Exodus 20 - Ten Commandments – Number 2 – No Idols

Joy Davidman, who became C.S. Lewis’s wife, once wrote a book on the Ten Commandments entitled ‘Smoke on the Mountain.’ In it, she introduces the second commandment, the one we are looking at today, as follows:

*‘WHAT SHAPE is an idol?*

*I worship Ganesa, brother, god of worldly wisdom, patron of shopkeepers. He is in the shape of a little fat man with an elephant's head; he is made of soapstone and has two small rubies for eyes. What shape do you worship?*

*I worship a Rolls-Royce sports model, brother. All my days I give it offerings of oil and polish. Hours of my time are devoted to its ritual; and it brings me luck in all my undertakings; and it establishes me among my fellows as a success in life. What model is your car, brother?*

*I worship my house beautiful, sister. Long and loving meditation have I spent on it; the chairs contrast with the rug, the curtains harmonize with woodwork, all of it is perfect and holy. The ash trays are in exactly the right place, and should some blasphemer drop ashes on the floor, I nearly die of shock. I live only for the service of my house, and it rewards me with the envy of my sisters, who must rise up and call me blessed. Lest my children profane the holiness of my house with dirt and noise, I drive them out of doors. What shape is your idol, sister? Is it your house, or your clothes, or perhaps even your worth-while and cultural club?*

*I worship the pictures I paint, brother.... I worship my job; I'm the best darn publicity expert this side of Hollywood... I worship my golf game, my bridge game... I worship my comfort; after all, isn't enjoyment the goal of life?... I worship my church; I want to tell you, the work we've done in missions beats all other denominations in this city, and next year we can afford that new organ, and you won't find a better choir anywhere... I worship myself...*

*What shape is your idol?’*

It’s quite a hard-hitting introduction I think, to today’s commandment – ‘You shall not make for yourself an idol.’ It is really closely connected with last week’s commandment, and in some traditions, they are seen as part of the same command.

The word ‘idol’ is more technically a carved image which would become the object of worship. It would represent either a particular deity or perhaps just an attribute of a deity; so a bull could represent the deity’s strength and power rather than representing the deity itself.

The command continues, extending the scope from just wooden objects to anything that we bow down too – meaning anything that we serve or worship. This means that it extends, as Joy Davidman suggests, to those things which are part of our lifestyle that we serve.

This command gives a reason for obeying it that is rooted in God’s character – and the reason is an interesting one that I can’t just skip over. The reason for not making idols is because God is a ‘jealous’ God. This raises lots of questions for us, and briefly because of time, there is a translation issue here, or rather an issue with the connotations of the English word, jealous. We think of jealousy, nowadays, as synonymous with ‘envy’, but this isn’t the case here. God’s jealousy is that of being zealous about something that he already has a right to, not envious of something that rightfully belongs to someone else. It’s more about exclusiveness, like the marriage covenant, than it is about God as envious.

There’s also an interesting bit about God’s punishment and reward over generations. There’s loads that could be said here, but so I can be brief, the summary statements are: Firstly, the third and fourth generations thing is a semetic idiom that enables God to make the contrast that his rewards far outweigh his punishment – the latter statement, best translated as ‘myriad generations’ frames the former.

Secondly, God’s ‘showing’ his love to people is actually the word ‘doing’ love for his people. This isn’t about earning God’s affection; it’s about the faithfulness of God to those whose affection and desire are towards him. If you remember the treaty stuff we talked about last Sunday, it’s the steadfast doing of love that a king has for his people who love him and do what he says.

Thirdly, we can’t just write this warning and reward stuff off though as a word-play. There is an uncomfortable point to be made here about generations and the ripple effects of sin. You only need to look at issues like pollution, slavery or racism to see how the sins of one generation can affect those following. The fact is that one generation sets the moral agenda for the next, and therefore moral and religious deviance (to use rather grand language) are passed on from one generation to the next and the next. If this doesn’t scare you then you’re not really thinking about it! And it doesn’t just mean parents – this encompasses communities; we all have an ongoing part to play in setting the agenda for the next generation.

So that’s the issues at stake here, glossed over painfully quickly. Do come back to me about any of it if that’s been too quick.

The reason I’ve been moving quickly, however, is to give us time to reflect a bit on what is so wrong with idols anyway, and then how this commandment is a way to freedom rather than slavery, as I talked about last week.

The traditional wood-carved household idol primarily addressed here is a good place to start. You’d carve it from a nice piece of wood in a shape which, as I said, represents your god or divine attribute of choice. Then, you’d put it somewhere important, sacrifice to it, bow to it, serve it, feed it, and keep it safe. It sounds crazy to our 21st century thinking! But you’d have your static, immobile, unthinking, frozen in time object that you have to serve, and in fact that traps you into a cycle of service and servitude.

And all this is in total contrast to last week’s introduction where God is a living, historically active God who is personal and addresses his people personally. An idol is therefore an example of a completely false theology: a theology where we are able to own, contain and fully understand the idol, and at the same time bargain with it, feel free to ‘outrage it’ as Joy Davidman would put it, and then, at the same time as we feel like we control it, we also give ourselves to its control. This is a million miles away from a personal God who wants to love us personally and free us from slavery, particularly the slavery of idol worship.

All this seems perhaps a little out of date, but as Joy Davidman said at the beginning, idols come in various shapes and sizes. They are the things that we serve, that take our time from us, our money from us, our health from us, and so on. She answers those who ask how can an inanimate object do anyone any harm, by saying: ‘*So is a gun [inanimate]… But a man can do great harm with it.’*

What does it matter if my car, my house, my holidays, my lifestyle, my church building, my job, my clothes, my hobbies are idols? Perhaps they even give me pleasure – why is that so bad??

As Joy says, there’s nothing wrong with a gun per se, it’s about the human who uses it. So it is with many of those things which we idolise. A car that serves me is fine, a car that becomes an idol is the one which I sink my riches into and then have to buy a garage for, wax every weekend, pay a huge insurance premium for, and then never use in case it gets scratched. A house that serves me is very different from a show home I use to impress the neighbours which I serve every day on my knees cleaning. Similarly, a garden, or a good cause, or a job. When a golf handicap becomes a measure of almost divine merit within the golfing fraternity. When an argument at Bridge can damage a real-world relationship. When a besmirching of our online or real-world persona can end a life-long valued friendship. When a deep relationship can be irreconcilably dented by the difference of opinion about Brexit, or some other cultural cause. When any of these things happen, something has been elevated to the status of an idol, and we are in service to it rather than the other way around. We have become enslaved.

Idols take away, they don’t just give. Let me finish with Joy again:

*‘Idolatry lies not in the idol but in the worshipper. It is a psychological attitude that governs his whole life, and a very murderous attitude. We begin by offering others to the idol; we end by offering ourselves. Men threw their babies into the fiery furnace of Moloch and threw themselves before the crushing car of Jagannath; men unconsciously sacrifice themselves and their children daily to the automobile juggernaut and the brain-consuming furnace of the modem city. The house devours the housewife, the office rots the executive with ulcers, and canned entertainments leave us incapable of entertaining ourselves. Have our idols done us no harm?*

*The real horror of idols is not merely that they give us nothing, but that they take away from us even that which we have.’*

Idols enslave, they impoverish, and they carve us hollow. The God who brought us out of slavery wishes us freedom and flourishing. Do not make for yourself an idol. Be free as God’s people. Amen.