

# The Ten Commandments 2. Have no other god before Me

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You shall have no other gods before me.  
You shall not make for yourself a graven image,  
or 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;  
you shall not bow down to them or 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 the fourth generation of those who hate me,  
but showing steadfast love to thousands of those  
who love me and keep my commandments

Exodus 20:3-6 (RSV)

## Topics

Topics largely from chapter 2 in **Broken Tablets : Restoring the Ten Commandments and Ourselves.** Ed. by: Rachel S. Mikva. Jewish Lights Pub; 1999, and chapter 2 in **Do We Still Need the Ten Commandments? : A Fresh Look at God's Laws of Love & Changing Perspectives.** John H. Timmerman. Augsburg Fortress. 1997.)

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# 1. The Second Commandment

## 1.1. Exodus 20: 3-6

You shall have no other gods before me

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

You shall not bow down to them or worship them,

for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me,

but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments (NRSV)

## 1.2. A “positive” phrasing of the second commandment:

“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”

Deuteronomy 6:5 (NRSV)

(Jesus knew his Torah.)

# 2. The Idol of Self

## 2.1. The "I" is a thief

The Kotzker rabbi: The “I” is a thief

- it takes the partial and mistakes it for the whole.
- in our search for self-fulfillment, we tend to seek meaningful existence only of ourselves

## 2.2. Examples of the idolatry of self

- making our personal concerns more important than God's
- making a religious service a “pick and choose feel-good activity” that turns our emotions into idols

# 3. The Idols of Money, Technology, Absolute Political Systems, Addictions . .

## 3.1. The call to discipleship

we are called to *discipleship*, a totality of commitment to

- God
- God's word
- God's vision and desire for us and for others

we must be suspicious of *anything* that may interfere with that commitment

## 3.2. The example of wealth

for example, *wealth*:

**No one can serve two masters, for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth**

(Matthew 6:24, NRSV)

also:

- Ezekiel 7:19-20
- Deuteronomy 32:10-18

## 4. The Gods of Other Religions

The Second Commandment raises difficult questions on how we should view the Gods of other religions. An unnecessarily radical viewpoint would be to declare:

- all religious non-Christians are idolaters
- all non-orthodox Christians are heretics

Questions:

- Do only Christians worship the one true living God? A case can certainly be made that Christians, Jews, and Moslems all worship the one true God, although they differ in the fullness of their knowledge about God
- What should our attitude be towards other religions?
- Can salvation be found outside the church?

## 5. Why Do We Worship Idols?

### 5.1. Four reasons why we tend to worship idols

from Timmerman:

- 1. The Religious Instinct in Humanity
- 2. The Desire to Manipulate God
- 3. A Need for a Visible God
- 4. A Confused Sense of Freedom

### 5.2. The Religious “Instinct” in Humanity

We have an innate sense of the divine, a inner longing for transcendence

- Platonism: “intellectual vision” of ultimate good, justice, love. . . part of the Divine Mind
- Schleiermacher: “God consciousness,” our feeling of utter dependency

can be perverted, misdirected

### 5.3. The Desire to Manipulate God

We have a tendency to envision, project onto:

- God,
- or
- a substitute “god”

those characteristics that satisfy our own psychological needs (thus “manipulating” God)

### 5.4. A Need for a Visible God

We desire to:

- “capture” God in a concrete, visible, static form (*thus denying the relatedness of God*),
- worship a God who is fully knowable, who is without mystery (*thus denying the transcendence of God*)
- worship a God fashioned by our own hands (*thus forming God in our own image*)
- worship the here and now (*an ego centered universe*)

## 5.5. A Confused Sense of Freedom

### 5.5.1. Idolatry as a path to freedom

We may have a sense that freedom is *expressed* by:

- not being bound by the conventions of others
- choosing your own way.

Idolatry, choosing what to “worship,” is hence one expression / path to freedom

### 5.5.2. What is freedom?

*The metaphor of the train journey.*

If a train wants to go to Chicago, is it bondage or freedom for it to stay on the track to Chicago?

### 5.5.3. Where does Grace come in?

**Two paradigms of grace, our natural state and freedom**

- 1. *Augustine*. Human nature was naturally inclined to the divine, but human natures became corrupted. Grace *restores* us to our natural state and allows us to freely chose good.
- 2. *Aquinas*. We are naturally inclined to the world. Grace *raises* us up so we can aspire to and achieve that which we would otherwise be incapable of in our natural state. (This grace which raises us up is "sanctifying grace.") It allows us to freely choose good, which we would be incapable of doing in our natural state.

## 6. A Jealous God

### 6.1. A metaphor from marriage

“(for you shall worship no other god, because the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God)”

Exodus 34: 14 (NRSV)

“They made me jealous with what is no god, provoked me with their idols.”

Deuteronomy 32:21 (NRSV)

This metaphor is from marriage, stressing allegiance to YHWH alone.  
YHWH demands absolute loyalty and rejection of all other Gods

### 6.2. Why should God be Jealous? A parable

There are no other real gods, so why should God be jealous of that which is not real?

Rabbi Gamliel's answer:

***The parable of the man who takes a second wife inferior to the first.*** The first wife will be rightly infuriated that her husband is lessening his devotion to her for a woman who is not worthy

God's passion is aroused both because:

- devotion of the husband (us) to the first wife (God) is lessened
- the second wife (idol) is not worthy of the husband (us). The husband (us) deserves better.

## 7. How Can God Hold Responsible the Children of Those Who Hate Him?

### 7.1. Apparent conflict with the spirit of Deuteronomy 24:16

“...for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me. . .”

Exodus 20:5 (NRSV)

“Parents shall not be put to death for their children, nor shall children be put to death for their parents, only for their own crimes may persons be put to death.”

Deuteronomy 24:16 (NRSV)

### 7.2. Possible Answers

1. children are punished only if they:

- follow the sinful ways of their parents
- fail to protest if it is within their power

2. God's remembrance of the parent's sins is God taking notice that:

- a parent's actions
- genetic predisposition

all shape a child's behavior

3. a reminder that children do suffer from the iniquities of their parents. For example:

- neglect
- inheritance of a polluted world

4. statement is harsh, but God later changes his mind after the Golden Calf incident, removing the conditions on his steadfast love (Exodus 34:6-7)

## 8. References

**Broken Tablets : Restoring the Ten Commandments and Ourselves.** Ed. by: Rachel S. Mikva.

Introduction by Lawrence Kushner. Afterword by Arnold Jacob Wolf. Jewish Lights Pub; 1999

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**Exodus. (Interpretation. A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching.)** Terence E. Fretheim, John Knox Press, Louisville, 1991