

## Just God Himself

Exodus 20:4-6

Cradock Presbyterian Church

September 23, 2012

Suppose you went to the trouble to make real lemonade on a hot summer day. I'm talkin' the *real deal* here! You actually get out lemons, and one of those squeezer things, or a juicer, and you've got lemon rinds all over the place, and you keep adding sugar to the juice until it's right, and water until you got just the right strength. You know what I'm talkin' about, right? It's lots and lots of trouble, but there really isn't anything much better. So you ice up glasses, fill 'em up and hand 'em, out, and after everybody takes a few sips, your next-door neighbor says, "The stuff in the cans is better." WHAT!?

Maybe I used the example of lemonade because I'm sad that, officially, summer's now over; but actually, that's a pretty good example to illustrate what happens when you substitute something man-made for what's real. You know why the neighbor liked the lemonade in the can better? He didn't like the pulp from the lemons! – even though having that fiber is very good for you. Even though there's lots of Vitamin C in the real lemonade. AND even though there are LOTS of artificial preservatives in the canned stuff that probably don't do you much good.

See, we humans always think we know better. We always think what we come up with is the best. We can't take what God gives us and accept it and praise it – even including God himself. And not only won't we worship and praise God for all he's given us, including himself – we'll invent things, or create things, and bow down and worship those things instead.

If you think I'm kidding, let me digress for a minute and ask you if you've seen all the craziness on the news about the new iPhone 5. People have literally *camped out* for days in front of Apple stores so they can be the first to throw hundreds of dollars away on this thing, instead of waiting for their cell phone companies to offer the same phone at a discount when they renew their contracts! Now you all know me, I'm an Apple fan! And we have some members of our church who have iPhones; I'm not complaining about the iPhone! The point here is what you *bow down to*, what you *worship*.

And that's the point to this second commandment. Last week, in considering the first commandment, we talked about how God knew his people, knew they wanted a whole lineup of Gods because then they'd have some control, since they had A) created those gods, and B) could choose which one they worshipped or prayed to. By commanding them to worship only him, God took back control, but gave them the gift of a better life. Now, you'd think people could recognize it, when God gave them something better. Just like you'd think you could tell that fresh-squeezed lemonade is better and better for you than the stuff from the cans. But some people want to believe that what humankind can do, what we can make ourselves, is better, and we should worship the works of our hands.

God knew people. He knew his people Israel. He knew they'd seek other ways to exert control, seek ways to make it about *them*. Where the First Commandment was about substituting little "g" gods, that didn't in fact even exist, this Second Commandment is about substituting something that actually does exist. It's about having an artificial God.

Now let's talk about that a minute. Say you decide you want to make a statue or an image of some kind of God. What would it look like? Would you make it look like – a starfish? How about – a flounder? No? Maybe – *a koala bear!* I got it! A golden calf!

Why not? That's what Israel did. Eventually.

You know what you'd do. You'd make an image of God that looked something like you. Every image, every bit of artwork of God you've ever seen looks like what? – an old man with a beard, right? It's no surprise. If we were allowed to make an "artificial God" to bow down to, to worship, we'd make God in our own image. *And we'd bow down to THAT God, instead of the REAL God.* It's no wonder. If we could get away with it, we'd bow down to and worship our own high view of our abilities and accomplishments and worth as human beings, all the time.

Now you see, don't you, that this commandment is a lot deeper than you thought.

So what does it mean, to "bow down to?" First of all, it means worship, because that's how Middle Easterners pray, they bow down. You've seen plenty of videos and pictures of Muslims bowing down at prayer; that's also how ancient Jews did it, too. But bowing down was also a sign, how you showed your ultimate loyalty, showed who you would give your life to. That's where this Second Commandment reaches forward some 3000 years and touches us.

See, I *know* none of us are gonna go out and fire up the kiln and cast some kind of golden calf or some kind of statue or something like that, and worship it. At least, I haven't seen that kind of activity at the CraftShoppe on Monday mornings! We're not going to do that. But you and I and all kinds of people like us are in danger of bowing

down to, offering loyalty to, *worshipping*, some things that don't deserve it, some things that we might be allowing to take the place of God, we might be allowing to obscure God and his intentions for us.

There's a long list of things we as a society do that substitute *things* for *God*. I'm more concerned with a particular set of principles, ideals, that go beyond mere *things*. There's a reason so few people are going to church these days. It's because our country has become, for the most part, a country based on an idol. It's called "The American Dream." "The American Dream" says that all you need in life is to work hard, be a good citizen, to raise your family right, and to keep your nose clean. Be persistent; and if you are, you'll have everything you need. You'll have your own place, you'll have money enough and to spare, you'll be able to enjoy life to the fullest. And that's the absolute GOAL of life. Worship is at the altar of *happiness*, whatever that means.

Notice, there isn't any mention of God in any of that. Apparently, God isn't necessary for happiness. That thinking, that "ideal" is the reason so many of our fellow citizens aren't here with us this morning. And that's the reason life is *unhappy* for so, so many. They've *replaced* God with something very transient, very much NOT eternal.

Understand, there's not one thing wrong with the "American Dream!" It's what motivates us all our lives. And every country has some version of it. It's when that Dream takes the place of God, when it becomes what we worship, what we give our ultimate loyalty to, that we *break* the Second Commandment. And then our lives can end up, often end up, being just awful.

Let me tell you where I'm going with this. I think most people view this Second Commandment as being about *punishment*. You'd better worship this God, and not idols, *or else!* And yeah, that's true; way back there in the wilderness, God couldn't have Israel wandering off into pagan religion. But God was always looking out for the well-being of his people – and he still does. These commandments, all of them, are *good* for people apart from simple obedience to them. This one is good because it's about forcing people to give their loyalty to *God*, which means they'll follow ALL his commandments; and as we've seen and will see, that means a MUCH better life for everyone. What God offers us is guaranteed: life here and now with him watching over us from heaven, and his Holy Spirit with us here, and Jesus interceding for us when we need it. What the so-called "American Dream" offers isn't guaranteed at all! That's because it's tied to the material, and not the heavenly and spiritual. It's tied to the things of this world, that pass away, and not to God. It's tied to things that are man-made, essentially artificial, and not to the one true God. Jesus said, in the 6th chapter of Matthew, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." If we obey the commandments, we store up heavenly treasures here, now. And it all begins by making sure you bow down to, worship, and give your loyalty to the real God, and not to anything "artificial."

So, what do you give your loyalty to? To what do you bow down, either by your devotion or by your acceptance? There are so many organizations, ideals, principles of life, they're too numerous to list. Once you figure it out, ask yourself this: do they allow me to bow down and worship the one, true God? Or are they a substitute for the real thing? If you put aside everything that tries to take the place of God, and if you give your loyalty to God himself, who deserves your worship and your love, then you're just one step closer to the life God has in mind for you.