
VIDEO LECTURE MODULE: TEN COMMANDMENTS

LECTURE 9: THE SECOND COMMANDMENT

Lecture Presenter: Rev. A.T. Vergunst



The John Knox Institute
of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Rev. A.T. Vergunst is minister of the Gospel and plans to serve the Reformed Congregation of Carterton, New Zealand, June 2020. Currently he serves the Netherlands Reformed Congregation of Waupun, WI, USA.

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Module

TEN COMMANDMENTS

18 LECTURES

REV. A.T. VERGUNST

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|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Introduction | 10. The Third Commandment |
| 2. The God of the Law | 11. The Fourth Commandment |
| 3. Paradise and the Law | 12. The Fifth Commandment |
| 4. Jesus and the Law | 13. The Sixth Commandment |
| 5. The Law and the Sinner | 14. The Seventh Commandment |
| 6. The Law and the Saint | 15. The Eighth Commandment |
| 7. The Law at Mt. Sinai | 16. The Ninth Commandment |
| 8. The First Commandment | 17. The Tenth Commandment |
| 9. The Second Commandment | 18. The Law in Eternity |

Lecture 9

THE SECOND COMMANDMENT

Every direction in life begins the same way. It always begins with one step or one choice. They may seem small and insignificant. Yet the result of the first step will not be known till we have reached the end of our journey. By that time, it is usually too late to reverse our course. Our caring Creator, however, knows the end from the beginning. He knows where even the slightest misrepresentation of Him and His character will lead to. Changing the glory of God into an image of something created isn't only dishonoring but destructive of ourselves but also for our descendants.

TRANSCRIPT LECTURE 9

Welcome, dear friends. It is my privilege again to take you into a commandment of the Lord, and today I have titled my lecture based on the second commandment as *Worship Me Honorably*. And, the Scripture on which this will be based is of course found in Exodus 20:4–6, where God says, “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that which is in the water under the earth: And thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers unto the third and the fourth generation of them that hate me; and showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.” The second commandment, along with the fourth commandment, [is] the longest in the ten. That may indicate something of the importance of these two and the impact that honoring or dishonoring this particular direction of God has upon us and our children. So therefore, I think it's important for us to understand well what are the implications of the second commandment.

Before we look at the details of the second, I want to introduce to you a second principle dealing with the law of God in general. And the second principle is that the 10 Commandments are divided over two tables. Obviously, Moses had two tables given by God, as it is recorded in Exodus 31, “And he gave unto Moses, when he had made an end of communing with him upon Mount Sinai, two tables of testimony, tables of stone written with the finger of God” (verse 18). Now, the content of each of these tables can be concluded from Jesus's statement in Matthew 22 when He gives in answer to the Pharisee the original law of God, as we have looked at earlier. And the first table would spell out our duty towards God, containing there the four commandments of the ten. And the second table spells out our duty towards our neighbor, the remaining six commandments.

What we must not do with this division is to make it a more or less value, like the first table is more valuable than the second table. Jesus's words really contradict that. He says the first table is great. He didn't say greater. He says the second table is like unto the first, not lesser than the first. So, let's resist the tendency to take the second table commandments less [seriously] than the first table commandments. That there are two tables must have a

reason, and the reason is to establish an order and a basis in our devotional love and obedience. The love to God clearly is to take precedence over our love to father, mother, brother, sister, family member, as Jesus indicates in Luke chapter 14. Our love to God also is to be foundational to the love to our neighbor. The love to God is to flow into the love to the neighbors, God's creatures, around us. So, that is the division of the two, and that is an important distinction to keep in mind, the two tables of the law of God.

Now, let's turn our attention to the second commandment. And, there [are] four aspects that we will consider with each other. What is God's intent? What does He forbid? What does He command? And let's not forget that intention in both those aspects. And fourthly, how does He enforce both aspects of the second commandment?

So, first then, what is God's intention? And let's again begin and always continue to remind ourselves when we look at the 10 Commandments to look at [them] through the heart of the lawgiver, to begin with Him and what is reflected in these 10 Commandments. So, why did God give us the second commandment? The first answer is correct. It's His sovereign will. Correct, God isn't bound by anything. God isn't bound by anyone. He is the supreme lawgiver, and who are we to question that?

But there's a second answer we can give. God cares about us, and He cares about our children and our grandchildren and the generations to come. And, God knows that every departure from Him, be it ever so small, becomes bigger with time. Every departure begins the same way. It begins with one small step onto a slippery slope. No act of disobedience is innocent, but the disobedience to the second commandment is never done in isolation. It affects, as you will see, the third and the fourth generation, at least. And the honoring of it will affect thousands, as you will see, not just individuals but generations.

So again, do you notice what I notice? That God commands the largeness of His mercy [to] thousands, while He assigned His vengeance, just vengeance, to only four generations, [unto] the third and the fourth generation. Everywhere in Scripture where you also look, even in the 10 Commandments, again and again, do you notice you cannot omit to see the glory and devotion of the God of grace and love as His beauty shines through all His works and all His words? So, let's consider then what God forbids us in the second.

In the first, He revealed His will for us to worship Him in trust and obedience as the only true God. Now, in the second commandment He expands on the first. We are to worship Him in a worthy manner. We are to worship Him in a manner that reflects that we understand and know His glory. In other words, in the first commandment we are to worship the correct God, the only One. In the second commandment, God details for us that we are to worship the correct God correctly, or honorably. So, what is that then to worship God correctly or honorably? Well, God has given us the clear direction. You do that without the use of images or pictures of Me. Clearly, He forbids us to make any image, likeness, borrowed out of the heavens, on the earth, or under the earth, to somehow picture Him.

Moses reminded the Israelites repeatedly in the book of Deuteronomy that God spoke face-to-face with Israel, yet didn't show Himself, didn't give us any image of His likeness. I suspect that Moses is like us. He also desired to see God. He asked Him at one point, "Behold, Lord, show me thy glory." And God answers him, you can read it in Exodus 33 and 34, God says, 'Moses, you can't see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live. Instead, I will proclaim,' words, 'all my goodness. I will pass by, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD.' And then, in Exodus 34, you can read when Moses stands there, that God comes by and He proclaims His name.

There's something remarkable about what God says in that particular passage, so let me read it. He said, "The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy unto thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that by no means will clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers unto the third and fourth generation." Do you notice how similar that revelation of God to Moses is to the second commandment? So, God forbids us to make any representation or image of Himself.

Why? Well, that's His sovereign will. True. But secondly, God knows that any imagination, or any representation or any image, no matter how sophisticated and no matter how artistic and colorful, dishonors or degrades His glory. For how can we make He Who is a spirit and invisible, He Who is omnipresent and infinite, into something picture, something stone, something artistic? The only visible representation that God gave of Himself to Israel was the tabernacle, later on replaced with the temple, but ultimately replaced by the living Son of Man, Jesus Christ. Hebrews 1:3 describes Jesus as the brightness of God's glory and the express image of His

Son. Colossians 1:15 even refers to Jesus as the image of the invisible God, and that alone is the way that God revealed Himself visibly to us.

It's remarkable, however, that when you read through all the gospel stories, that the gospel writers never tell us whether Jesus was tall or short, stocky or slim. We have not a single clue what He looked like, except what His character was like. He was meek, lowly in spirit, gentle, caring, loving, compassionate, merciful, gracious, serving, all character issues which showed forth in His actions. That is the glory of God, for that reveals to us the devotional, loving character of the Almighty. And any picture and any representation of Him somehow visibly is a dishonor.

So, none of us ought to think to be wiser than God thinking that a representation of God in an image will make us feel closer to Him. If that is true, friends, God would have done the opposite of the second commandment, but God knows that any attempt to picture Him will lead people astray, and that's what His main purpose is. He doesn't want us to be led astray by a misrepresentation of His character or of His person in a limited visual representation. And history has confirmed it. Any time, from the days of Moses, when people began to picture God, beginning with the golden calf, [then] they would go astray and hurt themselves deeply, spiritually, as well as, of course, dishonor God.

So secondly, we are to worship Him without making a mental image of God that misrepresents Him as well. Idolatry is not only done with a stone image or statute. Idolatry is also done when we make a mental image of God and worship Him in a different way than what He has revealed Himself to be. In Psalm 50, God charges the Israelites with saying, "Thou thought I was altogether such an one as thyself." Now, that's a mental misrepresentation. So we dishonor, friends, God when we create a mental image of Him according to our liking, according to one that fits us. We may do this unaware, or we may do this purposely. But, both of them are nonetheless sinful. And therefore, please examine your own thinking about God according to the second commandment.

Do we worship Him correctly, honorably? We dishonor Him when we worship Him as if He is not sovereign over everyone's life. We dishonor Him if we worship Him as if He is not holy and righteous in all His ways and doings, or [as] if He is not truthful to His Word or [changes] His standards of right and wrong. But we likewise misrepresent Him if we think of Him only as a God of love, not concerned about sin, just love, indulging everyone. But we also misrepresent Him when we go the other way. He's only a God of anger, a God of harsh, cold, indifference. All such are misrepresentations of God, and what do they do? They lead us astray. Yes, they dishonor Him, but they also hurt us as we are straying away from the real, true God of heaven. Please keep in mind that these commandments are God's caring revelation of love to keep us on the straight and narrow way that leadeth to life.

So then thirdly, let's consider what God commands us in the second. He commands us to worship Him appropriately. Now when we heard the word *worship*, we right away think of church. We think of singing, praying, reading the Word, preaching, listening. That's not incorrect, but the word *worship* is far broader than a church gathering. Worship is doing what we were created to do. It is reflecting the God Who we were meant to reflect. That's already worship, how we live. How we bear out the image of Him is worship.

Now, friends, we dishonor Him when we don't reflect His glory in His devotional love, in His patience, in His being ready to forgive. We dishonor when that image of God is not reflected in our own lifestyle. When we in meekness turn the other cheek to someone who has offended us, that's God-like. When we involve ourselves in sacrificial ministry and pour ourselves into a priestly love, that's God-like. That's second commandment worship. When our walk is according to His will in all purity and sincerity, you see, then we are reflecting Him honorably. So, anyone ought to ask themselves, 'How do I reflect God's glory and honor as a husband, as a wife, as a father, as a mother, as a child, as a servant, as a traveler, or as a shopper, or as a visitor?' Can they see in me the reflection of [Him Whose image] I bear?

So, such a lifestyle of daily personal and also family worship will overflow itself in the weekly worship services, and the services should never be man-centered. Our church services ought to be God-centered, Word-based, Spirit-filled. Our friends and attendees who come and share this time of worship with us, they ought to walk away with an impression, 'Surely, God is in this place,' what Jacob said about Bethel. The unbelievers who see God's people in corporate worship, they ought to be stirred to ask the question, 'What makes them so expressive in their singing? What makes these people so trustful and childlike and confident in prayer? What makes

them so attentive to the explanation of the Word of God? What makes them so sincere in sharing, in ministry? And what makes them express their thanksgiving with this humility and with this awe? That is reflecting in our worship services something of the glory of God. That's what God requires in the second commandment.

Now lastly then, let's consider how God reinforced the importance of this commandment. You notice He builds into this commandment the statement that I am a jealous God. That's no negative statement. God's jealousy is the intensity of His love to His own character and glory. No one would feel ill when a husband feels jealous when someone gives his wife affection or adoration and intrudes himself into his relationship. Then, he feels jealous. As a matter of fact, it is spoken about 'as the rage of man is the jealousy of love' (Proverbs 6:34). So, God says, "I am a jealous God." He is jealous about His glory. That's perfectly legitimate. It would be a fault in God as it is a fault in us when we are not jealous about our honor and about our loved ones. God is the greatest. None is as great, as good, as devoted, as glorious as He. None of us will accept misrepresentation or dishonor to our character, and so, God says, "I am jealous."

And, friends, let us heed, therefore, what Moses writes about God's jealousy in Deuteronomy 6. I'll read it to you, a portion of verse 13 to 15, "Thou shalt fear the LORD thy God and serve him;... (for the LORD thy God is a jealous God among you) Lest the anger of the LORD thy God be kindled against thee, and destroy thee from off the face of the earth." And you see that that rage of God's jealousy has been intense upon the people of Israel. But then secondly, He not only states that He's jealous, [but] He also states and warns us what will happen when we misrepresent Him. He says that the effects of a misrepresentation, a dishonorable worship, will affect our generations to come. It will be disastrous for the generations to come. God will visit the iniquity of the fathers to the second commandment upon the children unto the third and the fourth generation.

Let's count the cost of misrepresenting Him in the eyes of those we lead, fathers, mothers, us teachers and preachers. What is the cost? Well, when I take one little step away from the character representation of God, my children will take two or three steps, and the grandchildren will take more steps. It's an increasing departure that God is warning us about. They follow our footsteps, or perhaps they even step out of our footsteps to go farther astray from where we have led them astray. Sin and lies always grow bigger, and God sees this happening. He says, 'Oh, My people, don't misrepresent Me because I see the disastrous results upon your children and grandchildren when you exchange the glory of God with a misrepresentation of Me.'

Not often do we read in the Scriptures that the Lord Jesus became angry, but may I highlight twice that He became angry? First, with the disciples when they hindered the children from coming to Him. Why was He so angry? Because they misrepresented Him and His Father as if He wasn't interested in children, as if they don't belong to [those who may] hear [about the] kingdom and hear about the kingdom grace. And the second time that Jesus was angry is when He saw how the temple of His Father was dishonored. They made a house of prayer and worship a house of merchandise and profit, and that wasn't reflecting on them. That was reflecting on His Father's glory, Who is a God of mercy and a God of goodness. And then, Jesus becomes angry.

But notice that the second commandment concludes with an encouragement. Those that honor me, I will honor, "showing mercy unto thousands that love me and keep my commandments." Now friends, the thousands are not just individuals. It's thousands of generations as Deuteronomy 7:9 points out. So what God is saying [is] 'When you honor Me and worship Me correctly, this is going to affect thousands of generations.' [As a] group, the nation will be affected as we lead people in the correct way of worshiping God. I said earlier, notice the contrast again. God is avenging in justice, the misrepresentation to the third and the fourth generation, but yet He extends His mercy to thousands of generations. That's one more remarkable thing here. The fact that God mentions the word *mercy* in the context of a lawbook.

Mercy doesn't belong [in] the lawbook. The law sets boundaries, spells out requirements and consequences, but it doesn't deal with mercy. But God reveals in His lawbook the glory of His merciful and gracious character. He knows our frame. He understands that even with the best of our efforts, we fail. We remain sinners. Though we are created in His image, we are fallen. And even though there is grace, we're not perfect. And therefore, the best parents and the best teachers will still fail to represent God in the most perfect way. And therefore, God expresses mercy in the 10 Commandments. He will bless the sincere efforts in mercy.

So, the first commandment calls us to worship Him only. The second commandment outlines [that] we are to worship Him worthy of His great glory. Let's take these truths to our heart. Let's examine our own worship

of God: privately, family worship. Are they in the spirit of Psalm 2:11? “Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling.” Let’s take these truths also to our corporate worship as church families. Are we modeling our church worship services along the biblical principles derived from the second commandment? Is every aspect of the actual worship service, but also of the decorations and the setup of the whole place where we are, honoring the spirit and the details of the second commandment?

And so, as we close, let us do that with remembering that today God is the same, so as He was then. The apostle brings this out in the last verse of Hebrews 12: “God is a consuming fire.” And therefore, he says, “let us seek grace, whereby we may serve him acceptably with reverence and godly fear.” So, may God bless these words, friends, as we have considered the second commandment and will the next time consider the third, that we are not to take the name of the Lord our God in vain. Thank you.