

**'The Second Commandment' – summary of sermon given by David Rawlings, 28 July 2019.
[This is a shortened version, to make it more readable.
I've cut out full biblical quotations, so have a bible next to you!]**

The second of the Ten Commandments turned out to be the most controversial within the Christian community. It starts: ***"You shall not make for yourself an idol..."***.

Read the rest in Exodus 20.4-6.

The full commandment is quite long but, as with all the commandments, the main point can be reduced to a few words. Note that the word 'idol' is sometimes translated as 'graven image' or 'carved image' (as in our Anglican Prayer Book). The sermon focussed on the various views of Christians concerning the Second Commandment through the centuries, followed by a comment on how we should look at the commandment today, and the Ten Commandments more generally.

Views on the Second Commandment

Most of the early Jewish rabbis applied a quite severe interpretation to the Second Commandment, not only forbidding idols but forbidding representations of the human form, or even of real objects in general, to works of art. This changed gradually as they were influenced by the art of surrounding countries. (A strong interpretation of the commandment certainly influenced Islamic art for many centuries – Islam started around 600 AD.)

In fact, a major theme of the Old Testament is the tension between a true worship of God, and the occasional falling away of the mass of the Hebrew people into sinful practices which frequently involved idolatry of the kind practiced by their neighbours. They are then brought back, often through the medium of divinely raised spiritual leaders such as great kings or prophets. Sometimes, as with the golden calf story, the return to God is associated with the smashing of idols. After the period of exile in Babylon (between about 589 to 539 BC), there is less evidence of the Hebrews having problems with idolatry; they had become content with, and confident in, their monotheism.

Around 330BC Alexander the Great conquered much of the area around Greece and Palestine, bringing Greek culture to the area. This cultural influence included new gods, temples, statues, and practices of worship. At the time of Jesus, there were many gods, in several different layers. There were family gods. There were the city gods, whose special feast-days gave you your holidays. There were the gods of the Greek universe, now with Roman names: Zeus or Jupiter; Aphrodite or Venus; Hades or Pluto; Dionysius or Bacchus; Gaia; and many others. There were a number of popular foreign gods, like Isis from Egypt. Around this time, emperors also were declared to be gods. It has been called a *religious supermarket*.

While Jewish converts to Christianity, influenced by a history of monotheism and distaste for idols, would presumably find little difficulty in avoiding using statues and the like in their worship, for Gentile converts, expressing one's religion using statues and images was the natural thing to do. While Jesus does not mention idols or idolatry specifically, New Testament writers such as Paul clearly warned against idolatry (e.g. Acts 17.16; 1 Corinthians 10.14; Galatians 5.20), and counselled against eating food offered to idols (1 Corinthians 8.4-13; 10.14-22). In Ephesians and Colossians, the word 'idolatry' is used metaphorically; on both occasions it is specifically associated with greed (Ephesians 5.5; Colossians 3.5).

The Western (Roman) Church seemed to accept the inevitability of statues and images of Mary and the saints becoming part of regular worship. St Augustine, the influential Bishop of Hippo (354-430 AD), argued that the first two commandments should be put together as a single commandment. This was probably due to his desire to make the second commandment look like just a subsidiary comment on the first. This way of numbering the commandments is still used in the Roman Catholic Church; the tenth commandment was divided into two to preserve the number ten! Note that the catechism of the Catholic Church indicates that "the honour paid to sacred images is a 'respectful veneration', not the adoration due to God alone".

The Eastern Christian Church (which became today's Orthodox Churches) was centred in Constantinople. It had a long controversy concerning images during the 8th and early 9th centuries, called the Iconoclastic Controversy. The Eastern Church eventually decided that they could accept the full implications of the second commandment by taking the view that graven or carved images referred to three-dimensional images; flat representations of any kind were acceptable. In other words, they supported 'icons', which refer to two-dimensional paintings, mosaics or other religious art-work of Christ or some holy person or event. They have retained this view to the present day, and we find icons are given particular reverence in modern Greek or Russian Orthodox Churches. Unlike the Western Church, the Eastern Church maintained the view that the first two commandments should be separated.

The Protestant Reformation began 'officially' in 1517 when Martin Luther is said to have nailed his 95 theses. Interestingly, Luther was not strongly against statues of the saints, and the like, believing that destroying such things implied that they were more than empty, meaningless objects. Furthermore, he could see no reason to make the commandment on idols a separate commandment. Some later reformers, like Zwingli and Calvin in Switzerland, focussed on the direct interpretation of God's word through scripture, rather than its mediation by the church hierarchy, and interpreted the Second Commandment very literally. They and their followers took more extreme views against statues and religious imagery, sometimes even crosses, leading to a period of iconoclasm (rejection and destruction of religious images) throughout much of Europe. The complex political situation in England during the English Reformation led to considerable destruction of religious images (iconoclasm) and other church property, as also occurred in the English Civil War about a hundred years later. Note that the reformers also championed the separation of the first two commandments, and (non-Lutheran) Protestant, and Anglican, churches still separate these commandments. [Incidentally, if you are interested in the numbering of the commandments, look up *Wikipedia* under 'Ten Commandments'. You are given eight different numberings, just to get you started!]

The Second Commandment Today

How should we respond to the second commandment today? The prohibition in the commandment may initially have been aimed at the carving of images of Israel's own God, though clearly it also refers to making of images of other gods, as carried out by the Hebrews' neighbours. Most people from our religious traditions are unlikely to be tempted by idols of this kind. The quotes from Ephesians 5.5 and Colossians 3.5 point to the fact that the commandment can also be understood non-literally. 'Greed' is specifically mentioned in these quotations, perhaps because this can be understood, like idolatry, to refer to

focussing our desires on created objects rather than the creator. Perhaps greed may also be understood as making an idol of oneself.

I'll look briefly at the wider question of how we should respond to the Ten Commandments generally. They undoubtedly comprise an extraordinary historical document. On the one hand, they consist of short, punchy, easy-to-remember rules comprehensible to simple, uneducated desert-wanderers. On the other hand, they clearly comprise a major foundation of our contemporary legal and ethical systems.

In thinking about how we should respond to the commandments today, I find it useful to look at how Jesus and the biblical writers (like Paul) treated the Commandments, and 'the law', of which the Commandments are a central part. Both show deep respect for the law (Matthew 4.1-20; Romans 7.12), while also indicating, in different ways, the need to go 'beyond' it. Jesus frequently uses the Commandments or some aspect of the law as a starting point to get people to think more deeply about an issue, and ultimately to examine their own hearts (e.g. Matthew 5.21-30; 15.10-20; 19.16-22; Mark 2.23; Luke 11.37-42; John 8.1-11). Rather than focussing on the Ten Commandments as such, in each of the three synoptic gospels Jesus indicates that the two primary 'commandments' concern love of God with all your being, and of your neighbour "as yourself" (e.g. Mark 12.28-31).

Paul says a good deal about the law, including the commandments, which are apparently critical (e.g. Romans 7.6; 2 Corinthians 3.6; Galatians 3.13). He seems to be saying that the law was given for a particular period of time, to serve as a guardian until Christ came, after which God's children no longer live under the law (Galatians 3.23-25; 5.18). Rather than being enslaved by the law, they have become "enslaved to God" (Romans 6.22) and "to one another" (Galatians 5.13). Like Jesus, Paul emphasises love for one another: "the one who loves one another has fulfilled the law" (Romans 13.8). "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit" (Romans 5.5). When writing about how a Christian should live, Paul certainly does say many 'negative' things (e.g. Galatians 5.19-21), but his view of how Christians, as God's adopted children (Romans 8.15-17) become gradually transformed into the image of Christ, is a positive, goal-oriented perspective (for details, see 1 Corinthians 15.12-58). Furthermore, whereas the writers of the law lived in, and wrote for, a world defined by natural inequalities (e.g. Exodus 21.20; Leviticus 21.16-20, 25.44), Christ's death and resurrection implied, for Paul, a world which is ultimately egalitarian (Galatians 3.28).