

“God’s Rules For Living Today” (Part 3)
“No Idols. No Taking the Name of the Lord in Vain”

Today in this series on the Ten Commandments we will look at the 2nd and 3rd commandments. The second commandment is found in Exodus 20, verses 4 through 6: “You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments” This commandment ties in with the first commandment, “You shall have no other gods before me.” It forbids making an image, idol, or representation of God and worshipping that image.

Israel at the time, and for much of her history, was surrounded by cultures where people made religious idols out of wood or stone or clay. Remember, even while Moses was up on the mountain getting the commandments the impatient Israelites at the foot of the mountain melted down their gold jewelry and made an idol shaped like a calf. They then said this was the god who delivered them from Egypt!

Later on, the prophets would chastise God’s people when they gave in to this temptation. The prophet Isaiah said, “Ignorant are those who carry about idols of wood, who pray to gods that cannot save” (Isaiah 45:20). He mocks the whole idea of worshiping a wood or metal figure that can’t even move itself: “Some pour out gold from their bags and weigh out silver on the scales; they hire a goldsmith to make it into a god, and they bow down and worship it. They lift it to their shoulders and carry it; they set it up in its place, and there it stands. From that spot it cannot move. Even though someone cries out to it, it cannot answer; it cannot save them from their troubles” (Isaiah 46:6-7). Its ridiculous, isn’t it, to take something we fashion with our hands and treat it like a god! Imagine trying to capture the totality of all God is in one figure made of wood or metal or stone – elements that God Himself has created!

Fortunately, today, in more civilized societies, we don’t have this today, do we? This is one commandment we do pretty well with, huh? You don’t see many people making little wooden idols or metal idols and worshipping them – at least not in our country.

But the truth is, we can make an idol out of anything and bow down to it! We can make an idol out of our home, or car or truck! I once heard a very dedicated Christian talk about going home from church and washing his car that day. He apparently valued that car a lot, because he said rather tongue-in-cheek, “I’m going home and polish my idol!” We can make an idol out of another person – we even have a TV program, “American Idol”! We can make a god out of a lot of things (as I said in last week’s message), and worship that idol. Anything that we devote ourselves to and value more than God can be an idol.

But there is another meaning to this second commandment against idol making. *We can make and worship a God of our own creation.* Sometimes the false god we create and worship is not made with our *hands*, but manufactured in our *head* – in our *mind* and *thoughts*.

We can create for ourselves a god who is just like we want God to be – a god who suits our own ideas and beliefs and tastes. Somebody has said, “God has made us in His own image; we are always trying to return the favor by making God in our image” Christian author Charles Allen talks about this. “It is so much easier to make God like ourselves than for us to be like Him. .. God tells us not to do wrong, but there are some things we want to do, right or wrong. So we create a God who doesn’t care what we do. We think of the God of the blue skies, majestic mountains and lovely flowers, but turn our backs on the god who said, ‘You have robbed in tithes and offerings’ (Malachi 3:8) or the God who said, ‘Whatever a man sows, that shall he also reap’ (Galatians 6:7)...it is so much easier to whittle God down to our size instead of repenting, changing our way of living, and being godly ourselves.”

It’s much easier to have a god who fits our own tastes than to let ourselves be confronted by the Living God revealed in the Bible and in the Person of Jesus! Wallace Fisher, in his book on the Ten Commandments, includes a dialogue from the old *All In the Family* TV show, where we see Archie Bunker shaping God into Archie Bunker’s image of what God ought to be! Archie, who is not a churchgoer, but sort of a self-confessed believer, is talking with his neighbor, George Jefferson, who is black. The conversation between the two men goes like this:

Archie: You an atheist? George: No. I believe in God.

Archie: That’s nice...interestin’, too! I mean how the black people went from worshippin’ snakes and beads and wooden idols...all the way up to our God.

George: What do you mean, your God?

Archie: Well, he’s the white man’s God, ain’t he?

George: That ain’t necessarily so. What makes you think God isn’t black?

Archie: Because God created man in his own image, and you’ll note, I AIN’T BLACK!

Anne Lamott has said, “You can safely assume you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.” Henry Fairlie, in *Leadership* magazine, talked about how some people invent their own god with their “do-it-yourself God Kits”! Actress Sarah Michelle Gellar, star of the TV show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, once said, “I consider myself a spiritual person. I believe in an idea of god, although it’s my own personal ideal. I find most religions interesting, and I’ve been to every kind of denomination: Catholic, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist. I’ve taken bits from everything and customized it.” In other words, you create your own god, cafeteria style – pick and choose what you want your god to be like).

The second commandment forbids our manufacturing our own God- either with our hands, or in our head - then worshiping it!

God says in this commandment that He is a “jealous” God – God will not share His glory with anyone else. The God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Jesus alone is the God worthy of our worship and service!

Let’s move on to the third commandment. In the traditional version of this commandments, as in the King James Version, it says: “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain. For the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain” (Exodus 20:7). In Hebrew thought, a person’s *name* referred to his or her “*character*” or *personhood*”. And the phrase, “in vain” means that which is unreal or untrue. So, this is a commandment against *misrepresenting God’s name and character in the way we speak of God*. In the New International Version translation this commandment is rendered in this way: “You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.” And in the Common English Bible translation it says, “Do not use the Lord your God’s name as if it were of no significance.”

Usually, this commandment is thought to be against *swearing* or *profanity*. Yes, that is part of it. *We can take the name of the Lord in vain through profanity – using god’s name as a curse or to emphasize a point*. Kids can swear to show that they are tough, or “grownup”. Adults can swear to fit in with the people at work, or parties, or simply out of habit. I really don’t need to tell you, do I, that the use of profanity has escalated today, in movies, television shows, books, and ordinary conversation. This kind of language used to be limited to pay the TV channels, but now it’s on sit-coms, afternoon soap operas, and movies on the regular television channels. A man was painting on a step ladder, and he fell off and knocked the paint can off too, with paint going all over the floor. His little boy was nearby. Later in the house the youngster’s mother asked what daddy said when he fell. The boy asked, “Do you want me to leave out the bad words?” “Of course,” the mother replied. “What did daddy say?” The son said, “Nothing.”

What’s so bad about profanity? Well, it misrepresents the character of God! When we attach God’s name to the word “d-a-m-n” we’re calling on God to harm others, or we’re associating God with our anger or frustration or vindicate spirit. That’s *not* what God is like. But we may argue, “I don’t really think about all that when I curse. It’s just a habit and I don’t mean any harm.” Still, we’re disregarding God’s true nature of holiness and love.

John Stossel was hosting an episode of the TV program 20/20 and did a piece on how children today are using foul language to a degree never before in our society. After the segment he commented that he didn’t see that this was that big a deal. Jesus had a different opinion. He said, “The mouth speaks what the heart is full of. . .I tell you that everyone will have to give an account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matthew 12:34, 36). How we *speak* of God reflects how much or how little we reverence God in our hearts!

But the command not to misuse God’s name means more than just cursing or swearing. *We misuse God’s name whenever we speak God’s name casually or thoughtlessly*. Some of the ancient Jews would not even speak the name of God. They revered God’s name and

character so much that they wouldn't even verbalize the name "God". We see this, for example, in the gospel according to Matthew. Matthew was a Jew, writing primarily to Jews. And instead of using the title "kingdom of *God*" Matthew uses the term "kingdom of *heaven*". Some of the early Christians who copied the Scriptures by hand (before the printing press was invented), prior to copying God's name on the manuscript, would wash their hands, then after they wrote it, they would wash their hands again. I have a friend who in his texts and emails, if he's referring to God, types G – d, rather than the name "God".

Even in our *praying* we can use the words "God" or "Jesus" or "Lord" thoughtlessly – like filler, sort of a punctuation mark while think of what to say next in our prayer!

Then too, we take the name of Lord in vain *when we take vows and make promises in God's name, and don't keep them*. When parents have their child baptized or dedicated to God, when we are confirmed or join a church, when we get married in a religious ceremony we make promises in the name of God. If we take these vows lightly or break them we are mistreating God's name and character.

We can also use God's name when we to support a lie. Think how many times in a court of law people lie, even though they promise to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth, "so help me God"! In ordinary life we can say things like "honest to God" or "so help me God" to try to convince people that we're telling the truth. It's much better to build a reputation for telling the truth, so we don't have to resort to using God's name in oaths to try to convince people to believe us!

We're finishing up this third commandment, "You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name" (Exodus 20:7).

The underlying thing God is saying in this commandment is, "Treat Me and My name with respect and reverence. Don't misuse and misrepresent My name and character." There is a story told about Alexander the Great. Alexander heard about a man who had committed a number of crimes. It so happened this scoundrel's name was also Alexander. So the emperor one day called this man in and said to this other Alexander, "You can't go on living the way you do and bear my name. Either change your ways or change your name."

God's name and character is holy. May we always treat it that way!

*Harry L. Kaufhold, Jr.
Community United Methodist Church
September 27, 2020*

