

## Zeroing In on the Second Commandment

Exodus 20:22–26, Revelation 22:12–20

The title of my message this morning is “Zeroing In on the Second Commandment.”

The term *zeroing in* originates in military language, particularly in gunnery and artillery. When aiming a weapon, especially firearms with scopes, one would *zero in* the sights, ensuring that the point of aim matches the point of impact. This term began to be used in broader contexts to mean *focusing* or *narrowing down* on a topic.<sup>1</sup>

The reason I speak of “zeroing in” is this: earlier in our chapter God had spoken audibly over Mount Sinai, giving his people the summary of his holy law. The law spoken from heaven is what is called the *moral law*, that is, God’s eternal standard of right and wrong. God is unchanging. He says, “I am the LORD, I change not” (Mal. 3:6). His law is an expression of his holy character. Since God does not change, his moral law does not change. It is binding upon all men, women and children in every time and place. It is written on men’s hearts. All people everywhere know intuitively that they must obey the God of heaven, and that someday they will give account to him at the final judgment.

Hopefully you have memorized the Ten Commandments and taught them to your children. Hopefully you meditate upon them day and night and refer to them as you make moral decisions. If not, then today is a good day to begin.

The second of the ten commandments has to do with worship: man’s duty is to “worship God” (Rev. 22:9); this duty cannot be set aside but remains binding upon all men in every age. Though it is no longer appropriate to offer animal sacrifices, as under the old covenant, the fundamental duty to worship remains. “Blessed is the people whose God is the LORD.” We must be worshippers!

When Yahweh spoke over Sinai, he solemnly told his people what he required: absolute, perfect obedience: loyalty and fidelity to himself as Creator, King and Benefactor, the Lord and giver of life, the source of all good; also love and service to our fellow man, fellow-sharers of the image of God. God requires man to love him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength; he requires us to love our neighbor with charity and intentionality. We all fall short of this ideal. Sin is the transgression of God’s law<sup>2</sup>: any deviation or omission, whether intentional or unintentional, from his high and holy standards, rooted in the divine perfections.

God’s moral law begins with four commandments that tell us how we must love God: by having no other gods but him alone, by worshipping him as he himself appointed in his word, by using his name reverently, by reserving his day for him.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://usdictionary.com/idioms/zeroing-in-on-something/> accessed 2-22-25

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 3:4

The last six commandments require loving our neighbor by preserving human life, forsaking immorality, protecting our neighbor's property and good name, and being fully content with the goods that God has committed to us. We must love God and our fellow man perfectly

Such is a very brief summary of the Ten Commandments. As we saw last week, when the people heard God speak from heaven, they were terrified. They said to Moses, "*You* speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die." So Moses went up on the mountain to receive God's commandments at his mouth. What we have in the remainder of Exodus 20, which we are beginning today, as well as chapters 21–23, which we will continue in the coming weeks, is Moses' transcription of God's words, what he calls the "Book of the Covenant." I have three points: (1) Follow instructions! (2) No idols! (3) No tools! First,

### **1. Follow instructions!**

Our text begins: "Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Thus you shall say to the children of Israel: "You have seen that I have talked with you from heaven. You shall not make anything to be with Me"' (vv. 22–23a).

What the LORD is saying is that he wants man's undivided *loyalty*. Nothing in life is to become more important than God himself. This is pretty basic. After all, God is *God!* If something is our god, then it is the most important thing in our life. Is the God of heaven *truly* your God? Is your ultimate loyalty to him? Do you identify first and foremost as his servant? Do you love him with all your heart, soul, mind and strength? What God is interested in more than anything else is your *heart*. He is not pleased with simply going through the motions of worship. He wants your heart. Can you say, "For me to live is Christ; my heart I offer to you, Lord, promptly and sincerely; however you want to use me, Lord, I am ready and willing; your will is best"?

Jesus said, "If anyone comes to Me and does not *hate* his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:26). Our love for the God who calls us into covenant with himself must be so strong that it eclipses everything and everyone else. Our love for father, mother, wife, children, brothers and sisters, is good and right. It is part of our fifth commandment duty: "Honor thy father and thy mother." The Heidelberg Catechism, summarizing this duty, asks, "What is God's will for you in the fifth commandment?" The answer: "That I show honor, love, and faithfulness to my father and mother and all those in authority over me." It is good and right and honorable to hold parents and family in high regard. But if we love them *supremely*—if they hold that first place in our heart that belongs to God alone—then we sin. God must be first. Christ says, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." If God is first in our heart and life, then everything else will fall into place and our life will be in balance. If

*anything* else, no matter how important, shares first place in our life, then God is not really first after all. We are not to advance anything or anyone else up to the place of God. This is the matter of priorities, what is most important in our life. Christ and his kingdom—his supreme rule over our life—must be first. His worship must be first. He is king, and we owe him first place in our life.

The first part of verse 23 stands alone in the ancient Hebrew punctuation.<sup>3</sup> The wording in the original is literally, “You shall not make with me.” That is where the clause ends. A direct object is wanting, and thus implied. What should that be? The New King James Version rightly adds the italicized phrase “anything to be.” “You shall not make *anything to be* with Me.” This is a superior translation to the KJV, NASB or ESV. “You shall not make *anything to be* with Me.” Anything that sinful man puts to be alongside God is an idol.

Are you putting anything *alongside* God? Or maybe—heaven forbid—you are putting something *above* God! If so, then you are an idolator. This is not some picayune, outdated requirement. This is God’s unchanging moral law, requisite of every man, woman and child on earth. If something else—even something that’s important in and of itself—is as important to you as the living and true God, then you are no different than a worshipper offering incense in a heathen temple, you are no different than a man or woman bowing down before some grotesque image.

As we read in our New Testament text, “Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city. But *outside* are dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and whoever loves and practices a lie.” Those who go to heaven, who have a right to the tree of life and enter into the celestial city, are those who live by God’s commandments. (None of us does this perfectly, and therefore we are totally dependent on the perfect righteousness of Christ, imputed to us.) “Outside” are “idolaters”—ranked right up there with the sexually immoral, murders, and liars. If you make *anything* in your life to be *with* God, then you will be excluded from heaven at the final day. Your final destiny will be with the demons of hell!

The bottom line: “follow instructions.” Listen to God’s Word. His worship is most important to him. He made us to have fellowship with himself—to sing his praises eternally with the angels of heaven. If we judge anything to be *on a par* with God, or *more important* than God, then we are idolaters who will face his judgment. Secondly,

## **2. No idols!**

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<sup>3</sup> Gill observes, “Ye shall not make with me, . . . This is a proposition of itself, as appears by the accent Athnach placed at the end of it, which divides it from the following, and therefore ‘gods of silver’ belong to the next clause or proposition” (e-Sword).

After saying, “You shall not make *anything to be* with Me,” God says specifically, “gods of silver or gods of gold you shall not make for yourselves.”

Silver and gold are precious metals, valued for their beauty, utility and rarity. Last week President Trump called for an audit of the gold held at Fort Knox, Kentucky. Is it really there? The last audit was conducted in 1976—before many of you were born.

The bottom line: gold and silver are desirable. There is wisdom in having them in your portfolio. If paper dollars lose their value, then it is good to have precious metals. Gold is currently trading at almost \$3,000 per ounce. At the time that President Roosevelt confiscated all Americans’ gold, it was worth \$20 per ounce. But if we make gold or silver the most precious thing in our life, we become an idolator. We will have sold our soul to the devil. “Gods of silver or gods of gold you shall not make for yourselves.” That is the word of God: No idols!

Here is a reiteration of the second commandment, “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.” It’s important to point out that this commandment has to do with *worship*. “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.” The verbs *bow down to* and *serve* refer to worship.

The word translated *bow down to* occurs a lot of times—170 in all. It clearly refers to worship. “Exalt the LORD our God, and *worship* at His footstool—He is holy” (Ps. 99:5). “I will *worship* toward Your holy temple” (Ps. 5:7).

The word “serve” refers to worship as well, as is evident from the familiar words of Psalm 100, “*Serve* the LORD with gladness: come before his presence with singing.” When the church gathers in the presence of Christ to worship God, we are to serve him with our whole being. We should not let ourselves become distracted. Our full attention should be on God.

As I’ve talked to people over the years—even ministers—I’ve found that there is a lot of misunderstanding about this commandment. I once dialogued with the pastor of a large church in our area which was having an Easter play with a man playing the part of Jesus carrying his cross down the church aisle and being crucified on a large cross up on stage. I pointed out that the second commandment forbids making pictures of God, and that Jesus Christ is God; therefore, the second commandment forbids making pictures of Jesus. The pastor justified his Easter play by saying, “What the Bible forbids is making *engraved* images, and having a man play the part of Jesus in a play is not an engraved image; therefore, that’s OK.”

Notice the piling up of synonyms for worship in the parallel text Leviticus 26:1, “You shall not make *idols* for yourselves; neither a *carved image* nor a *sacred pillar* shall you rear up for yourselves; nor shall you set up an *engraved stone* in

your land, to *bow down* to it; for I am the LORD your God.” Clearly, this list is *suggestive*, not *exhaustive*: no matter what technology one might use to make an idol to worship, it is forbidden. God does not want anybody play-acting or pretending to worship an idol. It is offensive to a holy God. The Christian is to offer God the pure worship appointed in his Word.

Note that the second commandment forbids two things: making an image that is to be worshipped, and bowing down and worshipping and serving any image. While there is a legitimate place for artwork, if it is not being worshipped, we are not to make any image in order to worship it. If an image becomes an object of worship, it must be destroyed. “All idols underfoot be trod; the Lord is God, the Lord is God.”

What is the most important thing in your life? Is it your career, family, success, pleasure, popularity, sports? If so, it is an idol, and you must give it up.

To recap: (1) Follow instructions! (2) No idols! Thirdly

### **3. No tools!**

Our text continues: “An altar of earth you shall make for Me, and you shall sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen. In every place where I record My name I will come to you, and I will bless you. And if you make Me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stone; for if you use your *tool* on it, you have profaned it.”

Note well: no tools! The worship we offer God must be that which he himself has appointed in his Holy Word—nothing more, nothing less.

When the Israelites built an altar, they were to use natural stones, not hewn stones. They were not to dress the stones with a tool. An altar is made up of stones. Hebrews says, “We have an altar.”<sup>4</sup> That altar is Christ. He is the priest, he is the sacrifice, and he is the altar. Man must not build an altar of hewn stone.

Some people might protest and say, “Isn’t God being a little picky here? Isn’t the *heart* what matters? If a man truly wants to worship God but likes to square off stones, so that they stack more uniformly, isn’t that a *good* thing? Doesn’t God want *more* of his people to worship? Why is God being so picky, turning people off by making worship more unpalatable to man’s taste?” Now if that is what you think, then you will have to take up the matter with God. All I am doing is telling you what God says. Don’t forget that God, through his word, is the one who orders worship. God is sovereign. It is his right to tell us how we are to worship.

The church’s worship ought to be Word-centered. The church ought to *read* the word, *preach* the word, *sing* the word, *pray* the word, *practice* the word. The word of Christ is to dwell in us richly. It ought to be on the lips of God’s people as we teach and admonish one another. God’s people ought to be conversant with God’s

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<sup>4</sup> Heb. 13:10

words. The only way that happens is if every aspect of God's worship is Word-centered. Substituting cute little manmade ditties for the robust Psalms and hymns that God requires is like substituting Kool Aid for the wine of communion. It is unpalatable to God.

A lot of churches are dropping the use of Psalms and hymns. They have a musical performance by a "worship team" rather than congregational singing. But worship must not be tooled according to the likes and dislikes of man. It is not a concert.

I invite you to check out the handy chart "Worship vs. Concerts" on our website. Some of the points: worship is a necessity (required by God), concerts are not a necessity (*not* required by God); worship contains all the biblical elements of worship: prayer, congregational singing, reading of the Holy Scriptures, preaching, sacraments, vows; does not contain any elements *not* required; concerts often contain elements inappropriate for worship (e.g. video clips, dance, drama, special effects, applause). There's more; find the whole chart "Worship vs. Concerts" on our website, [all-of-grace.org](http://all-of-grace.org), under Resources.<sup>5</sup>

The lesson here is that man is duty-bound to worship God exactly as he himself appointed in his holy Word. Man is not free to change the worship God specifies in Holy Scripture for any reason, including making it more palatable to man's taste. Man is not free to set aside any element of worship, nor add or substitute any humanly-devised element of worship. Man must not design a worship service according to *man's* taste or preference. The purpose of worship is not to please *man* but to please *God*. A concert-and-TED-talk format might be popular and draw a bigger crowd, but if God is not pleased, what is the benefit? If God finds such worship distasteful and wants to spew you out of his mouth, what's the use? Isn't the point of worship to please God? Would he have gone to the trouble of specifying the kind of worship he wants if it were not important to him?

When a man and a woman meet each other and start to get to know one another, they start to find out what each other's tastes are in food, in entertainment, in hobbies, in leisure-time activities, and so forth. The central thing that every couple should agree on is how important is *God* in each other's life. A person who loves God with all his heart, soul, mind and strength is not to be unequally yoked together with a person who loves something else more than God. Now if you are already married and find out that you and your spouse are not equally committed to God, then that is something that you must work on. But if you are not married, but contemplating marriage, then talking about priorities—especially spiritual priorities—is absolutely vital.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://all-of-grace.org/resources/worship-or-concert>

Why do churches abandon biblical worship? Because they seek popularity more than pleasing God. They want more attenders and bigger offerings more than pure worship. This is sin. They need to repent. God tells them, “Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent.”<sup>6</sup>

Sinners need a Savior. Christ is the Savior of sinners. If you call upon his name, he will save you.

Today, we have zeroed in on the second commandment: “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.” This commandment requires us all to worship the true God in the manner that he has appointed in his word—and no other way. Let us recommit ourselves to biblical worship. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Rev. 2:5