

Adult Lesson Four

Do You Idolize?

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 fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments (Exodus 20:4-6, NRSV).

The second commandment is one of the toughest for most Christians in the 21st century to relate to. Not only do we not make graven images for ourselves, the thought of doing so is foreign to us. What's more, the second commandment reads like a retelling of the first. For this reason both Catholics and Jews consider this to be part of the first commandment. (To have ten commandments, they divide the tenth commandment—you shall not covet—into two distinct commandments: you shall not covet your neighbors wife and you shall not covet your neighbors property.) Nevertheless, there is a distinction between the first and the second commandments. Whereas the first commandment deals with the issue of other gods, the second deals with the appropriate way to worship Yahweh.

Israel's neighbors did not believe the idols they made were actually gods, only symbols of gods. However, confusion often set in and the symbol became mistaken for a god. The LORD is very clear that the created is never to be confused with the Creator. When this happens we tend to believe that God only governs us when we are near the arena in which we worship him. God becomes localized and is not the God of all creation, but only aspects of it. We are tempted to make God as we would like him to be. We make him in our image in order to legitimize our activities. These are temptations we face as Christians today, and they will be the focus of this lesson. Worshipers of the LORD are called to a different way of living than those around them.



OBJECTIVES

- Identify idols, images, and other created things that serve as gods in our culture.
- Establish that Scripture teaches that God is to be Lord of every area of life.
- Critique the idea that all religions lead to "God" in light of the second commandment.

SCRIPTURE

- Exodus 20:4-6
- John 4:16-26

WHAT YOU NEED

- Copies of Handout #4.1 for everyone in the class
- Chalk/chalkboard; marker/dry erase board; or something else to write on
- Pencils/pens

Part 1 - Incensed over incense

Began the class by saying **We've been talking about the Ten Commandments. Today we will consider the one that seems to have the least bearing on us in our culture—"Thou shall not make for yourself a graven image."** Then ask the class to **Name some idols or graven images from the ancient world.** Write the answers that they give on the board. Possibilities include Zeus, Greek statues, Ba'al, Buddha, and the golden calf. Next, tell of the first time you can remember coming face-to-face with idol worship. I remember going into an oriental food restaurant and seeing a Buddha. They owners had put incense and some food around it. I think it was the food that made me realize that they took this god seriously.

Next ask **What are some other idols or graven images that we see people worship today?** (Hindu gods, Buddhas, crystals, other New Age symbols.) Again, write the answers on the board.

Part 2 - God of Everywhere

Ask **Do you think the ancient people believed their idols were actually gods?** (Answer: No, they just used them to symbolize their gods and give them something tangible to worship and a place to worship.) Have someone read Exodus 20:4-6. Ask **What is the importance of not worshipping anything above, on, or under the earth?** (This is the three-tiered Hebrew understanding of creation. In short, the second commandment is an order not to worship anything created.) Say **What the commandment is really saying is "Do not make an idol in the shape of a created thing to symbolize the Creator."** Ask **Why wouldn't God want us to do this?** (If we do this we tend to think that God's presence is limited and God works only in certain spheres. This would have the effect of prompting obedience at church, but maybe not at home nor the office.) Explain **Part of what this commandment is dealing with is a tendency to localize God. The people of Israel worshipped the LORD in the temple, but worshiped Ba'al and other gods in the mountains or fields. God demands lordship of every aspect and place in our lives. Let's look at some other gods that fight for a place alongside of our God.**

Distribute Handout #4.1. Allow five minutes for the class to do the worksheet. Go over the worksheet out loud. Write on the board the created things that our culture worships. These may include money, beauty, art, talent, science, sex, and the environment. Circle the ones that class members suggest might be a problem area for them (for instance, nature might be worshipped by some if they could only "feel close" to God in nature. This is idolizing an aspect of who God is.)

Ask **When you are making a financial decision (buying a home or a car, for instance), what god dominates your thinking, the god of money or the LORD your God?** (Often money.) **Suppose you know someone who really needs cash and is forced to sell a car. Do you bid much lower than the car's value when you can afford more? Which god are you serving at that time? When listening to music, which god decides what you will hear, the god of beauty or talent or the LORD your God?** Allow a few minutes to discuss these issues. Some other areas you may wish to explore: **Who is your god when you choose entertainment?** (Sex, violence or the LORD.) **Who is your god when you are shopping for clothes or cars?** (Materialism, pride, or the LORD.) **God demands complete lordship, no matter the area of life.**

Part 3 - Nature is my temple?

Ask **Are there any places or things that we have allowed to symbolize God so that we feel like we must go there to worship or pray.** (The sanctuary, an altar, the grave of a loved one, or a special place in nature.) Explain **When we start allowing locations or things to symbolize God for us, we are dangerously close to breaking the second commandment. God is making it clear-"I'm not like the gods of the Canaanites. An animal or monster cannot symbolize me." In the same way, an altar, a church building, a natural location, or a crucifix cannot symbolize him.**

Have someone read John 4:16-20. Explain **On Mt. Gerizim the Samaritans had built a temple because the Jews wouldn't allow them to worship in Jerusalem.** Ask **What is Jesus saying here?** (That the place of worship is not important. In fact, he is condemning the Israelite idea that you must go to the temple in Jerusalem to worship.)

Part 4 - Does gods equal God?

Say **In our pluralistic society, there is a common understanding that every form of worship connects with God, an "all roads lead to Rome" theology. For instance, Hindus have some 3,306 gods and goddesses, but they believe that all are simply aspects of Brahman. Their idols only help them to worship Brahman. In much the same way, many people understand all forms of worship-Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, etc.-to be legitimate and to be worshipping the same God. Ask What do you think of this idea?** (Allow time for answers.) **What does the second commandment have to say about this?** (It clearly states that we are to worship the LORD only. We must not worship an image which represents only one aspect of God, or be limited by the location of a particular shrine. We must worship God in Spirit and in His entirety.)

Say **Some theologians and others disregard this commandment as being dated. They believe that any religion which promotes peace and goodwill towards others honors God, even those that worship many gods or idols. How do you feel about this?** Allow time for a debate here. Some of the answers to this question may surprise you. **For instance, do you like the idea that Ghandi, a man who promoted peace and saved literally thousands of lives, did not make it to heaven because he was a Hindu?** Again, allow for discussion. Explain **This issue goes back to the first commandment. Who will we allow to tell us what is right and wrong? Because the God of the Bible led the Israelites out of Egypt, he demanded certain things from them. Because he has saved us, he demands we keep his Ten Commandments as well. This commandment is very clear on this issue. We may choose to believe something else, but if we do so, we have denied that the God who saved us has the right to tell us what is right and wrong.**

For a final activity, have the class reword this commandment to fit our contemporary setting. Write the final draft on the board. This exercise is recommended at the end of several lessons to come, but you may want to do it every lesson. If you choose to do this, have a class secretary record the commandment paraphrase every lesson and review them often.

Close in prayer.

Idols, Idols Everywhere

When the Canaanites made idols for their gods, they carved them to look like a creature or person that they respected, feared, or desired to be like. List some created things worshiped by people in our culture.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.



Have any of these become an idol for you?

Which of these might you be tempted to worship as an aspect of God?