

The Ten Commandments
Lesson 5: No Idols
Loving And Obeying Only God

Introduction: Idolatry is forbidden; the second commandment states it clearly, *“You shall not make for yourself an idol...You shall not worship them or serve them...”* Is this just an Old Testament problem that only the children of Israel faced? Or is this issue discussed in the New Testament and still a problem today?

Although thousands of years have passed since the events recorded in Genesis 3, the human heart is the same now as it was then, and God is the same. If God is the one true God, it is reasonable that we should worship only Him, but humans are easily deceived and led into idolatry. **What is an idol?** It is any substitute for God. It is not necessarily a statue of stone or gold or silver. Perhaps, it is an idea or philosophy of life, a gifted leader or soul-stirring movement, a cause or opportunity, or even oneself—self-directed and self-energized for self-glory. Anything can become an idol—anything (or anyone). And anyone can follow an idol. God knows that. He knows the weakness and wickedness of the human heart as well as the deceptions and misdirection of Satan, the enemy of our souls. Therefore, God gave us commands and cautions concerning idolatry.

The second commandment addresses the danger of idolatry and gives specific directions concerning it. As we study it, we will discover God’s will and the path He wants us to take in worshiping only Him. He wants to see genuine worship—no substitutes and no phony worship. Let’s see how we are to follow Him in obeying Commandment Two.

A. Getting Israel Out of Egypt and Egypt Out of Israel

When the Lord gave the Ten Commandments to the children of Israel, He communicated with them on a level they understood. There was no confusing theological or philosophical language. What He said was plain and clear. When He dealt with the dangers of idolatry, they understood. What did they understand? What did they know about idolatry?

1. First, let’s look at the second commandment. Read Exodus 20:4-6. What does the Lord say about the matter of idolatry? What specific instructions does He give? What does God reveal about Himself? What kind of God is He?
 - a. The Lord clearly prohibited any kind of idol worship. *“You shall not make yourself an idol.”* Idolatry always results from being too conscious of, concerned with, and consumed with self. Self is the ultimate focus, not God.
 - b. Often, people think they can move and manipulate an idol to get what they want. With self in control, one often changes or adjusts his or her idols trying to find satisfaction or significance, but idols always disappoint. The Lord, on the other hand, is constant and cannot be adjusted.
 - c. Not only did God prohibit creating any kind of idol, but He also forbids us to bow before, worship, or pray to anything or anyone He has created. Nothing we see in the sky or on the ground or in the sea is worthy of being treated like God. The focus was never to be on the creation or on any creature, but on the Creator, the true God.
 - d. God wanted His people to love and follow Him, to pray to Him and worship Him. He always had their best interest in mind. He delivered them out of Egypt to bring His people into a dynamic personal relationship with Him. He wanted them to be His followers, set apart for Him and His purposes. He also wanted their response of love and obedience. He is *“a jealous God,”* who

with great love is jealous for His people, zealous for their allegiance and love to Him alone, like a husband desiring a loving, loyal wife.

2. Were the Israelites affected by the religion of Egypt when they were enslaved there? Read Ezekiel 20:5-11 and record your insights.
 - a. The Lord recalled to Ezekiel how the Israelites had worshiped many of the idols and false gods of Egypt, and how He had commanded them to “*cast away... the detestable things*” (many idols) of Egypt. But they were not willing to listen to the Lord and forsake those idols.
 - b. God could have destroyed the people but chose to honor His promise by bringing them out of Egypt and giving them His law. One of the specific targets of that law was idolatry in all its perverse forms.
3. Read Exodus 32:1-35. Summarize what you find about the people and their connections to idols and idolatry immediately after they left Egypt.
4. The Scriptures contain several accounts of the Israelites’ journey from Egypt to Canaan, in both the Old and New testaments. Read the account in Acts 7:36-41. What do you discover about Israel’s idolatrous practices?
5. Look at 1 Corinthians 10:1-7 and 11-14. Here, Paul writes to the Corinthians about the example of the Israelites. What does he warn the Corinthians against (verse 14)?

After God miraculously delivered the children of Israel out of Egypt, and displayed His power at the Red Sea, provided manna in the desert and water from the rock, and continually guided them via the pillar of fire and cloud of glory, some continued to doubt Him and even worshiped cold, dead idols. While Moses was receiving the tablets with all the commands written by the finger of God, the people were at the base of the mountain worshipping a golden calf (an idol like Apis, the Egyptians bull god).

The idolatry and iniquity practiced in Egypt still filled the hearts of many. Some thought a calf could substitute for the true and living God. Others simply added the golden calf to their worship of Jehovah. In Exodus 32:5, Aaron proclaimed the day as “*a feast to the Lord,*” but it was a corrupt feast. Acts 7:41 says that the people brought sacrifices to the golden calf “*and were rejoicing the works of their hands.*” First Corinthians 10:7 reiterates the account in Exodus 32:6: “*the people sat down to eat and drink and stood up to play.*” The Hebrew word **sahag** translated “play” refers to drunken revelry including sexual immorality. Idolatrous worship often focused on prosperity and fertility and included immoral and corrupt practices.

Obviously, the people had a wrong understanding of who God was and how He should be worshiped. That is one reason why He brought them to Mount Sinai instead of taking them directly into the promise land of Canaan. They needed some “boot camp” time to be trained in His ways, see their sin, and to understand what it means to follow and obey God rather than the hideous idols of the Egyptians or the Canaanites.

6. How did they do? What other gods and idols did Stephen mention in Acts 7:42-43?

Stephen pointed to their worship of several false gods. The Israelites wanted gods they could see and follow. They not only made and worshiped a golden calf, but they also worship “*the host of heaven*”—the sun, moon, and stars. Specifically, Stephen mentions Molech (or Moloch) and Rompha (or Rephan).

Molech was a Canaanite god of the sky and sun, the god of Moab. The worship of Rompha focused on the

planet Saturn and included astrology, whereas worship of Molech could include child sacrifice (see Lev. 18:21 and 20:2-5; 1 Kings 11:4-8, 33; 2 Kings 17:16-17, 23:10; Jeremiah 32:35).

Each generation needed training and teaching. After forty years of wilderness wandering, the people needed a reminder concerning the one true God, especially those who had grown up during the period of wandering. In Deuteronomy 4, a new generation heard the truth about who God is and what He wanted them to know about idolatry versus true worship.

1. Deut. 4:9-24: The people were told to not forget what God had done for them in bringing them out of Egypt. They were told not to make graven images male or female. Not to make images of things on the ground, underneath the earth, things in the sky, or the waters beneath the earth. They were also told not to worship the things in the heavens—the sun, moon, or stars.
2. In Leviticus 20:1-5 they were told not to give their seed to Molech or to worship Molech, lest they be stoned to death or cut off.
3. Leviticus 18:1-23 and 20:1-23 gives an overview of the Canaanite culture. God didn't want His people committing those kinds of abominations. God wanted His people to keep His statutes and judgments. He wanted them to be holy unto the Lord (see Leviticus 20:22-26).

The people of Canaan worshiped many idols and the gods they worshiped affected how they lived. In the futility of their thinking and believing, they acted in degenerate ways. Parents practiced child sacrifice, and children cursed their fathers and mothers. The people practiced many forms of immorality and consulted mediums (those who purported to contact the spirits of the dead). All these things were an abomination to the Lord. He *abhorred* the Canaanites and their wicked practices. He wanted the people of Israel to possess the land, to be a people set apart for Him, loving Him and following His Law. God sought an end to the corruption of Canaanite culture, desiring instead a society marked by righteous relationships. He wanted the hearts of the people emptied of idolatry and wholly His.

B. God's People Deal with Idolatry in The Promise Land

The Scriptures record many dealings with idols and idolatry. In fact, the words *idol, idols, idolatry, or idolatrous* are found in more than 150 verses and more than 80 verses speak of carved, graven, or molten images. God warned, commanded, and rebuked His people, pleading with them to turn from useless false idols. It is the ultimate insult to the true and living God to worship, serve, love, cling to, or call on a deceitful, dead idol. He sent many prophets to call Israel back to Himself and to true worship.

1. According to Judges 3:5-7, what did the children of Israel do that was evil in God's sight?

How did the Lord respond (Judges 3:8)?

As the children of Israel lived among the Canaanites and other tribal groups, they began to intermarry with them and to worship and serve the gods of those people. Doubtless, they bowed and prayed to these useless gods, hoping they would bless their crops and their families. They committed many immoral acts, forgetting God, His Word, and the relationship to which He had called them. The Lord became so angry that he allowed them to fall into the service of a pagan king in Mesopotamia.

2. Read Judges 3:9-11. When the people cried out against God's punishment, what did he do?
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In their distress, the people cried out to the Lord, and He graciously raised up a deliverer, Othniel, the nephew of Caleb. Then the land and the people had a period of rest for forty years. Once again, God showed His willingness to rescue His people when they wholeheartedly turned to Him in repentance and dependence.

3. Israel fell into idolatry again and again. In 1 Samuel 4—7, we read of an incident with the Philistines.
- Israel had lost a battle to the Philistines; they brought the Ark of the Covenant with them to the next battle and lost again and the Ark was captured. They were using the Ark more as a good luck charm than as a true dependence on God, and He will not be used in that way. But the Lord did use the occasion to show the Philistines who the real God was.
 - The Philistines proudly took the Ark into the house of their god, Dagon. The next morning, they discovered a message from the true God: Dagon *“had fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of the Lord.”*
 - They propped up their fallen idol, but again the next morning, Dagon had fallen again. This time his head and hands were cut off, reflecting a common practice of victorious armies against their foes. Also, God *“ravaged and smote”* the people of Ashdod with a plague.
 - When they recognized the hand of the Lord was against them, they met and moved the Ark to the city of Gath, which faced the Lord's heavy hand. Then they moved it to Ekron, where again the people faced God's displeasure.
 - Finally, the Philistines had had enough of dealing with the Lord because of possessing the Ark of the Covenant. First Samuel 6 records how they sent it back to Israel on a cart pulled by two milk cows. The people of Israel gladly received the Ark and offered a burnt offering to the Lord.
4. 1 Samuel 7:3-14 details Samuel's call to Israel to put away their idols. The heart of the solution was to worship God only and put away the idols of Baalim and Ashtoreth. They needed to return to the Lord.
5. Idolatry was always a danger, but more so later when King Solomon compromised God's Word. Read Deuteronomy 17:16-17. God warned King Solomon not to have multiple wives for they would turn the king's heart away from God. And in 1 Kings 11:1-8, Solomon's 700 wives, and princesses and 300 concubines turned his heart away from God. God was angry with King Solomon and said he would rend the kingdom and give it to a servant. In fact, God divided it into two kingdoms after Solomon's death.
- a. After Solomon's death, ten tribes came under the leadership of one of his servants, Jeroboam.
6. King Jeroboam led Israel into deeper idolatry. In fear and anxiety, Jeroboam devised a plan to establish his reign as king. He refused to trust the Lord.
- a. To strengthen his rule and build loyalty to himself, he made two golden calves and proclaimed the horrendous lie that these were Israel's gods who had brought them out of Egypt. He placed one in Bethel, in the southern part of the kingdom, and one in Dan in the northern part of the kingdom. He also setup shrines at high places throughout the land—all in convenient places to keep the people from going to Jerusalem to worship at the temple of God.
 - b. He created false gods, made up false doctrine, and put false priests in place. He created a false feast one month after the Feast of the Tabernacles and led false worship—all a result of what *“he had devised in his own heart.”*

- c. All of this was an abomination to the Lord and a great stumbling block to Israel for the next two hundred years.

Jeroboam left a legacy of idolatry and evil. His wicked influence is mentioned in the reigns of fifteen of the kings of Israel (the northern kingdom) and six of the kings of Judah (the southern kingdom). From Jeroboam to Hoshea, the kingdom of Israel had no godly kings (931-722 B.C.). All followed in the footsteps of Jeroboam—some were not as wicked and some were much more wicked, but all were evil. God punished Israel by opening the door for the Assyrians to defeat, plunder, enslave, and scatter those ten northern tribes. Why the destruction? It all goes back to their disregard for the second commandment, “...*They did wicked things to provoke the Lord to anger, for they served idols, of which the Lord had said to them, ‘You shall not do this thing’*” (2 Kings 17:11b-12 NKJV).

Homework: Read Numbers 21:1-9; John 3:14; Matthew 6:19-24; and Acts 19:23-41.

Next Week’s Lesson: **No Idols.** *God’s Continued Cry Against Idolatry, The Impossibility of Serving Two Masters*