar or the organ. I don't like it when kids do certain parts of the liturgy or when only adults do all the leading. Those might be things worth talking about. Undoubtedly, because we're all different, we all have different tastes. But never forget that worship is not about you and me. It's about God. Do we come to worship in order to get something or do we come to give Jesus the glory and praise that he's worthy of.

Maybe you didn't know this but the word worship comes from the Latin meaning to ascribe worth! Worth-ship. We are gathering to ascribe worth—glory and honour and praise—to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. When you lose sight of that and focus on yourself, you've become a consumer, not a worshiper. Then you're worshiping a golden calf but not worshiping God in Spirit and truth.

Likewise, we go wrong when we think worship is optional. We know that our Lord Jesus did not neglect to join corporate worship. According to Luke 4:16, it was his custom. He was in the habit of attending the synagogue on the Sabbath. So today too we must gather around the word of God with his people. Gather to hear what our Saviour and Lord has to say to us. Gather to lift his name in praise. Gather to receive his means of grace in the Word and sacraments. These are the ways he's instructed us to worship him because these are the ways that he meets us and strengthens our faith.

Follow the example of the early church. We are told in Acts 2 that when the early believers gathered together,

Act 2:42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

That was corporate worship. Thirty years later, the writer of Hebrews had to remind the church about the importance of worship as a means of hearing from God as we connect with his people. There we are told,

Heb 10:25 Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Yes, we can worship God anywhere. But we are still called to gather together with the body of Christ and exalt Jesus, the Head of the body.

Worshipping Jesus in Spirit and truth will help us become better disciples. We need worship to keep us oriented on the right things in our daily life. Queen Elizabeth's pastor, Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby appeared on BBC Radio the day after the Queen passed away. He spoke about his personal meeting with her this past June: "I came away thinking there is someone who has no fear of death, has hope in the future, knows the rock on which she stands and that gives her strength."

Yes, church, standing on the Rock, our Lord Jesus Christ is what guided the Queen. Worship was an important part of keeping that perspective. For you see, the world pulls us away from our Lord but worship keeps us rightly focused. We can go without if we have to, like when we're sick. And I know some elderly folks worship from home because they have hearing issues and can feel more engaged in worship that way. Some people have anxiety disorders, including fear of crowds. But, like Jesus, we ought to be in the habit of gathering with God's people to worship the Lord together as he instructs us. It's for our good. Our spiritual good.

Promise

Finally, then, we come to think about what God is promising us in the second commandment. In a word... in a name, he's promising us Jesus. Immanuel, God with us.

God forbids worshipping him through idols because Jesus is the image of God. He's "the image of the invisible God." (Col 1:15). The Greek word there for image is *eikon*. You can hear the English word *icon* in that which refers to statues or idols.

I remember being in Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris way back in 1986 and seeing the foot on an icon worn down by thousands of hands that touched it day after day to feel some greater connection to God.

But God has given us Jesus, in the flesh. Friends, Jesus guarantees that God is close to us. God draws near to us as humanity in the person of Jesus. In coming to us, in dying for our sins and rising from the dead, Jesus guarantees that nothing can separate us from the love of God. Our access to God is wide open through Jesus. No need to question whether we are connect to God. We are firmly connect through God himself coming to us in the living person of Jesus. Not a stone icon. Not a wooden statue. Not a god of our imagination or our desires.

The second commandment promises us that God has given us all we need to connect with him. First of all, he comes our way because we could never reach him. Jesus has our flesh with him in heaven and is one with humanity in that way. But he is also very much one with God the Father and the Holy Spirit. We are tightly connected to God. So now as we live for him in gratitude for his union with us, we worship him in the way that he prescribes—giving him the worth that is due him. The praise, the honour, the glory. He has made us safe... Let us worship him as we should.