



# ARE YOU WORSHIPPING GOD YOUR WAY OR HIS?

Worship is the special reverence and honour we owe to God (Psalm 50:23; 89:7). Worship belongs to God. After all He is the One being worshipped. Scripture makes it clear that God is the only One who can determine how He is to be worshipped. Anyone must acknowledge that He Himself is the best person to tell us what worship is pleasing to Him. Sadly, however, the worship of God is often shaped by personal taste, fashions and what makes people feel most comfortable. Yet this was the principle that motivated the people of Israel to make for themselves a golden calf to use in the worship of God (Exodus 32:1-8). They felt that this accorded more with their preferences and expectations. Scripture warns that we must not add to or take away from what God requires in His Word in relation to worship (Deuteronomy 4:2; Matthew 15:8-9). As Samuel Rutherford put it in relation to worship, for God “not to command is to forbid”.

We must worship God in truth (John 4:24). This means that we must worship Him only according to the objective standard of what He has required in His Word. That is the only yardstick of true worship. Our individual opinions and preferences about worship are of no ultimate consequence compared to what the unchangeable God Himself requires. Our duty is to “observe all things” that Christ has commanded (Matthew 28:19-20). Things that are indifferent, neither commanded nor prohibited, must not be part of the worship offered to God. We cannot engage in worship without some circumstantial things such as lighting and an agreed time and place, but the elements and acts of worship must be commanded by God alone.

The following is extracted and updated from James Durham’s full exposition of the Second Commandment (Exodus 20:4-6). It may be shocking to think of anything other than commanded worship as idolatry but that is the way in which the Lord Himself speaks. Frequently, through the prophet Jeremiah, the Lord’s displeasure does not depend on the nature of the idolatry practised but simply that He had never commanded it (Jeremiah 7:31; 19:5; 29:23; 32:35). We need to heed the same solemn warnings in our generation.

1

## HOW DOES THE SECOND COMMANDMENT RELATE TO WORSHIP?

In the first commandment we are commanded to worship the only true God and forbidden from worshipping any idol. The second prescribes the true worship of that God and forbids everything contrary to that. The first commandment shows who is to be worshipped, the second how He is to be worshipped. He must not be worshipped in the way that the heathen worshipped their idols nor in any other way that men shall devise to themselves, but in the way He Himself prescribes.

God will not have men follow their own preferences but rather to walk by the rule He gives to them. Whatever other worship men perform to Him is in vain (Matthew 15:9). Thus the second commandment forbids making false means of worship “unto” ourselves, i.e. to please ourselves without God’s command. Worship according to God’s command is made to Him. This extends to all His ordinances, to the worship itself and the way God is worshipped. It must all be done according to God’s command only.

2

## IS IT NOT JUST ABOUT IMAGES IN WORSHIP?

The aim of this commandment is not merely and only to forbid making and worshipping images, which is the most gross way of abusing the worship of God. It also forbids all manner of grossness in the outward worship

of God. It commands us to be exact and precise in it according to the rule prescribed by the Lord.

### **The Second Commandment is About the Outward Aspects of Worship**

This commandment includes all outward aspects of worship. It also forbids all will-worship and superstition in the worship of God: honouring Him by commands taught by men not by Himself (Colossians 2:22-23; Isaiah 29:13 and Matthew 15:8-9).

The fact that the commandment relates to the way in which outward worship must be ordered is clear. Firstly, the things forbidden in it (making images and bowing to them) are outward actions. Secondly, these things are mentioned in relation to God's worship. They are in the first table of the moral law (which relates to our duty to God) The reason that only images are mentioned is that this is what the heathen used in their worship (Leviticus 26:1). The Lord will not allow His people to do so to Him (Deuteronomy 12:3-5). Thirdly, making and worshipping images are only one aspect of men abusing the external worship of God. They are mentioned in order to include all abuses and false worship (just as adultery includes all sexual immorality in the seventh commandment). This is the most gross way of adding to God's worship. It serves to show how God accounts every addition to or altering of His Word, a heinous sin (Deuteronomy 4:23-25).

This is the way the surrounding nations (especially Egypt) served their gods. People seem naturally inclined to it, as Romans 1:24-25) and the practice of almost all nations shows. The Israelites also had their golden calves (Exodus 32:1-7; 1 Kings 12:28). The Lord will not be served in this way but commands that we must not do so to Him (Deuteronomy 12:4) but only worship Him as He requires (Deuteronomy 12:5).

3

### **IS IT SINFUL TO WORSHIP GOD IN WAYS HE HAS NOT COMMANDED?**

Yes. We break this commandment when: (a) something is added to God's worship, serving God by duties He has not commanded (this is will-worship); and (b) when God's ordinances are diminished and anything He has commanded taken from them (Deuteronomy 4:2).

Scripture condemns two types of idolatry that were found in Israel. Firstly, when groves and images were planted for idols and heathen gods. Secondly, when they had groves and worshipped in high places, not to idols but to the Lord their God (2 Chronicles 33:17). Thus, Deuteronomy 12:2-4 forbids two things: (a) making images to the false Canaanite gods; and (b) making use of the heathen way of worship in relation to the true God. Both are forbidden: one by the first Commandment, the latter by the second commandment.

Deuteronomy 12:8 condemns doing what is right in our own eyes in worship and verses 30 and 31 copying the heathen. Deuteronomy 12:32 therefore requires that we observe what God commands and neither add to nor diminish from it. This opens up and makes clear the aim and meaning of the second commandment, When they are forbidden from doing "so to the Lord your God" more is included than is expressed. It not only forbids them from serving the Lord as the heathen do their gods but also requires them to serve Him, as He Himself prescribes.

4

### **WHY IS THIS ESSENTIAL?**

The commandment is urged by a reason, threat and promise. These indicate that men easily fail in this command and that God takes special notice of the duties it requires and the sins it forbids. People might be ready to say: "Why should we be so strict about worship as long as it is offered to the true God even though it has aspects He has not commanded?" God tells us why.

#### **The Reason the Commandment Gives**

"I am a jealous God" (He says). I must have my Church and Spouse not only faithful but without appearance of unfaithfulness. The Lord seeks His people to behave towards Him as carefully as a wife would towards a jealous husband to avoid any cause for suspicion. God will not allow that which is suspicious in His worship. If His people depart from Him in deviating in the least from the rule given, He will be provoked to be avenged on them for it.

#### **The Threat the Commandment Makes**

He will punish the children for the faults of their fathers. God may seem to forget sins against this commandment for the time being and not take notice of corruptions introduced in His worship. Yet, He says He will visit (revenge) that iniquity, not only on the present generation but also the one following, even to the third and fourth generation. It mentions those "that hate me". Even the least sin amounts to hatred of God. It is done in despite of Him, preferring some corruption to Him. Though every sin has hatred to God in it, yet He puts this name of hating Him especially on the sin of corrupting His worship to show that there is a special enmity against God in that sin. It also shows that it is especially hateful to Him.

#### **The Promise the Commandment Offers**

On the other hand, He takes zeal for the purity of His worship as unique evidence of love to Him. In this promise He says that the godly are: (a) those that love Him (love is the inward fountain and summarises all duties); (b) those that keep my commandments. This is the outward expression and proof of love. There is no halfway house between loving God by keeping His commandments and hating Him by slighting or breaking His commandments. Thus there is no halfway house between God's gracious promise to parents and children, and His curse on both.