



October 23, 2020

A Big No-No: Confusing Anything with God

(4) You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. (5) You shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, (6) but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments. (7) You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain. - (Exodus 20:4–7)

Often the first few of the Ten Commandments seem hard to relate to in our current setting, in particular, the second one about not making idols and not bowing down to them. A helpful word the Old Testament uses for idols is vanity or vanities. This is because idols are vain, empty, worthless things—things that have no spiritual reality or power. Psalm 24:4 speaks of the person who “hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity” (KJV). In many contemporary versions, you will find the word vanity is now translated as idol or idols.

In verse 5, God describes Himself as “a jealous God”. It might be helpful to our modern ears to substitute the word zealous for jealous here. This more accurately captures the meaning of God’s explanation for the commandment, which is his zeal or fervor for the well-being of his creatures, especially for human beings.

The command to not take God’s name in vain is most often misunderstood as relating to swearing or cursing (v.7), especially in ways that ask God to “damn” someone or something, or possibly when a person exclaims, “Oh, God!” While that may be a problem, this is not the issue that the command is addressing.

The real problem is dealing with the multitude of ways God’s real name is used that is not in accord with God’s real nature. Remember, God’s name, Yahweh, is a reflection of his nature, and the most common way of using it “in vain” is to degrade God to the level of a created being. This is what you have in an idol. We transgress this commandment any time we refer to God in ways that are not appropriate to the greatness of his being, especially ways that do not take into consideration that God is an invisible and eternal power who has a personality. This is precisely what takes place when people carve a figure out of wood or stone and treat it as if it had Godlike characteristics, when in fact it is nothing but a lifeless, soulless piece of matter. But that is not the only way of being an idolater.

Practice: *However, there are other ways of being an idolater. Anything that occupies a greater concern in our lives than God qualifies— position, influence, success, wealth, even family. As Paul points out, covetous or greedy persons, those who “worship” the things they desire to possess (created stuff), also qualify (Ephesian 5:5).*

(Q) Are there other concerns that have pushed God to the periphery of your life? How have these concerns proved to be unreliable to meet your deeper spiritual needs?