

God Beyond Our Imagination
Deuteronomy 5:8-10

Introduction

1 Cor. 2:9

Isa. 46:5

Deuteronomy 5:8-10

Exposition

Background

As we study the second commandment, we must understand something about their setting. Idolatry has been a ubiquitous practice throughout all the world in all human history. As one OT scholar put it, “In paying homage to an idol, the pagan worshipper believed that the life of a god was present in the statue that represented the supposed deity. In bringing offerings of food and drink, the devotee gave evidence to the belief that the image was alive with the spirit of the god.” So, when we come to verses 8-10, we are encounter a common practice among pagans that the LORD was calling His people to refrain from because He alone could reveal what He is truly like and worthy of in worship.

I. The What of the Second Commandment (Vv. 8-9a)

Let’s look at verses 8-9a again:

⁸ You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. ⁹ You shall not bow down to them or worship them;

As I have already mentioned, an image was understood to be a representation of the supposed deity. The most infamous example of this among the Israelites is the incident of the golden calf. If you recall, Moses was still on Mt. Sinai receiving the law from the LORD, and the people compelled Aaron to make them an image from their gold. They wanted an image to represent their god, just like all the other nations around them.

Here in Deuteronomy 5:8-9, the LORD forbids such image-making. It is interesting that the LORD notes these three realms: heaven above, earth beneath, the water below. The LORD left nothing from which the people could draw a representative image for Him. The reason for this is because there was no image in all of those realms that could represent Him. The LORD alone could reveal what He was like to His people, and an image based on these created realms could never do it. Thus, the LORD forbade the making of images that supposedly represented him. God was not like the gods of the nations, which is what we saw last week with the first commandment.

II. The Why of the Second Commandment (Vv. 9b-10)

Let's look at verses 9b-10:

For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, ¹⁰ but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

The first thing that we notice as we read these verses is the LORD's declaration of His jealousy for His people. Now, we looked at this a few weeks ago in Deuteronomy 4, where the LORD declared His jealousy for His people like a husband declares his jealousy for his wife. The covenantal relationship between God and His people means that they are committed to one another. As one OT scholar (Mark Rooker) wrote, "God becomes jealous when His people worship other gods and idols. We may understand the jealousy of God as his fervent and passionate protection of what is rightfully His." So, to encounter a jealous God in verse 9 should not surprise us because He love His people and desires to protect them.

But you may ask, "How does jealousy relate to protection?" Christopher Wright puts it this way:

Divine jealousy is in fact an essential function of divine love. It is precisely because God wills our good that he hates the self-inflicted harm that our idolatry generates. God's conflict with the gods is ultimately for our own good as well as for God's glory. This further highlights why idolatry is such a primary sin in the Bible – identified as such by the primacy of the first two commandments of the Decalogue. It is not merely that idolatry steals God's glory but it also thwarts God's love – the love that seeks the highest good of all God's creation. Idolatry therefore contradicts the very essence, the Goodness, of God, for "God is love."

The LORD's jealousy is not rooted in a desire to keep good things from us, but rather, to protect us from the harm that idolatry brings into you lives, which explains why the LORD mentions punishing children for the sins of the parents who hate Him and showing love to thousands of generations who love Him and keep His commandments.

At first, this language of "punishing the children for the sins of the parents" seems harsh, but that is probably because you are misreading the passage. The passage does not say that God punishes children for the sins of their parents, even if those children love him and obey His commandments. No, the passage says that the LORD punishes children for the sins of the parents, which means, "the LORD punishes children who practice the sins of their parents," which in this case, was graven idolatry.

Does God punish those who obey him? No. He does not punish those who disobey him. That would be unjust according to the covenant. So, when God says that He will "punish the children for the sins of the parents," he is dealing with the scenario when children imitate their parents. The children won't be spared just because they did not discover the sin on their own.

Hence, the warning of this command is that patterns of idolatrous sin in the families have repercussion for subsequent generations. And each generation has a responsibility to repent for their own sins and keep the terms of the covenant.

So, one of the reasons why God warns about idolatry and He declares His jealousy for His people is because He wants to spare them the generational repercussion that comes from practicing and tolerating idolatry.

Conclusion

We tend to prefer a “god” that is seen but not heard over a “god” who is heard by not seen because we can control the “non-speaking god.” We want a god that is portable. A god that we can decorate. A god that we can keep at bay. But the true God, the LORD, will not be manipulated or controlled or defined by our imagination or whims. He is beyond our imagination. He is greater than we can imagine.

Our propensity to fashion “gods” for ourselves is rooted in a misdirect desire to see god on our own terms in light of our own imagination.

Telford Work – “These manufactured images are not necessarily ‘other gods’ of other peoples, which the previous commandment already forbids, but products of Israel’s own distrustful imagination. Their qualities of lifelessness, fruitfulness, helplessness, and senselessness betray the hearts that conceived them. The only divine image that lives not engraved but incarnate, full of the Spirit of life, a fruit-bearing vine, helper of the helpless, and penetrating in his acuity – the polar opposite of these futile substitutes, the only begotten and therefore definitive sign of his Father’s heart.”

John 1