

**“LIVING GOD’S WAY – 3: NO IDOLS”**  
*Exodus 20:4-6; Isaiah 44:9-20*

We’re moving on this morning to the next of the responses that the people of God are to make to their Creator and Liberator – the second of our “Maker’s Instructions” or Ten Commandments. As we’ve seen already, these commandments were given to humanity by God in order to allow them to respond to his saving and sustaining love. Last week, Liz talked to us about the first of the commandments – an instruction to remember that the Lord God Almighty was the only God and deserved their full allegiance, so that they wouldn’t go off after the gods of the surrounding cultures. And we saw that Jesus’ interpretation of that commandment was to say that we must ensure that there is no room for any other god in our lives by devoting our whole beings – heart, mind, soul and strength – to God and loving him in all that we do and think. He is to be our top priority, the one to whom we give the best of our time, energy and resources. As Liz reminded us, “*For all that he’s done, I’m going to make him Number One*”.

Now, usually we tend to put these two commandments together and assume that the second is merely an expansion of the first. We are to have no other gods and to ensure that there is no way in which we try to represent these rivals for our allegiance to God in solid, or visual, form. It’s about **making** things, which is what that wonderfully sarcastic passage from *Isaiah 44* is all about. This is what is behind the Islamic prohibition of representational art, for example. But the more I think about it, the more it seems to me that it’s not the case that it simply follows from the previous commandment. We are not talking about other gods here.

God has already made it clear that he is the only God. He doesn’t need to repeat it. And all the other commandments are quite distinct one from another, so why should the second one not fit into that pattern? What I believe God is saying here is that we should not attempt to visualise, to create our own images of what **God** is like. Not only is the worship of **other gods** forbidden, but also the worship of erroneous images of the One True God. God needs to have priority in our lives – that much was made clear in the very first and foundational commandment – but we are not then to worship God only in the way we ourselves think is appropriate.

Why not, though? Surely we need some kind of **thing** to represent God, to help us in our worship of him, don’t we? After all, Jesus used a number of images to help people grasp what he was all about – Shepherd, Door, Light, Lamb and so on. Well, no. For one thing, God says that he is a “*jealous God*” (v5) – just like us, he does not want to be stereotyped, to be thought of for only one aspect of his character. We resent it, don’t we, if someone says of us, “*He’s only interested in football*”, or “*She doesn’t think of anything but shopping*” or whatever (even if it’s true!). Jesus tells us in *John 4:24* that “*God is spirit and his worshippers must worship him in spirit and in truth.*”

God did not want to be represented in physical form or any form that could become limiting. In *Deuteronomy 4:12,15-18* that is emphasised and many times throughout the Bible we are reminded that no-one has seen God – so no-one can accurately represent him. The people of Israel tried to do so in the form of a golden bull – it certainly signified strength, but what about the other aspects of God’s character, and what about the aspects of the bull that had nothing to do with God at all? Not to mention the fact that the bull was used by many other pagan religions as a representation of their gods (notably the later cult of Mithras, which was graphically portrayed in the first episode of *Rome* last week).

Yet we still fall into the same trap today – God as an old man with a white beard, God as tyrannical judge, God as a sentimental shepherd (which is also a false picture of shepherds, too), God as some kind of ecclesiastical superman, God as the supernatural fixer who finds us parking spaces and sorts out the consequences of our own petty carelessness. Maybe we’re too sophisticated to think of God as a bearded grandfather, the celestial Father Christmas, but we still conjure up our images of him, our ideas of what

we think he should be like. And then what happens? Let me suggest four things that can happen if we make an idol of God, if we dream up our own special picture of him.

## **1. WE MAKE HIM FIT INTO OUR OWN SCHEMES**

Once we have formed our own little image of God we have effectively brought him down to size, we have got a god whom we can manipulate. And so we can fit him in where we want and use him to justify all kinds of things that are simply our own human way of behaving. For instance, if we concentrate solely on the idea that God is love (and, yes, it does say that in the Bible, but not **only** that) then love can become the only thing that actually matters and we end up projecting back on to God our own human version of love. In the extreme cases where there is a perverted view of what love is anyway (usually mixed in with a good deal of lust), then our view of God becomes perverted and distorted – the sect which was very popular in the 1960s and 1970s called The Children of God is a good example of that.

We then end up living and behaving in ways that have very little to do with what the Bible teaches, yet we justify it in the name of God. God the anti-communist or anti-Muslim is invoked in the blessing of bombs and military personnel. God the acceptor of all men and women is used to bless the union of adulterers and homosexuals. God the Protestant, God the Catholic, God the Orthodox is forever being paraded in parts of Latin America, Northern Ireland, the new Russian republics. The God who talks to George W Bush can be used to justify almost anything.

There are those who go so overboard on the image of God as the Healer that everything then becomes seen in those terms – if you like, their idol is a doctor: God in a white coat with a stethoscope around his neck. That's limiting God, that's making a graven image and fitting him in where we want him. He becomes just another bit tacked on to our lives. As we've just heard, Isaiah is very hard on those who try to make their own gods just as they want them.

## **2. WE CAN PUT HIM AWAY WHEN WE WANT**

This is really the corollary of that, the opposite idea. If you can fit God in where you want because you've brought him down to size, you can also put him away when you want. If he is just an idol – physically or in our minds – then we can make sure he doesn't get a look in to things where we don't want him, or so we like to think. Liz said last week about asking where God is in the car of our life and one place we could put him is locked up in the boot. That's exactly what this commandment is all about.

Some of you may remember Alf Garnett in *Till Death Do Us Part*. When he was getting ready for bed at night, he used to turn over the picture of the Queen on the wall, so that she wouldn't see him taking his trousers off. In some high churches, the face of the Blessed Virgin Mary is covered over on Good Friday so that she doesn't have to see the sufferings of her son. Well, that's just what we end up doing when we have created an image of God – he can be put away, turned around when we don't want him interfering with our plans, when we think he might be watching us (disapprovingly or otherwise), when we don't want to be reminded of his presence.

If we've got to the stage of just dragging God in to justify our own ideas, then there's nothing to stop us pushing him out when we don't want him messing things up for us. The current trend for removing any reference to Christ in public places seems to me to be part of this. Taking a cross permanently out of a crematorium is a way of trying to ignore the fact that God is there. Removing Christ from Christmas is a rejection of all that Christmas actually means. Trying to silence preachers is an attempt to prevent God's inconvenient voice being heard. And I reckon we do it pretty often within the church as well. Why? Well, thirdly ...

### **3. WE CAN CUT OUT THOSE THINGS WE DON'T LIKE**

If we're making our own idols, our own images of what we think God is like, then we can sanitise them to leave out any aspect which think is undesirable. That's most clearly portrayed in the ways in which we picture Christmas or Easter. The soft-focus, squeaky-clean pictures of a gurgling baby in a manger that we will expensively exchange with each other in just a few weeks time are nothing like the picture of a smelly, squalid cow-shed round the back of a pub that Jesus more likely arrived in. Whatever else you may think of Mel Gibson's *The Passion Of The Christ*, it serves to remind us that Jesus did not go to the cross unblemished and with a beatific smile on his face.

Our image of God so often leaves out the things that are unacceptable to our generation. His justice, his judgement, his wrath – they rarely find a place in our image of him. “*Gentle Jesus, meek and mild*” is a far more comforting image than the avenging God who destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah or who got his hands dirty down amongst the prostitutes and low-lives of first-century Palestine.

Those whose God is exclusively the Healer ignore the times when he works **through** pain and suffering. Those whose God is the Bountiful Enricher ignore the God who calls us to repent of our wasteful and selfish use of his resources. We must not limit God by leaving out the things we cannot cope with. Oliver Cromwell is said to have insisted that his portrait was painted “*warts and all*”, unlike many great figures from Julius Caesar to Montgomery Burns who wanted their portraits painted and their busts sculpted to make them appear more heroic. We need to accept and worship God without trying to paint out the bits we don't think are suitable for us today.

It has been said that each generation creates God in its own image. The Enlightenment deists created a God who was a rational scientist and who ended up effectively making himself redundant. The nineteenth century liberal created a God who was a nineteenth century liberal and who in the end didn't even believe in himself. The social gospellers created a God who upheld the social gospel but said nothing at all about the innate and inevitable sinfulness in the hearts of men and women. Some evangelicals of the middle of the last century created a God who was so tightly confined by their own dogma that even Jesus wouldn't have been allowed into their meetings. Today we have a relativistic, compromising God who cannot keep his word, who isn't really sure of his own identity and who doesn't really have anything to say to anyone any more because he's just so afraid of offending someone. We have created a God according to our own image of what he should be like – an idol whom we can use to justify everything from bombing Iraqi children and massacring Palestinians to same-sex marriage, from market-led capitalism to white supremacy. And if he starts to criticise our morality, our values, our attitudes, our legislation, then we can put him away in the cupboard. We have an idol of a God whom we have sanitised and emasculated so that his message offends no-one, because he no longer says anything to anyone.

### **5. WE LOSE OUR AWARENESS OF GOD'S GREATNESS AND TRANSCENDENCE**

Limiting God by our creation of false images of him, by our idolatry, means that we lose any sense at all of his infinite power and supernatural activity. He does only what we expect him to, only what we want him to, only what we allow him to. His actions have to correspond to our experience or, more likely, to our own limiting and stiflingly systematic doctrines and dogmas. That was the sin of the church in Ephesus, to whom Jesus speaks through John in *Revelation 2:2*.

Think of that story in *Acts 12* in which Peter's friends are praying for him in prison and then don't believe it when he turns up. How often do we pray like Peter's friends did, limiting God through our own demands and our own reductionist image? I remember being forcibly reminded of that on one occasion when we were praying for prisoners of conscience – “Lord, give them strength to put up with their conditions”, rather than “Lord, release them from prison”. Our God is too small!

We pray that God will work in our city and our community, that our church will grow – but only in the ways we've planned, by the means we think we've got the resources for. We pray, no doubt sincerely, that God will move by his Holy Spirit, but we don't want him to disturb us or do it in ways that we don't understand. We've limited God: he is no more than an idol that we can take out or put away at will to help us do our own thing. Sometimes he becomes little more than a talisman or a lucky charm that we wave around to try and make the best of our own little plans.

Of course, we're not turning to other gods. We believe that God is still up there near the top of our list of priorities (let's not get too fanatical by putting him at the very top!), but we are sinning just as much by making God fit our own ideas, rather than, as Jesus says, "*Worshipping him in spirit and in truth.*" That's as futile as the exercise described by Isaiah. Listen to his voice, live in his ways, don't try so hard to picture him, as we are reminded in *Deuteronomy 4:12,15-18* – and let's expect him to do mighty things amongst us!

(Housegroup notes follow on next page)

## **“LIVING GOD’S WAY – 3: NO IDOLS!”**

*Exodus 20:4-6, Isaiah 44:9-20*

The passage from *Isaiah* gives us some idea of the futility of making idols and just how ridiculous it really is. We have already considered the commandment to worship God as the One True God: this next instruction, I would suggest, is a warning against trying to make God conform to our own limiting images of him.

God, who tells us he is “*jealous*” does not want to be stereotyped. No-one has ever seen him, so no-one can adequately represent him. The Bible is strong in its insistence that no-one has seen God and it is only his voice that has been heard (see *Deuteronomy 4:12,15-18*). As Jesus tells his disciples, “*God is a spirit and those who worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.*”

When we conjure up our images of God – rarely “*graven images*” any more – we can fall into several traps.

### **1. We try to fit God into our own schemes.**

Once God has been brought down to size, limited by our own imperfect ideas of him, we use him to justify all kinds of things that are simply our own human way of behaving. An over-emphasis on one aspect of his character leads us into the trap of slotting him in where we want him.

### **2. We can put him away when we want.**

On the other hand, when God is limited we can exclude him from those things which we would rather he kept out of. If we have got to the stage of dragging him in when we want to justify something, there’s nothing to stop us pushing him out when we don’t want him messing things up for us.

### **3. We can cut out those things which we don’t like.**

Our image of God can be sanitised to leave out any aspect of him that we feel is undesirable – his judgement, his uncompromising commands, his solidarity with the oppressed and disadvantaged. We end up with a God who has nothing to say to anyone.

### **4. We lose our awareness of his transcendence.**

Limiting God by our creation of false images of him means that we lose any sense of his infinite power and his supernatural activity. We pray for his intervention, but we’re only prepared for him to intervene in the ways we can cope with, in the ways we’ve planned.

## **Questions for discussion**

1. Do you have a mental image of what God is like? What do you think has influenced that image?
2. In what ways is God used to justify things we might find difficulty accepting? Why do you think this is?
3. From which areas of life – personal, public, church – is God excluded? How can we prevent that happening (especially in the public sphere – e.g. education, politics, the media)?
4. Is it true that we cannot cope with certain aspects of God’s character, so we try to paint them out of the picture? Which aspects of his character do we do this with? Why? What can we do to redress the balance?
5. Can we really worship a God we cannot visualise? How?