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Exodus 20:4-6

Thirty-first Message

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## THE SECOND COMMANDMENT: HOLY HANDS

*SERIES: HEARING GOD'S VOICE*

We return to the foot of Mt Sinai, the place where Israel was allowed to hear the very voice of God. To appreciate the impact that these Ten Words had upon Israel, we must be diligent with our imaginations to place ourselves in the terrified shoes of the nation. As the Creator God touches down upon the summit of the mountain, raw holiness is unleashed with such force that, without carefully placed protective barriers on both sides, it will destroy everything in its wake. The atmosphere that day would be something like attending an outdoor wedding in the state of Washington on the evening of May 17th, 1980. Thousands of guests are seated at the foot of a rather irritable Mount St Helens. No little tension in that wedding! As the billows of angry smoke blanket the heavens and waves of heat burn to the bone, every guest would be wondering whether they would survive long enough to hear the vows. But to Israel's surprise at Mt Sinai, instead of being struck dead by an outbreak of God's holiness, she is summoned in magisterial command to be his ambassador to the nations. In the holiest words of the Old Testament, Israel is given the supreme privilege of bearing God's glorious image in a foreign land.

Contrary to popular opinion, the Ten Commandments were not given to diminish our lives by narrowing our choices to a glum and prudish existence. Rather, they are designed to open our horizons to the infinite dimensions of living life to the fullest. The Israelites have been delivered from a tortuous tyranny to walk in "the land of the free," governed solely by holy love. It is in their keeping that she will live life on the highest moral plane and model before pagan nations, tyrannized by idols, what it means to be truly human. In this light we might think of the first four commandments as *worship that makes us fully human*, and the final six as *our responsibilities to protect the humanity of others*. But, as we learned last week, the order is of first importance. We cannot foster a healthy community without first being attentive to a holy God. No other law code ever addressed this truth in the Ancient Near East.

How then do we give honor to the God who has saved us? The first commandment addresses our affections, the very core of our being, as God demands nothing less than complete devotion, with an undivided heart. The second and third commandments instruct us how we are to honor God with our hands (no making of idols), and our lips (protecting the sanctity of God's name). The fourth commandment is so profoundly simple and practical, yet so foreign to both ancient and modern conceptions of spirituality, that no one seems to get it. This commandment reflects the honor we give to God by doing nothing. It is the gift of rest, the divine gift that God desires to bestow upon his entire creation, whether man or beast, believer or unbeliever. No one can live without this gift, yet we all consistently refuse it. So this covers the first four commandments. We worship God first and foremost with our hearts, then with our deeds and speech, and finally with our time.

In Exodus 20:4-6 we will examine the second commandment, which prohibits the making of idols. We will address four issues:

1. The prevalence and lure of idolatry
2. Identifying idolatry
3. The dangers of idolatry
4. The cure for idolatry

The passage is shaped by three verbal commands: "you shall not make...worship...serve," followed by the rationale ("for") to keep the commands.

**You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and fourth generations of those who hate me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments. (Exodus 20:4-6 NASB)**

Before we look at the specifics of the commandment we need to understand the nature and extent of idolatry in the ancient world.

### I. The Prevalence and Lure of Idolatry

#### A. The prevalence of idolatry: Dangers ahead!

Israel was destined to enter in and possess a land that was replete with idolatry. Although it seems harmless on the surface, idolatry is a deadly disease. So God, like a wise parent, prior to taking his son or daughter on a treacherous hike to a mountain summit, first points out the deadly dangers that the child must negotiate before being captured by the awe of the summit. Reverse the order and you could lose a child on the way. This may suggest why most of the Ten Commandments are addressed in the negative. God is neither a mystical theologian nor a naive optimist. God is the supreme pragmatist. He is keenly aware of the dangers that lurk in Israel's path, and he knows the perverted nature of the human heart. Before Israel learns the skill of saying an affirmative Yes to love and honor God, therefore, she will first have to say an emphatic No! over and over again.<sup>1</sup> Like a surgeon cleansing a wound prior to surgery, Israel will have to make secure, holy boundaries around her soul, similar to the ones Moses made around the mountain, in order to be protected from a massive invasion of impurity by land, sea and air.

#### B. The lure of idolatry: Bypassing relationship to manipulate life

Why was idolatry so prevalent in the ancient world? We need to understand a little about its psychology. In the Ancient Near East, no distinction was made between matter and spirit. It was commonly believed that by replicating the image of a god in stone one could possess the life force of that god and manipulate it for one's own ends. Bruce Waltke elaborates:

“Idol” glosses the Hebrew word *pesel*. This technical term for idol entails animism and voodoo. Animists do not distinguish between spirit and matter; thus, the spirit is in the matter itself. In other words, the *pesel* has spiritual power inherent in it. Voodoo involves the understanding that similitude provides access for manipulation. Because the idol is a frozen static form of a deity it can be manipulated to serve its worshiper. Thus, the common practice is to capture the living forces of nature, such as birds, animals, storms, sun, into a concrete, corporeal form. At this point, it becomes the living force itself but in a form that can be controlled.<sup>2</sup>

Yet to most of us in the modern world, the thought of investing stone images with “life-force” seems ludicrous. How could anyone believe that something made with human hands could be magically transformed into a god capable of imparting life and driving destiny? I recall my absolute incredulity on first visiting Malaysia and Indonesia and observing worshipers outside their homes, arranging food on an altar before a motionless statue, with as much devotion as they would take for an infant. I gasped. Did they really believe they were feeding a god who could not even open his mouth?

## II. Identifying Idolatry (20:4)

But we soon learn that it is much easier to identify the destructive forces of idolatry in a foreign culture than it is in our own. Have you ever reflected on the sustained shock that must bolt through a raw refugee from a Third World country on a visit to one of our shopping malls? Take one step into that self-contained mega-world of gross consumption that is Valley Fair, and within a matter of minutes all of your senses are assaulted with so many mind-altering images and sensuous sounds that, except for the battle-hardened veteran shopper, most of us forget why we came in the first place. Was it just to buy a pair of pants? Though idolatry has taken on different expressions throughout the ages, the underlying force remains the same. In a word, it is all about *bypassing relationships in order to manipulate life*.

To illustrate on a human plane, the sexual pleasures enjoyed by a married couple are one hundred per cent relationally dependent. If things are amiss in the relationship, if there is a breach of trust or resentment is brewing, that will affect their physical intimacy. Healthy couples work through these relational barriers and become stronger, but idolaters in their frustration bypass the relationship to gratify their needs in unhealthy ways. Whether it is the fantasy of pornography for men, or romantic novels for women, the need is gratified in a way that demeans the existence of the other person. So it is in our relationship with God. Idolatry seeks to manipulate the life of God by removing “god” from the relationship. With the idol we remain in total control, at least we think that. Eugene Peterson captures the thought well: “Idols are non-gods and as such are much more congenial to us than God, for we not only have the pleasure of making them, using our wonderful imaginations and skills in creative ways, but also of controlling them. They are gods with all the God taken out so that we can continue to be our own gods.”<sup>3</sup>

### A. What kind of images?

**You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. (20:4)**

As God’s privileged representative, Israel is to be distinctive among all peoples. Unlike the rest of the nations, she is to say a vehement

No! to the creation of images for the worship of false gods. Some interpret the second phrase, “or any likeness of what is in heaven,” as a prohibition against all representational forms of art. This is how Orthodox Jews and certain branches of Islam interpret the commandment. Though the grammar can be taken this way, as Waltke explains, the phrase is probably best understood as further clarifying the meaning of “idol,” as the TNIV translates the phrase, “an idol *in* the form of anything.” This is certainly consistent with the rest of the Bible, which is filled with art, and God’s commands to Moses to make a multitude of images of the creation within the holy place of his sanctuary. God is not against art or icons; he is against our deviant hearts that invest images with life-giving powers.<sup>4</sup>

### B. Domesticating the Holy

The prohibition also includes making a visible representation of the one true God in order to domesticate and control him, which is what Israel attempted in the golden calf incident (32:1-6). As Moses was delayed on the summit of the mountain with a God they could not see, Israel became extremely nervous at the base. The nation was discovering that her God is not “user friendly” (Brueggemann). He lives in absolute freedom, doing whatever he wants, whenever he wants. Unable to live within the tension of waiting for what she could not see or control, Israel created an idol to fill the void. In a massive, unified effort, every Israelite gave generously to the campaign, and enlisted Aaron to serve their interests in smelting and fashioning the idol. This is blatant “consumer religion,” with leaders feeding the people according to what their appetites crave. When the image was completed and presented to the people, immediately the fog bank of Israel’s anxiety lifted. Like a stiff drink, an image soothes us from the tension created by mystery.

Yet, while Israel is riding high on her first whiff of idolatrous fumes, we are stabbed by the irony of the whole affair. The image is a calf, a golden calf, but a calf nonetheless. Like a cheap Halloween costume from Woolworth’s, God doesn’t even get to dress up like a human. And with great applause Israel exclaims, “This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt” (32:4). What follows is an idolatrous feast, something akin to our modern Super Bowl parties, which Aaron dedicates to the Lord.

With that in mind we ought to take an idol exam to see how much idolatry resides in our own lives.

## III. The Progressive Nature of Idolatry

But there is even more to the mystery. The three verbal commands, you shall not “*make...worship...serve*,” reveal not only God’s disgust of image making, but also its dangerously progressive nature. What begins with a flurry of activity, harnessing all the best of our creative genius and applause from the boardroom, without explanation suddenly shifts. Just as the dust settles and the glossy image rolls out the factory door into the showroom, roles are mysteriously reversed. As the “creator” inspects the beauty of his creation, he begins to invest it with powers so ridiculous it would make a child laugh. Then, like watching a bad horror movie, a dreadful, dehumanizing process begins as the worshiper is progressively remade in the image of the idol.

The psalmist wrote, “Those who make them will become like them” (Ps 115:8). Like an idol who cannot see or hear or reason or speak, so also its worshipers become morally blind, dumb and deaf, and worst of all, unable to feel. The irony of idol worship is that, in the quest for “life,” its worshipers become numb to life. If you don’t

believe me, go to Las Vegas and look into the glazed, zombie-like eyes of all the worshipers; or tell me how alive you feel after you've been staring at a computer screen all day. Yet, even after the worshipers are fully remade in the image of the idol, their tyrannical master, still not satisfied, continues to demand that its "creator" do its bidding. There is nothing more pitiful to witness than a human being once made in the glorious image of God, addicted to things that no longer offer an ounce of pleasure. Is it any wonder that God, like a loving parent, emphatically warns Israel that she must not "*make... worship... serve them*"?

But just in case Israel is not spiritually sensitive to the implications of idolatry, God spells it out in black and white.

#### IV. The Cure for Idolatry: God's Zeal (20:5-6)

##### A. God's zeal defined

God refuses to be reduced to an image whereby he can be domesticated and controlled. He is one "who in holiness is beyond all our most pious efforts at control and manipulation."<sup>5</sup> To motivate Israel in no uncertain terms, therefore, God sets this commandment firmly in the bedrock of his passionate zeal: "for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God" (20:5a). The idea of a jealous God has a dissonant ring to our modern ears. We conjure up an over-possessive husband driven by an irrational or paranoid fear. Though the term (*qanah*) has both positive and negative connotations in the Old Testament, and a wide range of meaning, from a righteous zeal to blind fury, though always with the "notion of an intense, energetic state of mind, urging toward action,"<sup>6</sup> in this context it describes God's "fiery, angry reaction to the infringement of his rights." Basic to God's holiness is a passionate zeal that insists on possessing what rightfully belongs to him.

On a human level we find this today on the tiny island of Aruba, where the zeal of two grief-stricken parents for their missing daughter dominates the airwaves. Each time they are interviewed, we have the sense that the media are in absolute awe of their tenacious resolve and resolute determination to stay on that island until the mystery of their daughter's life is brought to light and justice is served. Their zeal has infected the entire nation. Zeal is proportionate to love. What would we think of parents who had no zeal spending all they had searching for a missing daughter? God has such zeal for us. Rather than being frightened by it, it ought to bring us the greatest comfort and joy that God will leave the courts of heaven and turn hell upside down to keep us from destroying ourselves. Yet, as only God could, he does so in a way that does not violate our humanity.

God's zeal is manifest in two different ways, based on the affections of the individual. But while the initial responses are vastly different, the goal is surprisingly the same.

##### B. God's zeal for the idolater

**"...for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and fourth generations of those who hate me," (20:5)**

In Christian circles this is one of the most misunderstood and misappropriated texts. Over the years I have seen it applied from an almost mystical superstition on the one hand, to a very insensitive and painful accusation on the other. Many wrongly interpret this text as teaching that children pay for the guilt of the fathers' sins, or even worse, that the sins of the fathers predetermine the behavior of the sons. This has produced more than its share of bad sermons

on "generational sin." The most recent example happened to close friends of mine whose first child suffered from an enzyme deficiency, similar to the one Emily and I have that cost the lives of our first two children. Unfortunately for this couple, instead of receiving the love and support that we experienced, many of their church leaders and other self-appointed prophets invaded the sanctity of their home and asked this couple, swallowed by grief, to consider that the fate of their daughter was due to "generational sin." They believed that idolatry had entered the family line and now it was the parents' responsibility to go through the lives of their relatives near and far, as well as their own lives, with a fine-tooth comb, to identify and renounce the sin. If they were successful in doing this, only then would their daughter have a fighting chance of being healed. Not only were they robbed of their daughter's life, they were also robbed of a sacred place to weep and be loved.

This warped teaching not only wrongly focuses the blame for contemporary dysfunctions on past generations, it also removes all responsibility and hope from the present generation. This was a common view among the exiles during Ezekiel's day. Their sense of injustice was so strong they expressed it in a proverb, "The fathers eat the sour grapes, but the children's teeth are set on edge" (Ezek 18:2). That proverb made God so furious that he left his heavenly throne and personally took Israel to court to set the record straight. Seldom do we find God so angry about bad Bible teaching that he comes down from heaven to correct it by means of an oath. "As I live," declares the Lord GOD, 'you are surely not going to use this proverb in Israel anymore!'" (Ezek 18:3).

The reason that interpretation made God so angry was that it removed his personal care and tender compassion out of the equation of history—which is the very reason he hates idolatry! After making it crystal clear that every individual is fully responsible for the guilt of his or her own sins, God concludes by saying, "I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies" (Ezek 18:32).

The second commandment teaches that if someone forsakes a relationship with the living God for an idol, God responds fervently. But though his passionate zeal is inflamed, he cannot violate the dignity of the person's free choice by coercing the individual to come home. So how does a jealous God reclaim what rightfully belongs to him, without violating one's freedom of choice? How does an individual who forsakes the intimacy of relationships for control over things, become human again? The text suggests that this kind of change doesn't happen overnight; sometimes it takes a lifetime. If the sin of idolatry consists of bypassing relationships to manipulate life, then God will use the grief of lost relationships to make us long for life. And the relationships he uses are those that are most dear to us. Our children and grandchildren become mirrors of our own deviant choices.

Again, this is *not* saying that children are predestined to a particular behavior. What it is saying is that idolatry is not only dangerous, it is also highly contagious. If children grow up in an atmosphere where idolatry is tolerated (which is what God means by "those who hate Me"), it is very likely they will not only embrace the idol but also indulge it to a greater degree than was ever foreseen by the father. King David committed adultery with Bathsheba in the secrecy of his palace. His son, Absalom, committed incest with his father's concubines before all Israel, on the palace roof! When David was lustful he took what he wanted, and because he was king, no one challenged him that the woman in question was the wife of Uriah, one of his most loyal friends. Then when David's son, Amnon, was

lustful, he took what he wanted. The woman was not a wife; she was David's own daughter. As David manipulated Uriah as a pawn to secure his wife, so Amnon used David as a pawn to secure his sister. And it didn't stop. There was more murder, and finally a military coup, engineered by David's own son Absalom. Absalom (whose name means "Father of Peace") hated his father.

But this is not God's cold justice running its predetermined course. As the grip of idolatry escalates through the generations, God is calling out to the parents and grandparents through their grief for the ones they love the most to repent and come home. I tried to imagine what God's voice would say to this David as he was alone on his bed, grieving over his children.

#### A Father's Mirror

Look at your son, David,  
what do you see?

A prince, a future king,  
or fool to lust?

That's you, David.

And you, David, used like a pawn,  
for someone else's private jest,  
the court joker in a game of secret seduction,  
your royal touch its faithful service  
servicing his untamed lusts.

How does it feel, David?

Weep, David.

That was you, David.

Look at your daughter, David,  
beautiful Tamar, succulent palm tree,  
princess in Israel.

What do you see, David?

Innocence gone,  
seized in a moment,  
royal robe rent in violent song.

She's crying, David.

Are you angry that she cries, David?

Would you rather she keep silent?

She's crying for you,  
she wants her daddy, David.

She's crying for justice.

Where are you, David?

Why can't you hold her?

Why do you look away, David?

Does that gaping wound of desolation,  
stare bloody back at you?

Why are you weeping, David?

Is it because you could have, but didn't,  
your once quick, decisive hand  
that played the harp,

seized the spear and shot the sling,  
now frozen in silence, paralyzed  
by sin's deafening blows.

Why are you weeping, David,  
an absent father now purged tender,  
by a daughter's inconsolable grief?

That is how I felt, David,

plagued with pain, unable to reach  
my daughter, whom you touched.

So weep your weary eyes dry, O David.

I love you David,

for today she made you a father.

This is the cry of a compassionate God who in his zeal is seeking to reclaim what he has lost. And this is why, in God's grace, the iniquity is visited only to the third and fourth generations. There is no possibility of repentance after the person has died. And even then, God still reminds us that he takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezek 18:32). We can see now why God was furious when Israel interpreted this commandment as predetermined consequences of "generational sin."

#### C. Zeal for the lover

**"...but showing loyal-love to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments." (20:6)**

By contrast, to those who love God by taking him seriously and turning from their idols, his loyal-love extends forever. Once again, using David as a prime example, consider how God has faithfully been answering David's request in Psalm 51, after he repented of his sin and returned to his Creator with his whole heart:

**"Restore to me the joy of your salvation,**

**And sustain me with a willing spirit.**

**Then I will teach transgressors your ways,**

**and sinners will be converted to you." (Ps 51:12-13)**

How many sinners have been converted and encouraged by David's example over the past three thousand years? I am even more impressed that God took David's voice in the psalms and used them to shape our Lord's prayers, especially those on the cross. This is the passionate zeal of God at work through history, loving those who have faithfully loved him. Love is the ultimate cure to idolatry. If we are truly God's representatives on earth we will love the next generation with such abandon that we won't have time for idolatry.

Let us remember the words of John, the apostle of love, as he concludes his first epistle: "Little children, guard yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21). Amen.

1. This same method is followed by the wise father in Proverbs 1-9.

2. Bruce K. Waltke, "Gift of the Old Covenant," *An Exegetical Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, forthcoming).

3. Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays In Ten Thousand Places* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 254.

4. Waltke, "Gift of the Old Covenant." For those who take issue with icons, Waltke retorts: "Many make use of icons in their worship, and it serves as a wonderful expression of faith and art... When I was growing up, we did not have icons, but we had flannel-shapes of Jesus in Sunday School. It seemed to me that the difference between us and Roman Catholics was that the Catholics had good art and we had bad art."

5. Walter Brueggemann, "Exodus," *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 1:843.

6. H. G. L. Peels, "*qanah*," Willem A. VanGemeren, gen. ed., *NIDOTTE* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 3:938.