

Image Isn't Everything

Exodus 20:4-6

(**Show Picture 1**) In Hong Kong, there is a temple of Ten Thousand Buddha's. It's a 30 minute walk to the top of a mountain, your journey the whole way is lined with hundreds of statues of Buddha. At the top there is a pagoda, pavilions and a temple where the walls are lined in thousands of small Buddha statues. (**Show Picture 2**) Every Buddha is different. Worshippers can go in and find the image of Buddha most suited to their liking, and worship that one.

Buddhists are far from the only ones to fashion a god more to their preference. Humanity so frequently professes deities shaped to their liking that many sociologists believe that this is what all religion is— a guise under which selfish human beings rationalize their behavior by giving it divine endorsement.

(**Next Slide**) There's a famous quote and versions of it have been variously attributed to everyone from Voltaire to Pascal to Mark Twain. It goes something like this, "God created man in his image, and man returned the favor." We love to shape god in our own image.

There are many examples of this in history. Nations that wanted to go to war and conquer other peoples worshipped war gods. Nations that hoarded great wealth and possessions bowed to gods of gold and silver. People that were given to pleasures of the flesh carved love and fertility gods. The eighteenth-century philosopher, Montesquieu, wrote, "If triangles had a god, he would have three sides."

You can see it today. Instead of trying to come to grips with God as He reveals Himself in scripture, people shape god into god, the environmental activist; or god, the LGBTQ champion. God becomes the pusher of our politics. Advocate of the American dream.

One pastor who is involved in worldwide missions has noted in his travels how when he goes to Africa, they have pictures of Jesus that look very African. Asian Christians have pictures of Jesus where our Lord looks quit Asian, and, of course, how many of us grew up with a blond haired, blue eyed Jesus. He died on the cross for the sins of every person, but he was, in fact, Jewish.

The God of the Bible is not made of spiritual Play-Doh. Yet, we often attempt to mold Him into an image more to our liking, just like the Buddhists in Kyoto, Japan. God is well aware of our idol making tendency, and this is what is behind the second of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:4-6:

(2 Slides) *You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.*

At first glance, this commandment might seem very similar to the first, “*You shall have no other gods before me,*” and certainly, there is the potential for a lot of overlap. But the first commandment rules out having any other gods. The second commandment, however, forbids shaping God into images more to our liking. God is as He is.

(Next Slide) Too often, we sell our ancient forebears short. They did not actually believe their idol was a god. They believed that their god spoke through that idol. The idol became a sort of go-between. While this command would certainly prohibit idols of other gods, it also forbids making God in an image we find more likable. We cannot make Him to be anything else. We can't just take the parts of God we like, and ignore the rest.

This is a commandment against turning God into some sort of customizable, personalized deity.

We don't have to have physical idols to do this. These images exist in our minds whether they exist physically or not. Listen to Col. 3:5, “*Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed, which is idolatry.*” This list is as contemporary as tomorrow's newspaper, and yet there is nothing there about statues or graven images, yet it is idolatry. According to this definition, we could all be guilty of idolatry. If God is going to be number one on the throne of our hearts, then we must worship God as He really is and not as we wish he was.

I. Ways We Shape God

We have been shaping God into many things for centuries. However, we do have our favorites today. Let me share with you some of the popular images we have for God today.

First is God as the **great vending machine**. The great vending machine image of God says just put in your religious tokens and out come the blessings. Your tokens are religious activities like prayer, going to church, or reading your Bible, and if you deposit enough of these tokens, you will get blessings from God. If you put in the token of prayer, then God will give you this. If you put in the token of Bible reading, then you earn another blessing.

A closely related image to the vending machine is the **God of Wall Street**, only this version is much more grandiose in scale. You'll find this image of God being painted frequently on the airwaves. In this case, your religious performance are not just tokens that earn divine blessings, but they are heavenly investments that will be returned many times over. Just send in a small donation and I'll send you a miraculous prayer cloth, then you pray this special printed prayer and God will multiply your donation by 20, 50, or even 100 fold.

Another idol is **God as Monte Hall or Wayne Brady** who says, “Let's make a deal.” This image is usually conjured up in a moment of crisis or a time of great need “Oh God, if you just get me out of this, I promise I'll never do this again. Oh God, If you just give me this one thing, I promise that from here on out I will be faithful and serve you.” There are many ways we can go

to God and say, I will give you this, if you will give me that. However, God is not in the business of bartering. His offer of salvation stands as is. He's already given us the greatest reasons in the world to believe in Him. If we don't find sufficient reason to be faithful now, God is not going to be able to bribe us with something else.

We should never view our spiritual activities as investments to get something out of God. God is not a stingy giver who wants to keep stuff from you. God loves to give. God wants to bless you. He's generous. But again he's going to give what you need, not what you want. He will never be our puppet on a string. Salvation is a free gift of God, and in our salvation God bestows upon us in super-abundance every spiritual blessing in Christ. As Christians we already have every provision we will ever need.

There are also many Christians who see God as **Uncle Sam in the sky**. Their faith is wrapped up in Red, White, and Blue. God's divine purposes with this image of Him are one and the same with His worshipper's patriotic ambitions. This version of God endorses just about everything the United States wants to do, buy, sell, or fight, or He aligns himself with their favorite political agendas. If you worship this God, your values and actions will be more influenced by your concept of national security and reputation than by divine truth.

Not everyone's view of God is so nice though. Many see Him as the **cosmic cop**. Whenever you start having too much fun, he's there to blow the whistle. He watches the flow of human traffic from his heavenly perch and whenever someone starts having too much fun in the fast lane, He makes sure they get slowed down.

Others see God as the **distracted executive**. The CEO of the universe, so busy with important things that he doesn't have time for your piddling concerns.

Those that grew up in an unhealthy family often see God as an **unloving father**. For them, heavenly Father, is not a positive image at all. At best, he is uncaring, cold and emotionally distant. At worst, he is abusive. He acts like a bully, carrying around a big stick using it to control, threaten, and punish people. This distorted image of God is one many abuse survivors struggle with.

Another widespread negative image of God is the **unreliable friend**. He's like the buddy that you can't depend on. He's there for the fun times, but when it comes time to move the piano from the third floor, he's nowhere to be found. He abandons you when you need him most.

There are many more false images of God. In fact, the list is almost endless. But the one thing they all have in common is that they revolve around us, around what we think, what we want, what we feel. To serve the true God, we must be oriented around Him. He must be at the center of things, and we are shaped to fit his desire. It may be true to say that no one has a fully correct view of God, because He is beyond our ability to comprehend. Surely, our understanding of God is finite, and we will always be growing. The real question is do you alter

your view of God to fit you, or do you allow yourself to be changed to fit Him?

II. What's Wrong With Shaping God?

A four-year-old boy was asked by his Sunday School teacher what he was drawing “I'm drawing a picture of God,” he replied. Amused, the teacher probed further “How can you do that, since no one knows what God looks like?” The boy kept right on drawing and without missing a beat said, “They will when I'm done.”

It might be sort of innocent when a four-year-old boy reshapes God, but it isn't when we do it. Why is shaping God such a dangerous thing? Whenever we mold God into what we want Him to be, we do several things.

First, our images of God are limiting. God is infinite. He is limitless. We, however, are very finite. There is no way we can ever understand all that God is. So, when we conceive an image of Him, and say that He is that, we are giving an incomplete view of Him. He is always greater than we say He is. Years ago, J.B. Phillips wrote a book called *Your God is too Small*.

Our image of God may be true in what it represents, but false in what it leaves out. We are not wrong in saying that God is this and this, but the implication is that God is this and not that. Anytime we try to shape God, we de-emphasize some aspect of his character because we emphasize others.

Secondly, our images of God are obscuring. It keeps us from seeing God as He really is. We hide His true glory and majesty. We might be very sincerely trying to get across a very real aspect of God, but try as we might, we will always end up muddying the waters more than clearing the view. Every man-made image, no matter how grand and glorious, is actually degrading to the true power and glory of God.

Our images of God are self-suppressing. Shaping God suppresses our ability to grow spiritually. More specifically it limits what we let God do in us. First, we make God in our image, then we become more like the image of God we worship. When we worship a lesser image of God, our own faith and spiritual growth become diminished. A smaller god means a smaller Christian.

Further, our false views of God are confining. We subtly begin to think God is more in one place than another and that some places are more holy than others. A minister walked into church early one day and neglected to take off his hat. A lady from the congregation saw him and approached him indignantly, “How dare you wear that hat in the church?” Unfazed, the minister coolly replied, “Ma'am, this hat is on the church.”

The main impact on us is when we assign God to certain locations- the temple, or a church building, or grandma's house, or a certain time, say 10 am on a Sunday morning, the only thing we have to worry about is keeping our appointment with him then and there. We confine God to only a certain place or a certain time. We can do what we want when we're not at that place.

This is why many feel free to swear, speak coarsely, and act rudely throughout the week, but find these things to be entirely inappropriate “at church.”

This very well could have been an issue for the woman at the well in John 4. She was greatly concerned where the right place to worship God was, Jerusalem or Samaria, yet she had been married five times and was now living with a man who was not her husband. Wherever she thought God was, it certainly was not in her house!

Moreover, our images of God are projecting. We impose upon God our own attributes. Instead of our being created in His image, we create Him in ours. Slowly, our god begins to care greatly about the things we care greatly about, and He’s not so concerned about those things we aren’t all that interested in. Images of God tend to mirror us

Finally, our images of God are controlling. Through our images we try to manipulate the limitless, infinite, eternal, sovereign creator of the entire universe. A company has actually developed a God doll. The doll is a white-haired, white bearded, white man in a long rainbow-colored robe. However, a talk show host suggested that the God Doll ought to simply be bags of clay, so that we could mold him into whatever image we thought best.

When we shape God, we become like the Jews who increasingly viewed the Ark of the Covenant as a talisman that could be used against their foes. In 1 Sam 4, the Israelites suffered defeat at the hands of the Philistines. They concluded that the only way to win was to take the Ark into battle. They thought they could manipulate God into performing for them. But Scripture tells us that God gave the Philistines an even greater victory than before, and allowed them to capture the Ark.

Christians do the same thing when we use reduce spirituality to formulas, or Christian growth to a simple 3 step process. Last week I saw an article about “God’s Formula for Success.” It gave a three-step formula which had some pretty good counsel. The problem came in this statement, “Follow these three steps to victory in any situation.” I’m sorry. That’s a recipe for disappointment and frustration.

Christian bestseller lists are filled with such titles with formulas to find financial freedom, reveal God's will for your life, or to discover the one God intends for you. Surely, scripture gives sound principles for such things, but this requires wisdom, discernment, prayer and maturity, and they don’t always “guarantee success.” When we try to manipulate God, we are setting ourselves up for disappointment. Spirituality is never as simple as an outline. God is too big for this. He cannot be used. He cannot be programmed like a computer.

III. Shaping God Can Change Your Family Tree

There is another consequence to shaping God into our own image that I want to make a whole separate point, because God specifically mentions it in verse 5. Shaping God into our own

image does more than stunt our own spiritual growth. It damages our legacy. Verse 5 says,

You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me.

At first glance, God might overly harsh in his judgment, punishing innocent offspring for the sins of prior generations. However, God clearly states elsewhere in Scripture that, “A son will not be punished for his father’s sins, and a father will not be punished for his son’s sins (Ezek. 18:20; Dt. 24:16).” So, what gives?

What we have is what is often called generation sin or a generational curse. God is not saying, “I will punish your children and grandchildren for what you do.” What he is saying is “I will punish generation after generation for committing the same sin.” Notice it’s all the generations who hate God in verse 5, the parents, the children, the grandchildren, and the great grandchildren. They’re all guilty. The younger generation can’t use the excuse, “Well, it’s not our fault. Our parents or grandparents made us this way.”

Don’t we hear that a lot today? My generation, Generation X blamed all of our problems on the Boomers. And today, we have the Millennials and Gen Y blaming us for all of their problems. It’s a game that every generation can play. We make a mess of our lives, and we pass that mess on down to the next generation. God says, that’s no excuse.

Sin is like a cancer that spreads and grows. It grows not just in your life, but in your family and your family tree. We know how this works with addiction and abuse, don’t we? Addiction often breeds more addiction in a family line. Those who are abused often become abusers themselves. Our children can be deeply impacted by the worst decisions we make.

What’s happening with these generational sins is a spiritual phenomenon. When a false image of God takes hold in someone's heart, you can often see the devastating results in their children, grandchildren, and even great grandchildren. Sinful patterns of behavior and ways of thinking get passed down through the generations. Sins like lying, unforgiveness, worry, anger, and unfaithfulness seemingly revisit each new generation like a curse. If you think about it for just a few minutes, you can probably identify several generational sins in your own family. How many of us grew up with a negative view of Christianity, or a negative view of the church because we had a parent or a grandparent that had a unhealthy understanding of God?

Verse 5 lays out a ripple effect that spans 4 generations. That amounts to an entire lifetime, four generations that can be deeply hurt by a false image of God. The consequences extend 4 generations, not because God is cruel, but because false images of God are so dangerous.

Generational sin can multiply until it becomes a stronghold – a seeming unbreakable prison for an entire family.

Verse 5 should not be read without considering verse 6. Don't overlook the tremendous grace and blessing that overflows in verse 6, "*but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.*" This is the reality of God's grace and mercy. If a false image of God leaves a trail for 4 generations, look at the ripples of blessing that come from worshipping the true God. God shows his love to a thousand generations. 1,000 to 4! How awesome and great is the love and grace of God! There's no comparison.

Maybe you're here this morning, and you are on the receiving end of one of these generational sins. You have parents or grandparents that made some awful choices. They have left you a spiritual legacy that's in shambles. Here's the good news – that generational sin can end with you. That cycle can stop with you. You don't have to pass it down to your kids or your grandkids. It's an inheritance that you don't have to accept. You can be the first of a thousand generations of blessing. The good news of Jesus is that anyone can receive Him as their Lord and Savior. He forgives you of your sin. He gives you His Spirit to live inside you.

Conclusion:

God wants you to know Him. He wants you to love Him He wants you to see Him as He really is. Have you ever been embarrassed by a bad picture of yourself? How about your driver's license picture? Why do we not like them? Because we do not think they accurately represent us. In a much bigger way, God does not want us to have a bad picture of Him. God has revealed Himself to us in the pages of Scripture, and He wants us to fall in love with Him there.

See Him! Know Him! Love Him! Love Him deeply! Love Him more and more! He loves you. There is no love greater than the love He has for you. Please don't miss that love by putting God in a box. Let Him Shape you