



# The Ten Commandments

Sermon Transcript  
April 17, 2016

True Worship  
Exodus 20:4-6

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on April 17, 2016 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio copy of the sermon on CD is available by request at (860) 563-8286. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at [www.wethefc.com](http://www.wethefc.com).

**Sermon Text**  
**Exodus 20:4-6**

4 “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or 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. 5 You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, 6 but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

**The Ten Commandments**

You shall have no other gods before me.  
You shall not make for yourself any idols.  
You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain.  
Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.  
Honor your father and your mother.  
You shall not murder.  
You shall not commit adultery.  
You shall not steal.  
You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.  
You shall not covet.

## Introduction

“You shall have no other gods before me.”

“You shall not make for yourself any idols.”

Perhaps you are wondering, “So what is the difference between the first commandment and the second commandment?” Last week when we looked at the first commandment, “you shall have no other gods before me,” we addressed the issue of idolatry. We noted last week that “idolatry is the most discussed problem in the Bible.”<sup>1</sup> Idolatry is something we all wrestle with and will struggle with until the day we die. Idolatry is loving something or trusting something more than God. The essence of the first commandment is that God must come first in our lives. God alone deserves our worship. And so now we come to the second commandment and we are instructed, “you shall not make for yourself any idols.” So, what is the difference between these first two commandments? Is there any difference between the two?

Roman Catholicism and the Lutheran tradition don’t see any difference between these first two commandments. In fact, in their listing of the Ten Commandments, they combine these two commandments as one commandment. Together, in their traditions, these two commandments make up the first commandment. Then they take what we call the tenth commandment and they divide it into two separate commandments. They make a distinction between coveting your neighbor’s wife and coveting your neighbor’s goods. But, here is the problem with dividing the Ten Commandments like that. For starters, you don’t see the Ten Commandments divided like this throughout Jewish history and tradition. But more importantly, there is a difference between the first and second commandment. The second commandment is addressing something that the first commandment is not.

Here is the difference between the first two commandments. The first commandment tells us “who” to worship. There is only one true God. God alone deserves our worship. The second commandment comes on the heels of the first commandment and tells us “how” to worship God. You are not free to worship God any way you want to.

Now I know this goes against our American principles. In 1941, President Roosevelt gave his State of the Union address at a time when Nazi Germany was already occupying most of Western Europe. In this famous speech, he was asking American citizens to sacrifice and support the war effort. In making this appeal, President Roosevelt envisioned a world that enjoyed four freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom of religion,

freedom from want and freedom from fear.” In other words, these are the freedoms we are fighting for through the war effort. The famous American artist, Norman Rockwell, captured the essence of these freedoms in four separate paintings. Rockwell’s paintings were often on the front cover of the most widely read magazine of the day, *The Saturday Evening Post*. Many believe that these four paintings went a long way to move the country to supporting the war effort and the vision presented by Roosevelt.

When President Roosevelt described the freedom of religion, he defined it this way. “The second freedom is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way—everywhere in the world.” Surely, as citizens of this country, that is a freedom we appreciate. It allows us to come and freely do what we do every Sunday. As you know, this is not a freedom enjoyed everywhere in the world. There are places throughout the world where our brothers and sisters in Christ can’t come together and safely gather like we are gathered here this morning. Furthermore, I think we would all agree that it would not be good for the state to dictate how someone worships or practices their faith. So yes, this is a wonderful freedom and we agree that it should be a freedom that is experienced throughout the world.

However, when you come to the second commandment, you discover that this is not a freedom granted to us by God. When it comes to the worship of God, we are not free “to worship God in our own way.” God has something to say about how we worship him. That is the point of the second commandment. Michael Horton puts it this way, “Not only does God command us to make sure we have the correct deity in mind when we worship, He also requires us to worship the correct God correctly.”<sup>2</sup> We don’t have the freedom to make up for ourselves “how” to worship and approach this holy God. Douma puts it this way, “the Lord in turn wants to be served in no other way than He has commanded. In sum: the first commandment points to the true God, the second to true religion.”<sup>3</sup> So the first commandment tells us to worship the right God. The second commandment tells us the right way to worship this God.

This means it is possible that you can have the right God in mind but the wrong worship. Perhaps that doesn’t seem too bad to you because at least you got the right God! But what I observed through my study this week is that when you break the second commandment it leads to the breaking of the first commandment. When we don’t worship God the way God has prescribed us to worship him, we are actually creating other gods in the process. When we worship God “in our own way” God is no longer the focus of our worship. Instead, we become the focus of our worship. So it is a serious thing to consider “how” we worship God. So “how” are we to worship God?

## No Images for God

When it comes to the worship of God, this commandment tells us that we are not to worship God through the use of images. This is where it is helpful to see how the first two commandments fit together. As already stated, the first commandment tells us who we are to worship. There is no one like God. God is beyond our comprehension. How can one even describe what God is like and do justice to it? Here is what Paul says of God in 1 Timothy 6:16, *“who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see.”* How do you even capture an accurate picture or image of the glory of God? Paul doesn’t even try. He just concludes with an appropriate word of awe and wonder, *“To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.”*

That being said, it is not as if we are without any understanding of what God is like. God has made himself known to us in a variety of ways. Creation tells us something about God. Psalm 19 tells us that *“the heavens declare the glory of God.”* Paul says in Romans 1:20 that when we look at creation, it is quite evident and pretty plain to see that there is a God and that this God is quite powerful. Therefore, he concludes, that God is worthy of receiving both thanks and honor. We also know something about God through Jesus. Through Jesus and through the cross, God tells us of his incredible love for us. *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son.”* And of course, we hold in our hands this morning, the inspired Word of God, the Bible. In the written Word of God, we find that God is all-wise. And so we are instructed in Proverbs 3 to *“Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and turn away from evil.”* Through creation, Jesus and God’s Word, we encounter the majestic God who had made himself known. Creation leads us to worship God. Jesus leads us to worship God. God’s Word leads us to worship God.

Make no mistake about it, the first commandment is a call to worship the one true God who has revealed himself to us and who is worthy of our worship. But, when you go to worship this great and awesome God, the second commandment tells us not to worship God through the use of images. When you go to worship God, *“you shall not make for yourself a carved image, or 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.”*

We find further explanation of this commandment in Deuteronomy 4:15. Here Moses reminds the people of Israel that when God came to them on Mount Sinai, he said, *“you saw no form.”* In other words, when God came to them on Mt. Sinai, he did not come to

them in any visible form. Rather, Moses reminds them, that God came to them through what was spoken. In Deuteronomy 4:12 he says, *“Then the LORD spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice.”* From this, he reminds them of the second commandment. He says in verse 16, *“beware lest you act corruptly by making a carved image for yourselves, in the form of any figure.”* He goes on to say that they are not to make an image of God in the form of a male or a female, of an animal on earth, a bird in the sky or a fish in the sea. Nor are they to look to the heavens and make an image of the moon, or the sun or the stars in their worship of God. Why? Because God came to them through his spoken Word. Tuck that into the back of your mind because that is going to be important at the end of the sermon as we consider the role of the Word of God and how we are to worship God.

There were several times in Israel’s history where they broke the second commandment and worshiped God through an image. Perhaps the most familiar scene where this takes place is when Moses is at the top of the Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments. If you recall, the people of Israel got impatient while Moses was at the top of the mountain. So they turned to Aaron in Exodus 32 and said to him, *“Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.”* As a result of this request, Aaron fashioned a golden calf.

The debate that emerges from this story is, “which of the commandments are the people of Israel breaking?” Is it the first commandment that forbids the worship of other gods? It appears that is what they are asking for by requesting *“make us other gods.”* There were Egyptian gods that took on the shape of a bull. Perhaps, it was harder to get Egypt out of the people of Israel than it was to get the Israelites out of the land of Egypt. And yet, “only one god” was fashioned out the of the gold they supplied. Furthermore, the Hebrew word translated “gods” is the Hebrew word *Elohim*. It is a plural word that can refer to many gods, or it can be used to refer to the one true God. It is also curious to note that once the golden calf is formed, Aaron says to the people, *“Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD.”* Do you remember what I told you last week? Whenever you see the name for God with all four capital letters, it is a reference to the sacred name for Israel’s God. They were not making a feast to an Egyptian god. It is not to say that the first commandment was not being broken here as well. But the primary commandment being broken was the second commandment. Douma says, “The Israelites were not intending to reject the Lord and go serve other gods, but they merely wanted to have Yahweh among them in a particular manner, a manner forbidden by the second commandment.”<sup>4</sup> Thus they worshiped God in their own way by crafting an image.

## Why the Second Commandment?

It is good to pause and ask the simple question, “Why?” Why are we not to make any images of God and use them to aid our worship of God? I mean, after all, we live in a visual age and perhaps these images could help us in our worship of God. Perhaps an image of God could help us feel a little closer to God and even experience God in a more personal and tangible way. But not so. In the end, images of God diminish the worship of God because they diminish the God we worship. Let me give you three ways visible images diminish the God we worship.

Majesty of God: First of all, there is no possible way to capture the majesty of God through an image. Any attempt to do so would greatly cheapen the glory of God. Just consider the scene at Mt. Sinai and how God came down to the mountain in an awesome display of power. There was lightning and fire and smoke and the mountain shook. This was but a tiny drop of the manifestation of the majesty and glory of God and the people couldn’t handle it. I think of the vision we have of the heavenly throne room of God in Revelation 4-5. Here we see angelic beings who are pretty awesome in their own right, but before the throne of God, these heavenly creatures can not stop saying, “*Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty.*” In this majestic scene, every creature is seen doing the same thing when they encounter the majesty of God. They fall before the throne of God and say together, “*Worthy are you, our Lord and God to receive glory and honor and praise.*” How do you even capture something like this through an image without diminishing the majesty of God?

When Paul comes into Athens for the first time he is struck by all the idols that he sees. Seeing a statute to “The Unknown God” he uses it as an opportunity to talk about the one true God. He says in Acts 17:24-25, “*The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. He is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.*” And so Paul concludes by saying in Acts 17, “*we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man’s design or skill.*” Philip Ryken says, “if God is the Creator and Giver of Life, then he cannot be squeezed into some man-made idol. How could the transcendent God be reduced to a mere object?”<sup>5</sup> Or, as Douma adds, “God is so majestic that he cannot be brought into man’s reach. How could Israel ever think to make an image of him?”<sup>6</sup> Isaiah asks the question in Isaiah 40:18, “*To whom then will you liken God, of what likeness compare with him? . . . Do you not know? . . . It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers.*”

The Rule of God: The rule of God in our lives is at stake when we reduce God down to an image. It is an issue of who is in control. Whoever forms the image is the one who is in control. That is exactly how an idol was used by the worshiper. It was used to manipulate the gods to serve the people. Ryken says, “The Egyptians did not think that the gods actually lived in their idols, but they did think that the idols gave them the kind of spiritual contact that would enable them to control their gods.”<sup>7</sup> You even hear this in the voice of the Israelites who turned to Aaron and requested, “*make us a god who will lead us.*” They wanted a god who would serve them. And so through the images they fashioned, the worshiper would attempt to coerce the gods to serve them. They thought by doing their religious duty they could obligate their god to serve them. But in reality, we are the ones made in the image of God. God is the one who formed the people of Israel into his people. And so through this commandment, God is saying that “he will not be captured, contained, assigned or managed by anyone or anything, for any purpose.”<sup>8</sup> Instead, Ryken adds, “God wants us to trust and obey him, not use him.”<sup>9</sup>

The Love of God: God’s love for us is compromised when we try to worship God through a image. An image provides a tangible meeting point between the deity and the worshiper. It provides a way to feel close to the god that is being worshiped. It is not that they believed the idol itself was god, but it did provide a touch-point with whatever god is being worshiped. But here is the thing with the people of Israel. They didn’t need an image or an idol to know the nearness and the intimacy of God. They had the covenant of God. They had the promise of God to be with them. The irony in all of this is that there was no god as close to his people as Israel’s God. They heard the voice of God and God made promise and covenant to be with them.

Instead of an image, again we are reminded that God has come to his people through the Word of God and we have all we need in God’s Word to know how near God is to us. In Deuteronomy 30, Moses is reminding the people of Israel that they are not left in the dark as to how to find God. They don’t have to go up to heaven to search for a word from God. They don’t have to get on a boat to sail across the sea as if the word of God is like some lost treasure. Rather, he reminds them of the love of God for them by saying to them, “*But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.*” He is reminding them, as they get ready to cross into the Promised Land, that God is with them and they have all they need in the Word of God.

The love of God for his people helps us understand what it means when God says “*for I the LORD your God am a jealous God.*” In the text, this is the stated reason why “*you shall not make for yourself a carved image, or 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 or serve them.”* Why? It says, “*for I the LORD your God am a jealous God.*” The way we often use the word “jealous” makes it hard for us to understand what it means for God to be jealous. But the word “jealous” speaks to the passion and zeal of God’s love for his people. We would understand the jealous feeling of a husband if he found his wife in the arms of another man. We would even say that he was right to feel that way. Just as we would expect a wife to return her husband’s love with her own love and devotion, so it is with God and his expectation for those whom he has loved. We are to return God’s love for us by loving and worshipping God in the way he has prescribed for us. We are to worship him in a way that is worthy of him and in a way that honors him. This commandment tells us that how we worship God is something that ought to concern us.

## **How To Worship God**

This brings us to the point where we consider how to live by this commandment. As you look around the room this morning, perhaps you might think we have this commandment down pretty well. Our tradition is not one that is given to using statutes and images to aid us in our worship. We have but one symbol in front of us and on top of our steeple—a cross. But we really don’t highlight it or have you come and pray in front of it or kneel in front of it. It is just a reminder of what Jesus has done for us. So, perhaps we can move on from the second commandment feeling pretty good about ourselves. I would caution you from quickly moving from this commandment to the next one without taking the time to evaluate how we worship God. Here are some things to think about when it comes to evaluating how we worship God.

Jesus: The Image of God - First of all, true worship of God is through Jesus Christ. In Colossians 1:15, we are told that Jesus is “*the image of the invisible God.*” What is interesting here is that the Greek word for “*image*” is the word *eikon*, from which we get the word *icon*. Jesus is the exact representation of God to us. The purpose of an idol is to have a point of contact with God. That is what Jesus actually provides for us. He was God in the flesh. True worship of God is through faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus is *the way, the truth and the life*. No one comes to God except through Jesus. And so Jesus has to be the focus of our worship.

Spirit and Truth - Jesus said in John 4 that “*God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship him in spirit and in truth.*” This is a reminder to us that God has spoken to us through Jesus and through the Scriptures and so the Word of God is central to our

worship of God. When Paul sends his instructions to Timothy on how to pastor the church under his care, he gives some instructions for what to do when they gather for worship. So he charges Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:13, “*Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.*” It is the same thing that described the early church in Acts 2 when they got together. They were devoted to *the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.* This tells us how we are to worship God in the church. Michael Horton says it this way, “somehow everyone must be involved in confession, prayer, thanksgiving, intercession, and praise. The sermon must always be central, the service must be reverent; and Holy Communion must have a prominent and well-defined place in confirming the proclamation of the Word of God.”<sup>10</sup> This is how we worship God when we come together.

God is the focus: I feel like I must say this. When it comes to the reverent worship of God, it does not mean that our worship cannot be contemporary. During the reformation, when the psalms were put to music, they were considered to be lively and they were given the scornful name “Geneva jigs.” In fact, Bach received the scorn of his contemporaries when some of the music he used for congregational singing was borrowed from the popular secular operas of the day.<sup>11</sup> There is something to be said about communicating timeless truths in the language of the culture. At the same time, as trends change, we must make sure that the principle that guides us is that God is the audience and that we are the actors in the drama of worship. It doesn’t matter if the style of worship comes from the eighteenth century or the twenty-first century. (Relatively speaking, both are contemporary.) What does matter is that God remains the focus of our worship and the elements he has prescribed for worship remain in our corporate worship.

Mental Images: We may not have visible images of God that we bow down to, but we do have mental images of God. God has revealed himself through his Word and so we must be willing to allow the Word of God to shape our image and our understanding of God. We are not free to make up our own opinion as to what God is like based on what we like and don’t like, or what we understand or don’t understand. The more secular our culture becomes, the more our culture wants to form an image of God that does not reflect how God has revealed himself to us. The challenge for the church, then, is to continue to confess the timeless truths of God as revealed to us through God’s Word. Remember, the Word of God is sufficient. We have what we need to know and worship God. That means we need to accept the things we read about God that those around us may not like. We can’t fashion a God based what we think God should be like. Our image of God must be shaped by God’s Word.

Worship Matters: My last thought is simply this; worship matters. The first four commandments are all about the worship of God. So this is not some side issue of life. It is “the issue” of life and so it is important not just to worship the right God but to worship God correctly. I just want to bring attention to the last statement of this passage. *“I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.”* We do know from Scripture that each person is accountable for their own sin. However, how we worship God does impact those around us. This verse especially addresses the fathers. Men, you are the spiritual leaders of your home. How you worship God has an impact on the lives of your children. You make sure that the weekly worship of God through the church is your priority. Not monthly worship or a couple times a month, but weekly. This is “how” we worship God as God’s people. Corporate worship is essential to our faith and you will teach your kids more about how to worship God by what you do than what you say. So heed the warning and rest in the promise. Lead your family in the worship of God. It is your highest calling as a father.

## Conclusion

God is concerned about how we worship him and he has not left us without instruction. We are to worship him through Jesus.. We are to worship him through the Word of God, it is sufficient for all we need. We are to worship him as he has revealed himself to us, allowing God to be God. We are to make him the sole object of our worship. Finally, we are to worship God corporately as the body of Christ. *“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to you, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.”*

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<sup>1</sup>Os Guinness and John Seel *No God But God* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992)

<sup>2</sup>Michael Horton (Chicago: Moody Press, 1993)

<sup>2</sup>Douma *The Ten Commandments: Manual for the Christian Life* (Phillippsburg: P&R Publishing, 1992) 35-36

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 36

<sup>5</sup>Philip Ryken *Exodus* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2005) 573

<sup>6</sup>Douma, 42

<sup>7</sup>Ryken, 575

<sup>8</sup>Walter Brueggeman *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1997) 184-185

<sup>9</sup>Ryken 575

<sup>10</sup>Horton

<sup>11</sup>Ibid

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**COMMUNITY  
GROUPS**

## **Getting To Know Me Questions**

1. What place have you visited that you would like to go back to again?
2. Spend some time as a group reciting the Ten Commandments together and rehearsing the Q & A catechism for this week. Open with a time of prayer. Reflecting on the second commandment and the catechism for this week, what do you want to thank God for? What do you want to confess? What do you want to ask God to help you with in living out this commandment?
3. Share what you learned about the second commandment this week. Put into your own words the difference between the first and second commandments.

## **Diving Into The Word**

4. Read Deuteronomy 4:9-19. Discuss what the Israelites saw and didn't see when God came to them. Talk about what they heard when God came to them at Mt. Sinai. How does this form the basis for "how" they are to worship God? What is forbidden? Why? What do you think this tells us about the sufficiency of the Word of God in our worship of God?
5. Read Isaiah 40:21-31. Discuss what you discover about God and his attributes from this passage. What from this passage causes you to worship God? Compare this to Acts 17:29 and discuss how an idol or an image of God diminishes the glory of God.
6. Read Colossians 1:15; 2 Corinthians 4:4; Hebrews 1:3 and John 14:9. Discuss what these verses tell us about the role of Jesus in our worship of God. What does this say to us about "how" we should worship God.
7. Read Exodus 20:4-6 and talk about the idea of God being a "jealous God" and consider the warning and the promise that comes with this commandment. What do these verses tell you about the issue of worship and how does it impact how you approach worship?
8. Read Acts 2:42; 1 Timothy 4:13 and Hebrews 10:21-25. How should we worship in light of what we read in these verses? What are your thoughts about corporate worship and what it should look like:?

## **Taking It Home**

9. What do you want to do to prepare your heart for corporate worship on Sunday?