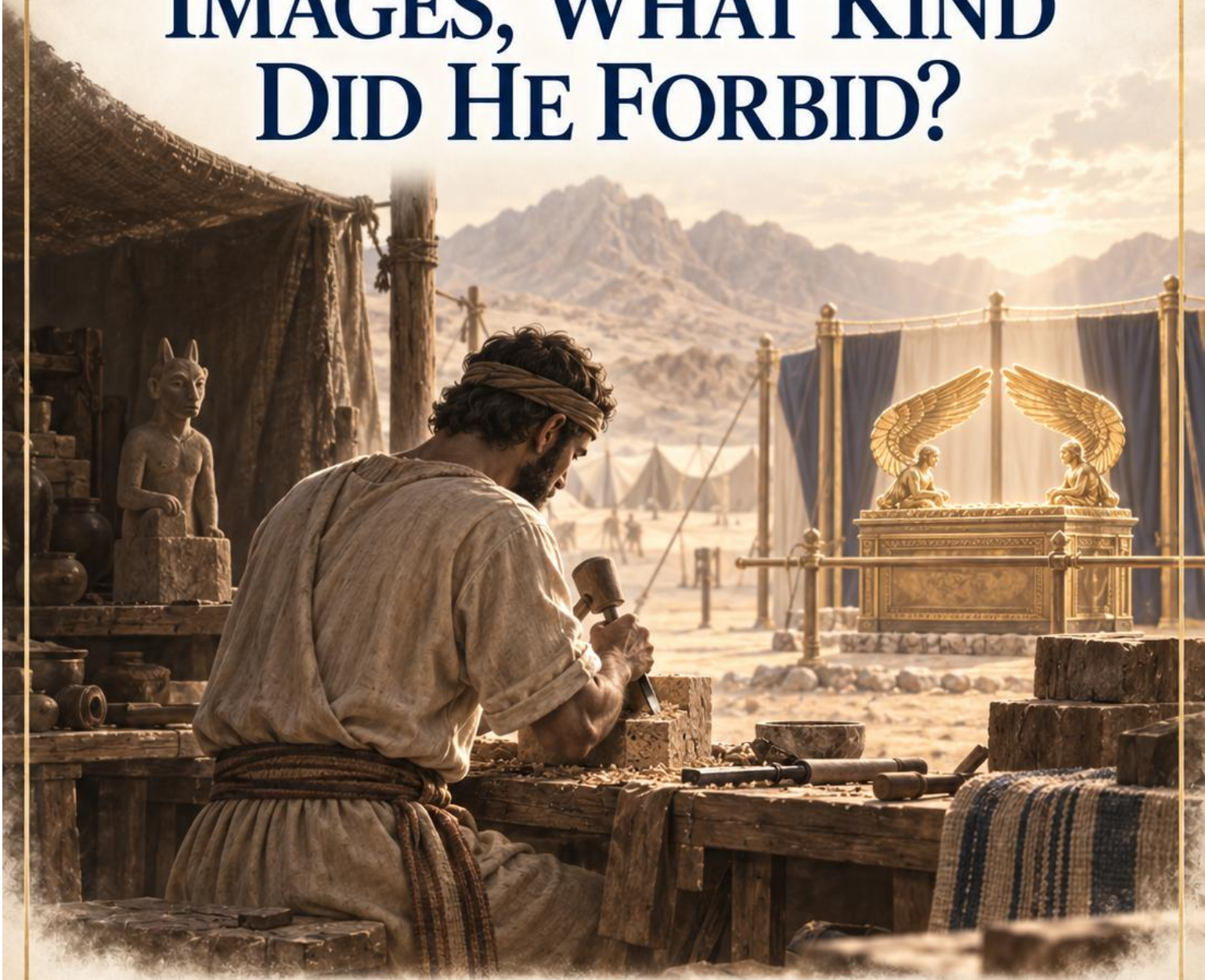


REASON TOGETHER CHURCH

THE TEN WORDS WE THOUGHT WE KNEW

A TEN-PART SERIES | **PART TWO OF TEN**

IF GOD COMMANDED IMAGES, WHAT KIND DID HE FORBID?

A man with a beard and a headband, wearing a simple white tunic and a brown sash, is seated at a wooden workbench in a desert camp. He is focused on carving a stone statue with a hammer and chisel. To his left, another stone statue of a seated figure is visible. In the background, a large, ornate golden altar with two winged cherubs stands under a blue and white striped canopy. The scene is set in a desert landscape with mountains in the distance and a warm, golden light from the setting or rising sun.

DR. THOMAS W. HAWKSLEY

HEARING SINAI THROUGH ANCIENT EARS

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HEARING SINAI THROUGH ANCIENT EARS

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

Dr. Thomas W. Hawksley

Reason Together Church

Aloha, church family.

Welcome to Reason Together Church.

If you came with a Bible full of marked pages, you are welcome.

If you came with a mind full of unanswered questions, you are welcome too.

Bring your questions.

Open your Bible.

Let us Reason Together the Word of God.

To every first-time guest, thank you for trusting us with part of your day.

You are an honored guest, and nothing will be required of you.

If you would like to hear from us again, the guest card asks for only your first name and email address.

That is enough for us to welcome you without asking for information we do not need.

The Keiki Kids Center is available for our children.

Parents are also free to keep their children with them throughout the service.

When we finish, the Reason Together Cafe will be open.

Come for coffee.

Stay for a question.

Stay for a conversation.

The coffee is free, and we still offer free refills on conversations.

COFFEE reminds us that Christ Offers Forgiveness For Everyone Everywhere.

Today we continue The Ten Words We Thought We Knew.

In the first study, we asked whether something can become our god without ever receiving a physical bow.

We discovered that the first commandment demands exclusive allegiance.

It asks whom we worship.

The second commandment asks a different question.

It asks what happens when people claim to worship the Lord but attempt to give Him a form of their own making.

The question begins with what appears to be a contradiction.

God said:

"Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image."

Then only a few chapters later, God said:

"And thou shalt make two cherubims of gold."

Do not make an image.

Make two cherubim.

Both instructions appear in the same book.

Both come from the same God.

So what kind of image did God forbid?

If we assume the answer is simply "every picture of every living thing," the tabernacle becomes a violation of the commandment.

If we assume the commandment has nothing to say unless someone worships a pagan statue, we may miss its continuing warning.

This is exactly the kind of question this series was designed to examine.

Not because contradiction is our destination.

Because apparent contradiction often forces us to read more carefully.

Let us pray.

Our Heavenly Father, thank You for revealing Yourself.

You are greater than every form we could fashion.

You are not contained by buildings, objects or human imagination.

You are the Creator, and we are Your creatures.

Teach us to recognize the difference between a symbol that points toward truth and an object that replaces trust.

Protect us from reducing You to a version we can control.

Protect us from believing that our preferred picture of You is greater than Your Word.

Give us wisdom as we consider an issue over which sincere Christians have sometimes disagreed.

Help us speak carefully.

Help us listen charitably.

Lead us finally to Jesus Christ, the image of the invisible God.

We ask this in the name of Jesus.

Amen.

Our Scripture reading comes from Exodus chapter 20, beginning with verse 4.

The King James Version says:

"Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above,

or that is in the earth beneath,

or that is in the water under the earth:

Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them:

for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God,

visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me;

And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments."

Before we reason through those words, let us speak briefly about giving.

We do not pass an offering plate at Reason Together Church.

Our guests are never expected to give.

If another congregation is your church home, please support the work God has entrusted to that church.

Those who call Reason Together Church their church home may give as the Lord leads through the giving box in the back.

Giving should be cheerful.

It should be honest.

It should never be treated as a religious mechanism that forces God to act.

We do not insert money and receive a guaranteed blessing in return.

We do not use a gift to make God manageable.

And that gives us a natural entrance into the second commandment.

Human beings repeatedly try to take the living God and place Him inside something we can see, carry, predict or control.

Sometimes that something is an object.

Sometimes it is a ritual.

Sometimes it is a formula.

Sometimes it is our own preferred picture of what God must be like.

The second commandment warns us that God will not be reduced to something made by human hands.

Let us begin with the words themselves.

The commandment uses the Hebrew word *pesel*.

Pesel ordinarily refers to a carved or fashioned image used in worship.

The commandment also uses the word temunah.

Temunah refers more broadly to a form or likeness.

The command then adds two actions.

"Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them."

The making cannot be separated from the worshiping purpose described around it.

That matters because the Bible does not treat every visual representation as sinful.

God commanded artistic craftsmanship.

The tabernacle contained color, embroidery, engraved stones, floral forms and cherubim.

First Kings later describes the temple with carved flowers, palm trees, lions, oxen and cherubim.

If Exodus 20 prohibited every artistic depiction of anything in heaven, earth or sea, God would soon command Israel to violate His own word.

He did not.

The commandment concerns images made to represent deity and receive religious service.

That distinction answers part of the apparent contradiction.

But it does not yet explain why such an image was so dangerous.

For that, we need Deuteronomy chapter 4.

Moses reminded Israel what happened at Sinai.

Deuteronomy 4:12 says:

"And the LORD spake unto you out of the midst of the fire:

ye heard the voice of the words,

but saw no similitude;

only ye heard a voice."

Then Moses says in verses 15 and 16:

"Take ye therefore good heed unto yourselves;

for ye saw no manner of similitude on the day that the LORD spake unto you in Horeb out of the midst of the fire:

Lest ye corrupt yourselves,

and make you a graven image,

the similitude of any figure."

Israel truly encountered God.

The mountain burned.

The people heard His voice.

His words were not imaginary.

His presence was not uncertain.

But they saw no form.

That absence was not an invitation for an artist to finish the picture.

It was part of the revelation.

God chose to make His words heard without giving Israel a visible shape to reproduce.

They were not authorized to fill in the blank.

Why?

Because every manufactured form would reduce the Creator to something within creation.

A bull communicates strength.

An eagle communicates height and vision.

A human figure communicates personality and authority.

The sun communicates light and power.

Each image may capture one idea.

But the moment Israel said, "This is the form of our God," the form would limit what it claimed to reveal.

God would be identified with this shape rather than another.

This location rather than every place.

This material rather than the One who made all material.

This human conception rather than God's own self-revelation.

An image can make the invisible appear accessible.

It can also make the infinite appear small.

The surrounding nations used cult images in ways that were more serious than simple decoration.

Ancient worshipers did not always believe that a god was nothing more than the wood, stone or metal itself.

An image could be treated as the place where divine presence rested or through which the deity became available.

The image could be carried.

It could be installed in a temple.

It could be clothed, fed, honored and consulted.

Religious specialists could control access to it.

A king could capture it as a sign that he had defeated the nation and its god.

The image made divine power local, visible and politically useful.

The Lord refused that arrangement.

He could not be captured by taking a statue.

He could not be moved because a king carried an object.

He could not be fed because priests placed food before an image.

He could not be limited to one location because a temple claimed to contain Him.

He is not one creature within the universe.

He is the Creator of heaven and earth.

This helps us understand why Deuteronomy warns Israel not to make the form of a man, a woman, an animal, a bird, a creeping thing, a fish, the sun, the moon or the stars.

Creation can reveal God's power and wisdom.

Creation cannot be turned into God.

Romans chapter 1 describes the tragedy clearly.

Humanity "changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things."

The exchange moves downward.

The incorruptible God is traded for a representation of corruptible creation.

The second commandment protects the difference between Creator and creature.

Now return to the cherubim.

Exodus chapter 25 says:

"And thou shalt make two cherubims of gold,
of beaten work shalt thou make them,
in the two ends of the mercy seat."

The cherubim were images.

They were made of gold.

They stood in the holiest setting in Israel's worship.

Yet they were not images of God.

They did not give God a body.

They did not become objects of sacrifice.

Israel was not commanded to bow before the cherubim or pray through them.

They belonged within a design God authorized.

God said that He would meet with Moses from above the mercy seat, from between the cherubim.

The distinction is important.

God's presence was not imprisoned inside either figure.

The figures marked a place of divine meeting without claiming to depict the divine being.

So the second commandment is not a war against beauty.

It is not a rejection of craftsmanship.

It is not God declaring that imagination is evil.

The same God who prohibited the cult image filled Bezalel with wisdom for artistic work.

The Creator made a world of color, texture, pattern, sound and form.

Art can serve truth.

Art can help people remember.

Art can communicate beauty.

Art can also lie.

It can misrepresent.

It can receive a trust that it was never designed to carry.

The question is not merely, "Is there an image?"

The question is, "What is this image claiming to be, and what are people doing with it?"

Exodus chapter 32 shows how quickly the danger became real.

Moses remained on the mountain.

The people became impatient.

They asked Aaron:

"Up, make us gods, which shall go before us."

Aaron collected gold.

He fashioned a molten calf.

Then the people said:

"These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt."

Aaron built an altar before it and announced a feast "to the LORD."

That detail matters.

The episode was not necessarily a simple announcement that the God of the exodus had been forgotten and an unrelated god had taken His place.

The language connected the calf with deliverance from Egypt.

Aaron used the Lord's covenant name when he announced the feast.

Whatever every participant understood the calf to mean, they used an image within worship they connected to the Lord.

God condemned it.

They had taken the Deliverer who could not be seen and supplied a visible form.

They had made the God who led them into an object that could be carried before them.

They had replaced the voice from the mountain with the work of their own hands.

The first commandment asks whether we worship another god.

The second warns that we may attempt to worship the true God falsely.

We can retain the right name while changing the character.

We can speak about the Lord while presenting a version of Him that Scripture does not authorize.

We can create a God who never confronts us.

We can create a God who always supports our group.

We can create a God whose greatest purpose is our comfort.

We can create a God who can be activated by the correct phrase, donation or ritual.

We can create a God who hates everyone we hate and excuses everything we excuse.

Such a god may not be carved from wood.

It may be carved from selected verses, personal preferences and cultural assumptions.

The material has changed.

The human desire remains.

We want a god we can carry rather than the God who carries us.

We want a god who confirms rather than commands.

We want a god whose location we control and whose presence we can predict.

The golden calf story should also warn us against impatience.

The people could not see Moses.

They did not know when he would return.

Uncertainty created pressure for something visible.

We often reach for substitutes during the silence between promise and fulfillment.

When we cannot see what God is doing, we may build something we can see.

When prayer has not yet produced the result we expected, we may search for a formula.

When Scripture does not answer on our preferred timetable, we may choose a confident voice that promises certainty.

When the future feels unstable, we may attach divine authority to a plan we can control.

The idol offers immediacy.

It is available now.

It can be handled now.

It appears to remove uncertainty now.

But what human hands can manufacture, human hands must also maintain.

The living God does not need us to keep Him alive.

First Samuel chapter 4 gives another example of a sacred object being treated as a mechanism.

Israel had been defeated by the Philistines.

The elders asked why the Lord had defeated them.

Then they decided to bring the ark of the covenant into the camp.

Listen to their expectation:

"When it cometh among us, it may save us out of the hand of our enemies."

They spoke about the ark as though the object itself could guarantee victory.

They shouted when it entered the camp.

The Philistines became afraid.

But Israel was defeated again, and the ark was captured.

The ark was not an idol.

God had commanded it.

It belonged to Israel's covenant worship.

The sin was not that the ark existed.

The danger appeared when Israel treated a God-given object as a guarantee that placed God under their control.

They brought the ark without bringing repentance.

They wanted the symbol of God's presence without submission to God's authority.

That remains possible.

A Bible is not an idol.

A church building is not an idol.

A communion table is not an idol.

A cross is not automatically an idol.

A baptismal pool is not an idol.

A worship style is not an idol.

But anything associated with God can be trusted in a way God never authorized.

We may own several Bibles while refusing to obey what they say.

We may defend a church building while neglecting the people the church exists to serve.

We may preserve a method because God used it once and begin acting as though He can never work without it.

We may trust a personality because that person once helped us understand Scripture.

We may confuse loyalty to a tradition with loyalty to God.

The test is not whether the thing has a Christian history.

The test is what place it occupies now.

Numbers chapter 21 gives us one of the clearest examples.

Israel spoke against God and Moses.

Fiery serpents came among the people.

The people confessed their sin.

God instructed Moses to make a fiery serpent and set it upon a pole.

Those who looked upon it lived.

God commanded the object.

God used it in an act of mercy.

Centuries later, Second Kings chapter 18 tells us what happened to it.

King Hezekiah "broke in pieces the brasen serpent that Moses had made."

Why would a faithful king destroy an object God had commanded Moses to make?

The verse answers:

"For unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it."

They had named it Nehushtan.

Something connected to a genuine deliverance had become an object of worship.

Its history was authentic.

The original miracle was real.

The instruction to Moses truly came from God.

None of those facts justified what later generations did with the object.

Hezekiah had to distinguish the God who healed from the object God once used.

He reduced the celebrated relic to what it was materially.

A piece of brass.

An image becomes dangerous when it stops pointing beyond itself and begins telling us what God must be.

Sometimes faithfulness preserves an object.

Sometimes faithfulness breaks it.

The determining question is not how old it is.

The determining question is whether it now serves truth or receives worship.

This brings us to a disagreement Christians have carried for centuries.

What about paintings of Biblical scenes?

What about statues?

What about icons?

What about visual depictions of Jesus?

Sincere Christians have not all answered those questions the same way.

Some Christian traditions prohibit or sharply limit religious images because they believe the danger of misrepresentation is inseparable from the image.

They emphasize that no human work can adequately portray the divine Son.

Other Christian traditions distinguish an image from the worship due to God.

They use visual art for teaching, remembrance or devotion while insisting that worship passes beyond the material object.

We should present both concerns honestly.

The warning offered by those who reject religious images is real.

Human beings can direct trust, prayer and religious service toward an object.

An image can quietly determine how people imagine God.

The defense offered by those who use religious art also recognizes a Biblical reality.

God did not forbid every visual form, and the Son of God truly entered visible human history.

This sermon will not solve every denominational disagreement through one quick definition of *pesel*.

It can give us questions every tradition must answer.

Is this object being treated as though divine power resides within it?

Is it receiving prayer, trust or service that belongs to God?

Does it claim to contain or control God's presence?

Does it replace attention to God's Word?

Does it communicate something false about His character?

If the object disappeared, would faith in God remain?

Those questions apply beyond paintings and statues.

They apply to the picture of God carried inside the mind.

Every one of us has assumptions about God.

Some came from Scripture.

Some came from family.

Some came from painful experiences.

Some came from religious teachers.

Some came from culture.

Some came from what we wish God would be.

We must allow God's Word to examine those pictures.

Perhaps our imagined god is always angry and can never be approached.

Scripture reveals a holy God who judges sin, but it also reveals a God rich in mercy who sent His Son to save.

Perhaps our imagined god exists mainly to make life comfortable.

Scripture reveals a good Father, but it also reveals a Lord who calls disciples to take up a cross.

Perhaps our imagined god belongs to our nation, race, political party or social group.

Scripture reveals the Creator of all people and a kingdom that cannot be reduced to any earthly tribe.

Perhaps our imagined god can be controlled by saying the correct words.

Scripture reveals a personal God who hears prayer but remains sovereign.

Perhaps our imagined god never disagrees with us.

That may be the clearest evidence that we have fashioned Him in our image.

The second commandment does not allow us to make God convenient.

It does not allow us to take one attribute and pretend it is the whole.

God's love cannot be used to erase His holiness.

God's holiness cannot be used to erase His mercy.

God's sovereignty cannot be used to erase human responsibility.

God's nearness cannot be used to make Him common.

God's transcendence cannot be used to make Him absent.

We need the whole witness of Scripture.

We also need humility.

None of us sees God exhaustively.

Our language is limited.

Our understanding is limited.

But limited understanding is not the same as manufactured revelation.

God has truly spoken.

We may know Him because He has made Himself known.

Acts chapter 17 records Paul speaking in Athens, a city filled with objects of worship.

Paul said:

"God that made the world and all things therein,
seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth,
dwelleth not in temples made with hands;
Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing,
seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things."

The direction is important.

God does not depend upon our hands.

Our hands depend upon God.

He is not maintained by what we supply.

He gives life and breath to us.

Paul continued by rejecting the idea that the Godhead is like gold, silver or stone shaped by human art and imagination.

Human art cannot create the God who created the artist.

Then how can the invisible God be known?

The Christian answer is not that we finally produced a better statue.

Colossians chapter 1 calls Jesus "the image of the invisible God."

Hebrews chapter 1 calls the Son "the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person."

John chapter 1 says:

"No man hath seen God at any time;
the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father,
he hath declared him."

Jesus is not humanity's artistic attempt to imagine God.

He is God's self-revelation.

We did not reach into heaven and design an acceptable form.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

That distinction changes everything.

Idolatry begins with human beings making a god according to their conception.

The Gospel begins with God coming to human beings according to His grace.

An idol is carried by its worshipers.

Jesus carried the cross for sinners.

An idol must be protected by the people who made it.

Jesus is the Savior who protects and keeps His people.

An idol cannot speak unless a worshiper gives it words.

Jesus is the living Word through whom all things were made.

An idol receives offerings because it is treated as though it has need.

Jesus gave Himself as the offering for our sins.

Psalm 115 describes idols with mouths that cannot speak, eyes that cannot see, ears that cannot hear and hands that cannot handle.

Then the psalm warns:

"They that make them are like unto them;
so is every one that trusteth in them."

We become like what we worship.

Dead worship produces spiritual deadness.

False worship deforms the worshiper.

But Second Corinthians chapter 3 says that as believers behold the glory of the Lord, they are changed into the same image from glory to glory by the Spirit of the Lord.

The answer to a false image is not spiritual emptiness.

It is the true knowledge of God in Christ transforming His people.

There is another beautiful reversal here.

Genesis says that God made human beings in His image.

Idolatry is humanity's attempt to make god in ours.

God created the image-bearer.

The image-bearer rebelled and manufactured images.

Then Christ, the perfect image, came to restore what sin had damaged.

The purpose of salvation is not merely that we stop bowing before objects.

It is that we become more like Jesus.

So what should we do with the second commandment?

First, refuse to reduce God to what we can manage.

Allow Scripture to correct the picture.

Read passages that challenge the attribute you prefer to isolate.

If you emphasize judgment, read deeply about mercy.

If you emphasize mercy while dismissing repentance, listen again to Jesus' call to turn from sin.

If you emphasize personal blessing, read about costly discipleship.

If you imagine God belongs mainly to people like you, read the vision of people from every nation gathered before the throne.

Second, examine the objects and practices associated with faith.

Do they serve obedience?

Or have they become substitutes for it?

Would losing the building destroy the church?

Would changing the method make us believe God had departed?

Do we trust the Bible as God's Word while refusing the God who speaks through it?

Have we treated a past experience as though God must repeat it in exactly the same form?

Third, test every promise of controllable spiritual power.

Be cautious when someone guarantees that a phrase, object, gift or ritual will force a particular result from God.

Biblical faith trusts God's character.

Magic attempts to control spiritual power.

The language may sound similar.

The posture is opposite.

Fourth, hold Christian disagreement with conviction and charity.

If your conscience prohibits a particular religious image, do not violate your conscience.

If your tradition uses visual art, do not dismiss the danger of misplaced trust.

Ask what the object does within actual worship.

Ask what is taught about it.

Ask what response it receives.

Ask whether Christ and Scripture remain central.

The second commandment is too serious to be reduced to attacking another congregation's decorations.

It is also too serious to be dismissed because our own objects look respectable.

Finally, look to Christ.

The cure for a false picture of God is not a blank mind.

It is God's true self-revelation in Jesus.

Look at His holiness.

Look at His compassion.

Look at His authority.

Look at His humility.

Look at His anger toward hypocrisy.

Look at His welcome toward repentant sinners.

Look at the cross where justice and mercy meet.

Look at the empty tomb where death's claim is broken.

No manufactured image can contain Him.

No building can imprison Him.

No ritual can control Him.

No human imagination can improve Him.

He is the living Lord.

Perhaps you entered today trusting a religious substitute.

You may trust church attendance.

You may trust baptism without trusting Christ.

You may trust a family tradition.

You may trust a physical object connected to faith.

You may trust the memory of an emotional experience.

You may trust your ability to say the correct words.

Those things cannot save you.

Jesus saves.

The Gospel is not advice for manufacturing a path to God.

It is the announcement that God came to us.

Jesus Christ lived without sin.

He died for our sins.

He was buried.

He rose again.

He calls us to repent and believe.

Salvation is received by grace through faith, not by trusting an object, ceremony or religious achievement.

If you are ready to turn from sin and trust Jesus Christ, you may pray with me.

The prayer is not a formula that controls God.

These words have no power apart from the Savior to whom they are directed.

Prayer expresses the faith of a heart turning to Christ.

Our Heavenly Father,

I confess that I am a sinner.

I have trusted things I can see more than I have trusted You.

I have imagined You according to my preferences instead of receiving Your truth.

I cannot save myself through an object, ritual or good work.

I believe that Jesus Christ died for my sins.

I believe that He was buried and rose again.

I turn from my sin and place my faith in Jesus Christ.

Forgive me by Your grace.

Make me Your child.

Teach me to know You through Your Word and to follow Jesus as Lord.

I ask this in the name of Jesus.

Amen.

Let us pray together.

Our Heavenly Father, You made heaven and earth.

No work of our hands can contain You.

No picture in our minds can define You completely.

Thank You for speaking.

Thank You for revealing Yourself in Your Son.

Forgive us for every time we have reduced You to something manageable.

Forgive us for trusting symbols while resisting obedience.

Forgive us for treating methods, buildings, traditions or personalities as though Your presence depended upon them.

Give us discernment concerning the objects we use in worship.

Give us charity toward sincere Christians who draw lines differently.

Give us courage to destroy what has begun receiving trust that belongs to You.

Give us humility to preserve what serves truth without worshiping it.

Correct every false picture we have carried.

Make us willing to know You as You have revealed Yourself rather than as we wish You would be.

Fix our attention upon Jesus Christ.

Transform us by Your Spirit into greater likeness to Him.

Let every part of Reason Together Church point beyond itself to the living God.

May our building remain a tool.

May our studies remain tools.

May our images remain tools.

May our traditions remain servants of truth.

And may Jesus Christ alone remain Lord.

We ask this in the name of Jesus.

Amen.

Before you leave, consider one object, method or mental picture that has become difficult for you to examine.

Ask whether it points you toward God's truth or quietly tells you what God must be.

Ask whether you can receive correction from Scripture even when that correction changes something familiar.

Do not begin by accusing another Christian tradition.

Begin with your own heart.

If you trusted Christ today, please speak with me before you leave.

If this study raised a question about religious images, traditions or your understanding of God, I would be glad to reason through it with you.

Please join us at the Reason Together Cafe.

Bring the question with you.

The coffee and the conversation are waiting.

In the first study, we examined rival allegiance.

Today we examined false representation.

Next time we will consider the Lord's name.

Does taking God's name in vain merely mean using a forbidden expression?

Or can the most serious misuse of His name sound deeply religious?

Bring your questions.

Open your Bible.

Let us continue to Reason Together the Word of God.

Aloha Nui Loa.

REASON TOGETHER CHURCH
THE TEN WORDS WE THOUGHT WE KNEW
A TEN-PART SERIES | PART TWO OF TEN

PASTOR'S COMMENTARY

If God Commanded Images, What Kind Did He Forbid?

Hearing Sinai Through Ancient Ears

Exodus 20:4-6

Dr. Thomas W. Hawksley

Pastor & Teacher

www.ReasonTogether.Church

*Bring your questions. Open your Bible.
Let's Reason Together the Word of God.*

Introduction

The second commandment can sound absolute until the reader turns a few pages. Exodus 20 says, 'Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.' Exodus 25 says, 'And thou shalt make two cherubims of gold.' The same God gives both instructions. The tension is not an embarrassment to hide. It is an invitation to distinguish what God prohibited from the beauty and craftsmanship He authorized.

Part One asked whom Israel may worship and exposed rival allegiance without requiring a statue. Part Two asks how worshipers may falsely represent the God they claim to honor. The difference matters. The golden calf account shows that people may retain the language of the LORD and the exodus while supplying a form God never gave.

This Commentary expands the sermon without reproducing the internal Vault. It will examine the Hebrew words, the no-form theology of Deuteronomy, commanded art, ancient cult-image practice, sacred objects that became mechanisms, Christian disagreement, the warning about generations and the Gospel answer in Jesus Christ.

Controlling answer: God did not forbid all art. He forbade the manufacture and use of an image or likeness as divine representation and object of religious service. Authorized cherubim did not depict the LORD or receive worship. The command protects God's freedom to reveal Himself and refuses every attempt to make Him visible, portable, local or controllable on human terms.

1. Read the Whole Commandment

Making, Bowing and Serving

Exodus 20:4-6 forms one unit. Verse 4 prohibits making a graven image or likeness drawn from heaven, earth or the waters. Verse 5 says, 'Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them.' The movement joins manufacture, representation and religious response. Verse 6 places the issue within covenant love and obedience.

Some interpreters emphasize that the worship actions explain the kind of making prohibited. Others understand the making clause to establish a separate boundary around religious images before worship occurs. The disagreement should be acknowledged. Yet the commanded cherubim establish a firm limit: the command cannot mean that every visible depiction of anything in creation is sinful in every context.

The Comprehensive Realms

Heaven above, earth beneath and water under the earth cover the creaturely world. Deuteronomy 4 expands the list to male and female forms, animals, birds, creeping things, fish, sun, moon and stars. Every model an artist might select belongs to creation. The Creator cannot be reduced to one member of the world He made.

2. Pesel and Temunah

The Hebrew word *pesel* commonly refers to a carved, hewn or fashioned image, especially a cult image. *Temunah* is broader and can refer to a form, likeness or visible appearance. The words do not

function as a secret code that makes the command obvious only to Hebrew readers. They help us see the relationship between a manufactured object and the form it claims to present.

Term	Basic range	Contribution	Limit
pesel	Carved or fashioned image, commonly cultic.	Focuses attention upon an object made for religious representation or use.	Does not by itself classify every painting, photograph or sculpture.
temunah	Form, likeness or appearance.	Connects Exodus 20 with the warning that Israel saw no form at Horeb.	A broad word must be interpreted in its sentence and canonical setting.
shachah	Bow down or prostrate oneself.	Names embodied homage offered to the prohibited object.	Physical posture is evidence but not the only possible form of worship.
avad	Serve or render service.	Reveals continuing cultic allegiance rather than a momentary glance.	The ordinary word for work gains its religious force from context.

The best public conclusion therefore uses more than a dictionary. The prohibited image is made to represent deity and function within worship. That conclusion arises from the words, the bowing and serving clauses, Deuteronomy 4, the golden calf and the commanded-art evidence together.

3. Israel Heard a Voice but Saw No Form

The Absence Was Part of the Revelation

Deuteronomy 4 explains the danger with unusual clarity. Moses says, 'ye heard the voice of the words, but saw no similitude; only ye heard a voice.' He then warns Israel to remember that they 'saw no manner of similitude' lest they corrupt themselves and make a graven image.

Israel did not lack a real encounter. The mountain burned, the people heard and God spoke. The absence of a visible body did not make the revelation incomplete. God chose words without a form to reproduce. Israel was not authorized to finish the picture.

Every Form Reduces

A bull communicates strength, a sun communicates light and a kingly figure communicates authority. Each may suggest a true idea, yet each also limits. To say, 'This is the form of our God,' identifies the Creator with one created shape, one material and one location. The image turns human selection into a boundary around God.

This does not mean human language can describe God exhaustively. Scripture itself uses metaphor and analogy. The difference is authority. God accommodates true revelation to human understanding. Idolatry manufactures a revelation He did not give and then asks Him to inhabit it.

4. Why the Cherubim Were Not a Contradiction

God Commanded Artistic Form

Exodus 25 commands two cherubim of beaten gold upon the mercy seat. Curtains included woven cherubim. Priestly garments contained colors, engraving and skilled design. Bezalel was filled with the Spirit of God for craftsmanship. The temple later included cherubim, palms, flowers, lions and oxen.

The second commandment is therefore not a war against beauty, imagination or the artist. Creation itself displays color, texture, pattern, sound and form. Art may teach, commemorate and serve truth. Art may also lie, misrepresent or receive trust it cannot carry.

The Cherubim Did Not Portray the LORD

The cherubim were not called images of God. Israel was not told to pray to them, sacrifice to them or identify them as the Deliverer. God promised to meet Moses from above the mercy seat, from between the cherubim. The figures marked an authorized setting of meeting while leaving God's own form unpictured.

The distinction is not simply between religious and secular art. The cherubim were placed in Israel's holiest setting. The relevant questions are what the image claims to be, whether God authorized its use and what response worshipers direct toward it.

5. Ancient Images Made Divine Power Available

In several ancient Near Eastern settings, a cult statue was more than an illustration. Through manufacture and installation it could be treated as the localized embodiment of a deity or the place where divine presence became accessible. Worshipers might clothe, feed, carry, honor and consult it. Priests might control approach, and rulers might use the image to display political favor.

The details varied, so we should not claim that every ancient worshiper believed wood or stone was the complete substance of a god. The important contrast is functional. The image made divine power visible, local and manageable. It could be installed, transported, guarded and even captured as a sign that a nation and its deity had been defeated.

The LORD refuses that arrangement. He does not depend upon priests to feed Him, kings to protect Him or craftsmen to give Him breath. He cannot be defeated by carrying away a statue. Acts 17 declares that the Creator is not worshiped with human hands as though He needed anything. He is the One who gives life and breath to the worshiper.

6. The Golden Calf: The Right Name and a False Form

A Feast to the LORD

Exodus 32 records Israel's impatience while Moses remained on the mountain. The people demanded gods to go before them. Aaron fashioned a calf, and the people connected it with deliverance from Egypt. Aaron then announced a feast 'to the LORD.' The covenant name remained present while the worship was condemned.

We should not claim more than the text reveals about the intention of every participant. Some may have understood the calf differently from others. The narrative makes enough clear: the people supplied a visible and portable form within worship connected to the LORD and His saving act. They replaced the voice they had heard with the work of their hands.

Impatience Wants Something Visible

The people could not see Moses and did not know when he would return. Uncertainty created pressure for an immediate substitute. The idol could be handled now and carried now. It seemed to remove the delay between promise and fulfillment.

Modern substitutes often arise in the same interval. When prayer does not produce the expected result, we may reach for a formula. When Scripture does not answer on our timetable, a confident personality may promise certainty. When the future feels unstable, we may attach divine authority to a plan we can control. The material changes, but the desire for a manageable god remains.

7. A True Symbol Can Become a False Guarantee

The Ark in Battle

First Samuel 4 records Israel bringing the ark into battle after defeat. The elders said, 'When it cometh among us, it may save us.' The ark was real, commanded and bound to Israel's covenant worship. Yet they treated the symbol as a mechanism that guaranteed victory without repentance. They wanted God's presence under their control while resisting His authority.

The Bronze Serpent

In Numbers 21 God commanded Moses to make a bronze serpent. Looking at it in obedient faith accompanied deliverance from the serpents' judgment. Centuries later Hezekiah broke the same object because Israel burned incense to it. He called attention to its material character as Nehushtan, a piece of brass.

The original command was genuine and the original mercy was real. Neither fact justified later worship. Sometimes faithfulness preserves an object because it serves truth. Sometimes faithfulness removes the object because it has begun receiving trust that belongs to God.

Christian Objects and Methods

A Bible, church building, communion table, cross, baptismal pool or worship method is not automatically an idol. Each may serve faithful obedience. The danger appears when the object or method is treated as a guarantee of divine favor, when its loss is equated with the loss of God or when defending it becomes more important than obeying the God to whom it points.

8. A Jealous God and the Reach of Generational Sin

Holy Covenant Jealousy

God calls Himself jealous. The Hebrew *qanna* describes zeal for an exclusive covenant claim. This is not the insecurity of a creature who fears being replaced. The God who needs nothing opposes rival worship because it violates truth, breaks covenant love and deforms the people He rescued.

Third and Fourth Generations

Sin rarely remains private. Parents teach worship through words, habits, fears and loyalties. Households inherit practices, consequences and institutions. Exodus takes that multigenerational reach seriously.

The phrase 'of them that hate me' prevents us from imagining innocent descendants mechanically condemned regardless of their own relationship to God.

Deuteronomy 24:16 and Ezekiel 18 preserve personal accountability. A child is not personally guilty simply because a parent sinned. At the same time, personal responsibility does not erase inherited damage. A later generation may receive wounds and false practices it did not begin, then become responsible for whether those patterns continue.

Mercy on the Greater Scale

The warning is followed by God 'showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.' Deuteronomy 7:9 speaks of mercy to a thousand generations. Judgment reaches the third and fourth generation; covenant mercy is described on a vastly greater scale. The command is severe about idolatry and expansive about God's faithful love.

9. Christian Disagreement About Religious Images

Sincere Christians have not drawn every boundary in the same place. Some prohibit or sharply limit religious images, especially depictions of the divine, because no human work can represent God adequately and because an image can shape worship before anyone formally bows. Their warning against misrepresentation deserves careful hearing.

Other Christians distinguish an image from the worship due to God. They use art for teaching, remembrance or devotion and often argue that the Son truly entered visible human history. Icon-affirming traditions may distinguish honor offered through an image from worship reserved for God alone. Their appeal to the Incarnation and to commanded Biblical art also deserves an honest hearing.

A short word study cannot settle every historic dispute. Every tradition must answer the same practical questions.

Question	Why it matters
What does the object claim to represent?	A reminder of a Biblical event is different from a claim to contain or define divine presence.
What response does it receive?	Prayer, saving trust and religious service reveal more than the maker's stated intention.
Does it replace the Word?	An image becomes doctrinally controlling when Scripture can no longer correct what it communicates.
Can the object be lost without faith collapsing?	A servant of truth remains replaceable; a substitute for God feels indispensable.
What fruit appears?	The use should direct attention toward Christ, obedience, humility and love rather than mechanism or superiority.

If conscience forbids a particular religious image, do not violate conscience. If a tradition uses visual art, do not dismiss the danger of misplaced trust. Conviction does not require caricature, and charity does not require pretending that the command is unimportant.

10. The Image We Carry in the Mind

A congregation may have no statues and still present a god fashioned from selected verses, cultural assumptions and personal preference. The modern image may be verbal rather than carved. It may exist in a sermon series, political slogan, prosperity formula or unchallengeable memory of what God once did.

One imagined god is always angry and can never be approached. Scripture reveals holy judgment and also rich mercy. Another exists mainly to make life comfortable. Scripture reveals a good Father and a Lord who calls disciples to carry a cross. Another belongs to one nation, race or political party. Scripture reveals the Creator of all peoples and a kingdom no earthly group can contain.

Perhaps the most convenient god never disagrees with us. God's love is then used to erase holiness, or holiness is used to erase mercy. Sovereignty is used to erase responsibility, or nearness is used to make God common. Faithful worship requires the whole witness of Scripture rather than one preferred attribute enlarged until it hides the rest.

Limited Knowledge Is Not Manufactured Revelation

No human being knows God exhaustively. Our language is limited and our understanding grows. Humility does not mean God is unknowable. He has truly spoken. The difference is between receiving limited but true revelation and manufacturing certainty that protects our preferences from correction.

11. Jesus Is the Image We Did Not Make

God Came to Us

Colossians 1 calls Jesus 'the image of the invisible God.' Hebrews 1 calls Him the brightness of God's glory and the express image of His person. John 1 says that the only begotten Son has declared the God no one has seen. Jesus is not humanity's successful artistic attempt to imagine God. He is God's eternal Son made flesh.

Idolatry begins with human beings making a god according to their conception. The Gospel begins with God coming to human beings according to His grace. An idol is carried by worshipers; Jesus carried the cross for sinners. An idol must be protected; Jesus keeps His people. An idol receives offerings as though it needs them; Jesus gave Himself as the offering for our sins.

From Deformation to Transformation

Psalm 115 warns that those who make and trust idols become like them. Worship forms the worshiper. Dead worship produces spiritual insensitivity. Second Corinthians 3:18 gives the opposite movement: believers behold the glory of the Lord and are changed into the same image from glory to glory by the Spirit.

Genesis says that God made humanity in His image. Idolatry is humanity's attempt to make god in ours. Christ, the perfect image, came to restore what sin damaged. Salvation is not merely the cessation of bowing before objects. It is reconciliation to God and growing conformity to Jesus.

12. A Pastoral Answer for Different Listeners

For the Person Who Uses Religious Art

Ask what the object teaches, what response it receives and whether Scripture may correct it. Do not assume that stated intention settles actual practice. Keep Christ and the Word central. Refuse every suggestion that divine power resides automatically in material form or that possession of the object guarantees favor.

For the Person Who Rejects Religious Art

Do not assume bare walls guarantee pure worship. Examine the mental picture, method, leader or tradition that may have become untouchable. Respect conscience without turning personal boundaries into an occasion for pride. The second commandment reaches the iconoclast as surely as the icon user.

For Churches Protecting a Tradition

Ask whether the tradition still serves truth or now substitutes for obedience. Could a building be lost without the church believing God departed? Could a method change without assuming the Spirit stopped working? Could a respected leader be corrected by Scripture? Authentic history deserves gratitude, not worship.

For the Person Ready to Trust Christ

Church attendance, baptism, family tradition, a cross, an emotional memory or the correct religious words cannot save. Jesus saves. He lived without sin, died for our sins, was buried and rose again. Salvation is God's gift, received by grace through faith, not a result produced by an object, ritual or achievement.

You may pray: Our Heavenly Father, I confess that I am a sinner. I have trusted things I can see more than I have trusted You. I have imagined You according to my preferences instead of receiving Your truth. I cannot save myself through an object, ritual or good work. I believe that Jesus Christ died for my sins, was buried and rose again. I turn from my sin and place my faith in Jesus Christ. Forgive me by Your grace, make me Your child and teach me to know You through Your Word. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

Pastoral Summary

1. The second commandment must be read as a complete unit of making, likeness, bowing, service, jealousy, consequence and mercy.
2. Commanded cherubim and temple art prove that Scripture does not condemn every visual representation.
3. Pesel commonly identifies a fashioned cult image, while temunah emphasizes form or likeness.
4. Deuteronomy 4 grounds the prohibition in the fact that Israel heard God but saw no form at Horeb.
5. The cherubim marked an authorized meeting place but did not depict the LORD or receive worship.
6. Ancient cult images could make divine presence appear visible, local, portable and politically manageable.
7. The golden calf shows that correct religious names may accompany a false representation of God.
8. The ark and bronze serpent show that a God-authorized object can later be treated as mechanism or idol.
9. God's jealousy is holy covenant zeal, not sinful insecurity.

10. Generational sin produces real inherited consequences without erasing individual responsibility.
11. Christians should hold disagreements about images with Biblical conviction and charity.
12. False images can be mental, verbal and institutional as well as physical.
13. Jesus is the image of the invisible God because He is divine self-revelation, not human manufacture.
14. The Spirit transforms redeemed image-bearers into greater likeness to Christ.

Image and Symbol Discernment Worksheet

1. Identify the object, method, tradition or mental picture being examined.
2. State what it claims to represent or accomplish.
3. Ask whether Scripture authorizes that claim or merely permits the object as a created tool.
4. Describe the response it receives: attention, gratitude, remembrance, fear, prayer, trust or service.
5. Ask whether divine power is believed to reside in it automatically.
6. Ask whether it is treated as a guarantee that removes the need for repentance or obedience.
7. Test whether Scripture may correct what the object or mental picture communicates.
8. Imagine its loss. Would faith in God remain, or would the loss feel like God had departed?
9. Examine fruit. Does its use encourage truth, humility, obedience and love?
10. Listen to Christians who draw the boundary differently without surrendering your conscience.
11. If the object serves truth, return it to a humble servant role.
12. If it receives worship or saving trust, seek wise counsel and remove it from that role.
13. Replace a distorted picture of God with the whole witness of Scripture.
14. Look to Jesus Christ as God's self-revelation and ask the Spirit to form His likeness in you.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Why do Exodus 20:4 and Exodus 25:18 appear contradictory at first?
2. What do pesel and temunah contribute to the meaning of the command?
3. Why does Deuteronomy emphasize that Israel saw no form at Horeb?
4. How did the commanded cherubim differ from an image of the LORD?
5. What did ancient cult images allow worshipers and rulers to do with divine presence?
6. What does Aaron's feast to the LORD reveal about the golden calf?
7. How does impatience create desire for a visible or controllable substitute?
8. What went wrong when Israel carried the ark into battle?
9. Why was Moses right to make the bronze serpent and Hezekiah right to destroy it?
10. What does holy covenant jealousy mean, and what does it not mean?
11. How should generational consequences be distinguished from inherited personal guilt?
12. What concerns should restrictive and image-affirming Christian traditions hear from one another?
13. Which mental or verbal picture of God is most difficult for Scripture to correct?
14. How is Jesus the image of the invisible God without being a manufactured idol?
15. What does Psalm 115 teach about becoming like what we worship?
16. Does one object, method or tradition in my life point toward God, or tell me what God must be?

Prayer

Our Heavenly Father, You made heaven and earth. No work of our hands can contain You, and no picture in our minds can define You completely. Thank You for speaking and for revealing Yourself through Your Son.

Forgive us for reducing You to something manageable. Forgive us for trusting symbols while resisting obedience and for treating methods, buildings, traditions or personalities as though Your presence depended upon them.

Give us discernment concerning the objects we use in worship. Give us charity toward sincere Christians who draw boundaries differently, courage to remove what has begun receiving worship and humility to preserve what serves truth without trusting it as God.

Correct every false picture we carry. Make us willing to know You as You have revealed Yourself rather than as we wish You would be. Fix our attention upon Jesus Christ and transform us by Your Spirit into greater likeness to Him.

Let every part of Reason Together Church point beyond itself to the living God. May our building, studies, images and traditions remain servants of truth, and may Jesus Christ alone remain Lord. In His name we pray. Amen.

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