

# REQUIRED OF HUMANS: FEAR OF THE LORD

By Steve Zeisler

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Fortune magazine created a stir recently with an article about successful businessmen in their mid-life who discard the wives of their youth and marry young, beautiful, vivacious women described as "trophy wives." It was even satirized in a recent Doonesbury comic strip. This practice strikes me as an outstanding example of how rejection of God's truth leads to diminution of what is intrinsically worthwhile, while glorying in the trivial or tawdry. A marriage that lasts a lifetime and produces children is a work of art. It has incredible intrinsic value and is worthy of praise. To prefer a trophy to a valuable sculpture which has been created in your home is foolishness.

## A JEALOUS GOD

Our focus today in our study of the Ten Commandments is on a statement about the nature of God: Our God is an actively jealous God. He involves himself in that which matters to him. The word "jealous" as it is used of the Lord here is not defined like our common usage of the word. In our experience jealousy is usually petty, competitive, and immature. The word, when applied to God, has the idea of intensity. Our God is intense in his concern that what is valuable is not trivialized, and he acts on his intensity.

Let us read Exodus 20:4-7, the second and third commandments in the decalogue:

"You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, to the third and fourth generation to those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep my commandments. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain."

Briefly stated, the commandments in view here forbid idolatry and taking God's name in vain. The insistence of our Lord and Creator is that we esteem what is valuable, and he will act against those who reject such a calling. What is ultimately the most valuable is the glory of God himself. Nothing is worth more than the name, the reputation, the person, and activity of God. Should we choose to tarnish him by the use of our hands or our mouth then we have acted against an intense God who actively opposes us.

## THE SECOND COMMANDMENT: NO IDOLATRY

Verse 4 begins a discussion of idolatry:

"You shall not make for yourself an idol, or likeness of what is in heaven above or on earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them."

This refers to taking the worship of God into our own hands, and thus advancing ourselves inappropriately. The assumption is that what we create is sufficiently worthwhile so that we begin to worship it in preference to God.

This command forbids us to make idolatry an alternative to true worship or a perversion of it. The issue at stake is not the making of any image at all. Some Jews and Moslems, and even Christians in various parts of the world, have at some time said that we should never take a photograph or make a statue, for instance, as a representation of anything in creation. Once when I was in Jerusalem I took a photograph at a distance of some Jewish people at the Wailing Wall. Some orthodox Jews standing nearby almost seized my camera to forbid

my taking a photograph. They believe that the second commandment is violated by imprinting an image.

The concern of the law, however, is not creating beauty but making an image that is specifically intended to be worshiped or served. Art is not forbidden for believers. In fact, God directed the Jews in the Old Testament to make representations of cherubim to cover the ark of the covenant. What is forbidden is the making of objects to worship and serve in place of God.

To see idolatry in terms of our twentieth century experience rather than solely the activity of ancient people, let us read a word of ridicule that Isaiah preached in this regard:

Surely he cuts cedars for himself, and takes a cypress or an oak, and raises it for himself among the trees of the forest. He plants a fir, and the rain makes it grow. Then it becomes something for man to burn, so he takes one of them and warms himself; he also makes a fire to bake bread. He also makes a god and worships it; he makes it a graven image, and falls down before it. Half of it he burns in the fire; over this half he eats meat as he roasts a roast, and is satisfied. He also warms himself and says, 'Aha! I am warm, I have seen the fire.' But the rest of it he makes into a god, his graven image. He falls down before it and worships; he also prays to it and says, 'Deliver me, for thou art my God' (Is.44:14-17).

What foolishness, says Isaiah. A man cuts down a tree and turns half of it into energy. With the energy he roasts his food, bakes his bread, and warms himself at night. It has ultimately been used up in the process and becomes ashes that are scattered, trampled, and valued at nothing. The idolator then takes the other half of the tree and carves it into a graven image. He treats it as if it were a god, begging it to deliver him from his tragedy and his sin. He calls upon this object that he has made with his own hands to do what he cannot do for himself, mend his hurts and deliver him from anguish. It is foolishness.

## **WORSHIP AND SERVE**

Likewise, in contemporary society we will take a natural material, whether it is silicon or metal alloys, and will fashion it into a useful product, much like the idolator makes a graven image. Our desire in doing so is that the product of our hands will be greater than we are so as to deliver us from our state of need and contamination. It is not wrong to create, for we ought to surely use our hands to interact with the world to yield art and technology. However, it is wrong for us to worship and serve the things which we have made.

To worship is to ascribe value to an object. The original English word was "worthship." That which has worth or value in your sight is that which you worship. Worship has nothing to do with candles, organ music, folded hands, and closed eyes. It is anything that you value above other things so that you serve it through the amount of energy and time you expend in its advancement. In that way, the object has power to command obedience from its worshiper. If you worship that which has been made by human hands, then you are guilty of idolatry because only the Lord God himself and his glory is worthy of worship and service.

Idols in the ancient world were usually human in form, or were intermingled with animal parts like the sphinx in Egypt which had a lion's body and a man's head. Even when the idol was fashioned as an animal it was in order to transfer the capability of the animal--his strength, stamina, or potency--to the person.

## **MODERN IDOLS**

To understand what in twentieth century creation has the potential to be an idol, let us examine the products of our hands. When I was younger, I worked during the summers at a place which utilized heavy industrial machinery. Huge cranes with claw buckets would reach down into a mass of metal objects, pick up tons at a time, and move them from place to place. I remember watching a crane operator, a hefty man with big leather gloves on his hands, grasp the lever in front of him, and pull it back. The huge bucket on the crane swung around, a great metal claw dropped down, and the hand of the machine closed just as the man's hand had closed. With our technology we have recreated human arms that can do thousands of times more than what the ordinary man's hands can do.

A friend was telling me that she had joined a health club recently. There is magnificent equipment for working out, and mirrors everywhere. She had gone to one of the "priests" in the health club and gotten special vitamins and diet supplements to help in her fitness regimen. One of the things they determined which she should concentrate on was "thigh sculpture," since she was not happy with the appearance of her thighs. Particular machines have been invented to convert the human thigh to an ideal shape. It struck me how closely the creation of a human body, a shape that will give well-being to a person, is to the ancient idol that was carved in wood or stone.

Modern weapons are another example of this phenomenon. Ancient man would throw a spear at a target with his own physical strength supplying the energy. Now man presses a button and the spear is replaced by a missile which will go 5,000 miles at a time. It is merely an extension of the human body on a grander scale. We make things that emulate ourselves, hoping that they can deliver us. We give them far too much value, and begin to serve them as a result. We must be careful to dismiss any notion that our extended capabilities can save us from our sin.

If you have ever looked at a satellite dish carefully, you will notice that they look like human ears cocked at the heavens. It is as if we are trying to make ourselves bigger by interacting with what goes on far beyond. We want to listen in from thousands of miles away, strengthen our communication by bouncing sound off satellites in the heavens. Our hearing is expanded and we place our hope in our methods of mass communication. We are not unlike the ancient idolators. We fashion with our hands vaguely human shapes that we call on deliver us.

A friend of mine worked a large computer company some years ago, in the heyday of growth and glory in the industry. Going right from college, this brilliant young man began to give his life to the "company store." He said it had nothing to do with money, and in fact never paid much attention to his salary. As a result of the excessive hours he spent on the job, his wife left him. Later, he realized what drove him was his sense that he and the team working on a project would save the world. The idea was prevalent that human ignorance could be stamped out by these marvelous machines, that no one ever needed to want for knowledge and education again. This time it was not ears or arms that were developed, but the making of human minds. Not only did these workers want to bury IBM as one of their goals, but they were going to save the human race. It was not until long into the process that he looked up one day and saw what he had become. As a result he came to Christ because he realized that he had worshiped something that did not deserve worship. Men had made it with their hands and they had called out, "Deliver me!" They gave incredible value to that which did not deserve it.

## **IDOLATRY FOR GOD'S SAKE**

Not only do we make with our hands and accomplish with our energy those things which we worship as an alternative to God, but there is a more subtle problem for us as Christians. We may try to use idols of a sort to aid us in the worship of the true God. The error is that we attempt to put God in our debt by this kind of manipulation. The ancient Jews had that problem as well. When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the original Ten Commandments, he found that in their impatience for his return the people of Israel had asked Aaron to lead them in worship with a golden calf. Thus, on the day they received God's commandments they violated them by making an idol. Aaron proclaimed to the people, "This is your God who brought you up out of Egypt." This was not Baal, or Molech, or some other Canaanite god. Aaron's action called for the Israelites to express themselves in worship by making an idol for the sake of the true God.

I think we have some danger in this regard as well. For example, too many times we create ten-step lessons that are designed to put God in our debt. By reading the latest Christian best seller on parenting, for instance, we assume that God owes us trouble-free children. Instead of humbly bowing before a living God and depending on him and his wisdom to lead us we think we have created something that we can hold in our hands so as to force him to act. We believe we have localized him and built a channel that he has to run down to serve us. Routines and patterns can often be an attempt to manipulate God, and I think that is a problem of idolatry as well.

The Bible can even serve the same function. We love the Bible in this church, and expend ourselves in studying and meeting to discuss it. However, it is possible to have the Bible become so central that God is placed on the periphery. Our efforts to control this body of information on the page becomes that which excludes the living God. We think we can understand and thus own God by dominance of the scriptures. Jesus spoke to this issue in John 5: "You do not have his word abiding in you. For you do not believe him whom he sent. You search the scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life, and it is these that bear witness of me."

The scripture must lead us to humble obedience, worship, and love for the glory of God. The Bible cannot be an end in itself.

The glory of God is so valuable that we must not do anything to trivialize it, thereby diminishing it. We must not think that anything that we are capable of creating or any association of human beings is capable of building that which deserves our worship and service. God alone deserves that.

### **THE THIRD COMMANDMENT: RESPECT GOD'S NAME**

Let us turn to the third commandment found in Exodus 20:7:

"You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain. For the Lord will not leave him unpunished who takes his name in vain."

The concern here is for our speech rather than what we do with our hands. Unlike our culture's use of names, the name of God was a very serious notion for the ancient Semitic people. A name stood for the person, and gathered up the reputation and the personality of the individual. Therefore, any time that we diminish and trivialize the name of God by making it lower and less respected we reduce the glory of God. He takes very seriously this issue of protecting what is valuable and will act in his intensity. No one should ruin the name, and therefore the reputation of God himself.

There are a number of ways to take the name of the Lord in vain. Clearly, using God's name as a swear word would be one example. Taking oaths such as, "By God, I'm going to finish this project by Tuesday!" is also an offense. If you do that, you had better be finished on Tuesday because you have attached the name of God to a promise of action on your part. That is why Jesus said that we ought not take an oath by God's name. Since no human can control circumstances, the name of God must not be attached to a promise that might not be kept. Let your yes be yes and your no be no, but do not make an oath. If by chance you do make an oath then keep the promise because the name of God is at stake. You have attached the name and reputation of God to some announcement of activity on your part.

### **TEACH THE TRUTH**

James says that teachers of the word of God will be held to a stricter standard than others. A teacher is anyone who imparts God's word to others. It not only includes those who stand before a congregation, but anyone who says, "thus saith the Lord" in any setting. Teachers will be judged strictly because of the importance of accurately saying what God has said. If they do not, they have reduced his standing in the eyes of others. Once again, it is wrong to diminish the name and reputation of God.

Recall David's experience of being chased in the wilderness by Saul. David knew that he was to be king. Yet as long as Saul remained alive, David refused to harm him even though his own life was threatened. More than once he had opportunity to kill Saul to save his own life, but he refused to do so. Although David's advisers justified killing Saul in order to save the kingdom from ruination, David would not because Saul was the Lord's anointed. He was content to let God deal with the king in his own time and his own way. From a human standpoint, Saul perhaps deserved to be killed. However, as long as he was in an office to which the name of God was attached, David refused to dishonor the name of God by doing so. The Lord's reputation was at stake.

### **DECLARING GOD'S ACTIONS**

I think another way in which God's name and reputation can be tarnished is with casual usage, such as "God told me to do this," or "God led me to do this," or "The Spirit directed this." I am not suggesting that God does not act in our lives and the Spirit does not direct, but one who makes such a statement is responsible for telling the truth. I am concerned about some Christians today who are focused on seeing God do miracles of healing and dramatic works of power. They will report effervescently about a particular miracle that God did, or a dramatic powerful intervention of God. Certainly the Lord does dramatically and powerfully intervene in human lives, but if you proclaim that he did something, then he better have done it. Otherwise you have tarnished his reputation by claiming for him something that is not true, thus causing other people to regard him less seriously. He is a jealous, intense God who will act against those who would diminish his glory.

A friend with whom I went to college was deaf in one ear and 75 percent deaf in the other. Soon after she became a Christian, she was invited to a healing service. In the midst of an emotionally charged service, she responded to the call of the Christian "healer" to step forward.

After she told her story, he laid his hands on her and pronounced her healed. She was thrilled, and enthusiastically told everyone that she had been healed. For two days she seemed like a different person, but by the third day her hearing was back to the place where it had been before. After she had worked through her pain, she later related to me that she had become so excited and hopeful that the 25 percent hearing that she had in one ear gave her much more information than it usually did. She tuned in more effectively to what was going on around her, and was able to understand. She read lips and body language and was unaware that she was doing it. She genuinely believed herself to be healed, and she proclaimed what God had done to other people. Finally, when the energy had drained from her, and she realized her ability to hear had not changed, there were a number of people who ridiculed the whole experience. It is similar to the way that Jim Bakker and others have made the choice to assert God's name in such a way that he is made a fool. Any individual who has the temerity to say that "God has healed you" had better be certain. Otherwise, he is guilty of the very thing against which Moses is speaking in the Ten Commandments, ruining the reputation of God.

In effect, we take God's name in vain any time we indulge ourselves. Thus, when we act unbecomingly and are identified as Christians who supposedly march under the Lord's banner, we have taken God's name and made it lower in people's estimation.

As I was unloading garbage at the dump recently, I had the dilemma of disposing some paint cans. I did not know what the rules were, but it struck me that it was possible that they might be toxic, and I should find out what was appropriate before I threw them away. It seemed like too much of a hassle though, and I toyed with the idea of tossing them onto the pile with the rest of the garbage. Just then a man who works at the dump walked around from behind the pile and said, "Reverend, how are you doing today?" I once coached his son and it had made an impression on him that his son's coach was in the ministry. I asked him what I should do with the paint cans and he explained the procedure for disposal.

I was thinking of that incident in this case. I was close to indulging myself by taking the expedient way, even though my conscience had raised the question for me. This nonbeliever identified me with Jesus, however, and I realized that it was the Lord's name that would suffer as well as my own.

### **"WATCH YOURSELVES LEST YOU FORGET"**

Let me summarize. There are some who have chosen foolishly to treat marriage as if baubles and ornaments were more valuable than a work of art. It is wrong to exchange something magnificent for something tawdry. That kind of wrong valuation is like a graffiti artist painting over the Mona Lisa. It is grievously wrong when choices are made to tarnish the most valuable thing of all, the glory of God. To trivialize him by worshiping and serving that which man can make with his hands and obeying what it calls us to do in place of God makes us idolators. If we diminish the glory of God with idolatry or drag his name and reputation through the mud, then we must stand face-to-face with an intense God. He will not be made small by our irresponsible use of his name and glory.

The first of the Ten Commandments says that we should have no rivals to our Lord. The second and third

commandments say, in effect, that we must not trivialize him. Thus, the first three pronouncements are about our responsibility as God's covenant people to him. There must be no rivals or diminishment of God. We need to hear the word of God and examine ourselves fully in light of these things and see perhaps if we have made choices that break the law. In the first message of this series, I stated that the law cannot save us; it only exposes us by teaching us about ourselves.

If we see ourselves falling short in light of this examination, then we can begin the process of appealing to God for forgiveness, so that our full repentance will lead to effective rebirth and recreation. We must let the search light of the law tell us about ourselves so that we will not give way either to idolatry or to diminishing the name of God.

What do you worship and ultimately value? What do you daydream about when your mind wanders? What do you long for? What do your children emulate about you as you see them growing up? That will teach you about your values. What do you obey? What is it in your life that has the right to command you to act, speak, and perform? Make no idols that you should worship and obey.

For our benediction, I want to read from the preaching of Moses:

"So watch yourselves lest you forget the covenant of the Lord your God which he made for you and make for yourselves a graven image in the form of anything against which the Lord your God has commanded you. The Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God" (Deut.4:23,24).

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