

“We Bow Down”

Exodus 20:4-6; Jeremiah 2:13 ¹

My Dad only bought one new car during my lifetime, and it was a car just like the one you see on the screen. It was a light blue, 1966 Dodge Dart that I inherited a decade later.

The car was a slant-six, three-on-the-column, with an engine so simple that even I could work on it. I'd had it for several years when the original upholstery became so tattered that at some time in the early eighties I decided to replace it with the then-in-vogue Naughahyde. I chose Navy blue (of course), which is what you see on the background of this PowerPoint presentation.

Jill and I were going on a choir retreat the same evening that I got the car back from the shop, and I was looking forward to showing off my new interior. First, though, I had to take our new puppy to “dog camp” for the night so we could go on the retreat. What I'm about to tell you is funny now, but it was anything but funny when it happened.

It was fifteen miles to the kennel. After about five miles, the puppy had diarrhea all over the brand-new back seat. After about ten miles, the dog threw up all over the brand-new front seat. And as I carried the dog into the kennel, she peed all over me! Hang onto that image in your mind.

About ten years ago, the Japanese government put a bunch of albatross decoys on the Izu Islands, trying to encourage the endangered species to breed. While the project met with moderate success, the researchers were puzzled by the behavior of one male albatross they named Deko. For more than two years, Deko tried to woo one of the decoys by building fancy nests and fighting off rival suitors. Day after day, Deko stood by the decoy's side. One researcher commented, “Deko doesn't seem to have any interest in real birds.”² Hold that image, too.

Moses had been on Sinai for a long time. The people of Israel had no idea when—or whether—Moses would return from the firestorm on the mountain, and so, perhaps at the very moment that Moses was receiving the Ten Commandments from God, the people said to Aaron, “*Look, make us some gods who can lead us. This man Moses, who brought us here from Egypt, has disappeared. We don't know what has happened to him*” (Exodus 32:1, NLT).

While they may seem unrelated on the surface, these three stories share a fundamental inner connection: in each situation, affection was focused in an inappropriate place. First, although I didn't behave very well when our dog “inaugurated” my car, I knew exactly what was happening, even as it happened: God was messing up my car in order to deliver me from automotive idolatry, a sin to which I was rather susceptible in those days.

Deko the albatross apparently wanted a mate who would stay where she was and make no demands on him. A living, interacting mate didn't suit his plan for his life. He wanted a mate he could control. And that's the kind of god the Israelites wanted, too: a god that could be controlled, a god that would stay put and allow them to do whatever they wanted to do.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on June 28, 2015.

² *World*, February 20, 1999.

And all of this, of course, has everything to do with the Second Commandment, which warns us not to “*make idols of any kind*” (Exodus 20:4, NLT³). The necessity for the Second Commandment arises out of the fact that you and I have an inescapable need to worship. God created us for worship, and we are always worshiping something.

For the idolater, that mysterious Power, vast, formless, uncontrollable and unpredictable, which once filled the entire universe, is now conveniently reduced to something that can be imprisoned in a few ounces of wood or metal or plastic. And don't think the idolater too foolish to know that his god is man-made, breakable, and powerless. He does know it; that is precisely the sort of god he wants – a god he can control.⁴

As I'm sure you know, an idol is generally a material object, by the proper manipulation of which persons may get what they want out of life—except of course, for the small inconvenience that idols don't work. They don't have any real power at all. And because idols don't really do anything, idolatrous cultures tend to get nastier and nastier over time. If small bribes don't seem to be getting the job done, larger bribes are submitted, usually ending in some sort of human sacrifice. But no matter what the bribe, idolatry still doesn't work.

The Old Testament prophets repeatedly condemned idolatry, and one of the most frequent weapons they used against it was ridicule. Isaiah laughed at the man who took a block of wood and with part of it heated his house, with part of it cooked his dinner, and with part of it made a god to worship (Isaiah 44:9-20).

Jeremiah laughed at gods knocked together with a hammer and nails (Jeremiah 10:3-5). Gideon's father shouted, “*Why are you defending Baal? . . . If Baal is truly a god, let him defend himself!*” (Judges 6:31). The Bible has great contempt for gods who have eyes but cannot see, who have ears and cannot hear, who have mouths and cannot speak (Deuteronomy 4:28; Psalm 135:15-17).

These pretenders that are not the Living God have to be dusted off like furniture. Set them upright, and they can't move. Tip them over, and they can't get up. Their faces are blackened by the soot from the fires in their temples. They're no better than a city park bench, on which every passing bird does its business.

Now when you put it this way, it does seem extraordinary that anyone should be silly enough to worship an idol that is no more than a block of wood or a lump of metal. But when we try to understand how this kind of thing might have begun, perhaps it's not so silly, after all. Idolatry probably began because people found it difficult to worship gods they couldn't see. So they said to themselves, “Let's make something that will represent our god and that will help us to think about our god.”

It seems ridiculous that a sane person would ever worship something his or her own hands had made; but of course that wasn't what they intended to do. The idol was meant to make memory easier and worship more real. But bit by bit superstition turned the symbol into reality, the representation into the thing represented, the idol into a god.

The idol was never meant to be the god; it was only meant to represent the god. Other than the problem that the idol represented a false god in the first place, the trouble was that folks began to worship the idol instead of the god it stood for. The symbol was worshiped rather

³ In the NIV, “*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* (Exodus 20:4).

⁴ Joy Davidman (wife of C. S. Lewis), *Smoke on the Mountain: An Interpretation of the Ten Commandments* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953), p. 33.

than the supposed reality it was intended to represent. And once we've understood how idolatry develops, we also realize with a bit of a shock that idolatry isn't entirely a relic from the primitive past—idolatry is a clear and present danger at this very moment.

Let me try to make this more personal, beginning with the smaller symbols of our worship. For starters, many people carry some kind of lucky charm. Some people carry a special penny, or a sign of the zodiac, or a four-leaf clover, or a rabbit's foot. Some people put a St. Christopher medal in their cars. Some wear little metal angels. Others wear the insignia of a favorite NASCAR team or an athletic team. Many people wear a cross or carry a New Testament more for good luck than for identification with Christ.

Beyond these, we worship athletic teams and their athletes, musical groups and their musicians, movie directors and their beautiful actors and actresses, and we elevate those heroes to that same pantheon where the Greeks and Romans kept their peevish gods. We worship better houses, better jobs, better food, better education, better clothes, better gadgets, better technology, and better things in general.

One of the most pervasive idolatries in America is our worship of our machines of transportation: jets and ATVs, motorcycles and RVs are all contenders, but our cars, pickups and SUVs are at the top of the heap. Mr. Sparkle imagines that his glistening, flashy automobile distinguishes him from the lesser breeds who don't have one.

In a similar way, Mrs. Prosper's perfectly-appointed house is gratifying precisely because Mrs. Ordinary, who lives nearby, doesn't have one. I'm afraid that the bottom line is that quite often the problem with idolatry is that we're really worshiping ourselves.

Nor do we shed our idolatry simply by showing up at church, though churchgoing will usually cause us to discard our more obvious idols. What else do we worship? Well, we worship science, knowledge, progress, technology, digital displays, high definition video and audio, national surveys, money, land, bling, business, Bibles, children, grandchildren, our family name, and physical beauty. And what all of this has in common is that it takes God's place in our affection, just like my Navy blue Naughahyde seats, Deka's plastic sweetheart, and Israel's golden calf.

Beyond all this, it seems to me that even the ideas of "patriotism," "democracy," and "the American way" involve a sizable component of self-worship, too. The Bible tells us that Israel is God's "chosen people," and we Americans are fond of connecting ourselves with Israel as heirs-apparent to God's covenant with Abraham, but I suspect we'd be closer to the truth if we saw ourselves as siblings to the Babylonians, Assyrians, and Canaanites.

The truth is that it's foolish to the utmost for us to think that any thing—or even any person—can make us happy. God's gifts are all gracious and good; but our souls are forever empty until God Himself fills that emptiness. Creature comforts are pleasant, to be sure, but they can never fill the vacant places in our souls.

I find it instructive to note that most, if not all, of God's plagues upon Egypt were object lessons on the poverty of Egypt's arrogance and on the powerlessness of her gods: the river god (the Nile); the sun god (Re); the frog goddess (Hapi); the fly god (Vatchit); the anti-locust god (Serapis); even Pharaoh himself.

Now if God were to bring plagues upon our own nation to demonstrate the poverty of our arrogance and the powerlessness of our gods, I wonder what we'd see? Do you think there might be "plagues" upon the fuel we need for our cars? Might we become hostage to the foreign steel we need to make them? Might there be fearsome diseases visited upon our bodies in general and

on our sexuality in particular? Might there be shadowy enemies who mock our military might? Might there be global assaults upon our vaunted currency and on the resources we're trusting in for retirement? Might our system of healthcare collapse under its own weight? Might our sports enterprises become scandal-ridden to the extreme? Might there arise computer viruses and hackers that endanger our ability to carry on our commerce and government? Might there be continuing disasters and failures in our families and in our cities? Should I go on?

Now I'm neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet. There are other ways to explain all of these things—that's what Pharaoh's wizards did—but don't you think this is worth wondering about?

Well, I'm running out of time, but let me mention one more thing. Our text tells us that "*I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, who will not share your affection with any other god!*" (Exodus 20:5). To hear this through the lens of the petty jealousies that so often infect us is to miss the point entirely. In order to understand what God means, we have to remember that all of these commands are given out of God's incredible love for us, not to fence us off from the joys of life, but to protect us from self-inflicted sorrows. It is God's purpose to so guide us that we avoid ripping our lives apart on the jagged realities that lie hidden beneath the surface of Satan's glittering promises.

Because God loves us so much, God wants us to experience all the good gifts of this life and of the life to come. God is trying to prevent us from reaching the top of the ladder only to realize that we've leaned it against the wrong wall. And whether we see it now or not, the best of God's gifts is intimate friendship with God, and because of this, God is always at work destroying those paltry and petty idols that prevent that friendship and block that love.

Think about it this way. What do you think Jill would do if she saw my billfold lying open on our dresser some morning and noticed a picture of another woman alongside hers? Do you think she would just shrug her shoulders and say, "Well, this is interesting, but after all, Dave has a right to his privacy"? Or do you think it more likely that she might walk into the bathroom where I'm shaving and ask with unblinking resolve, "Dave, and JUST WHO IS THIS?"

And how do you think Jill would react if she learned that this other woman and I had a bit of an ongoing relationship – that I turned to this other woman when I was in need of support or affection or encouragement? Do you think that might bother Jill? Do you think she would still believe me when I whisper that I love her with all of my heart? Do you think she would have any reason to feel revulsion toward that image in my wallet? Would you blame her if she wanted to confront me, or beat me, or tear that photograph into a thousand pieces? Would you fault her for feeling jealous or hurt or angry over having to share my love and devotion with someone else?

Well, these are dumb questions, aren't they? Jill is my *wife*, my soul mate, and she has every right to expect and to insist that I keep myself entirely and completely for her, and for her alone. And do you know what? I *want* to do that . . . and I believe this illustration gets at the heart of the Second Commandment.⁵

What God is saying here is, "Don't put any other pictures in your billfold alongside Mine. Don't carry any other images in your heart. Don't turn to any false God for comfort, stimulation, or heart satisfaction. **Here I am**, I am able to meet your every need." **The Second**

⁵ Ron Mehl, *The Ten(der) Commandments: Reflections on the Father's Love* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Press, 1998, pp. 55-56.

Commandment is all about love and relationship. Jill doesn't want any rivals for my love; and God doesn't, either.⁶

The fact of the matter is that you and I become like that which we worship, and God knows the empty despair that always follows the service of false gods. God knows that these deceitful deities will never satisfy the longings of our hearts. As Jesus said to the woman at the well, “*If you drink this water, you will be thirsty again, and you'll have to come every day for more, while never being satisfied. But there is a well – a well of living water – that could keep you from ever being thirsty again*” (John 4:13-14).

Our heavenly Father knows that the promises of these deceitful deities are bankrupt. He knows that if we pursue them, in the end we will find ourselves disappointed, devastated, and destroyed. These false gods never give anything at all. They only take, take, take.⁷

But on the other hand, everything we work for in the name of Jesus bears fruit a hundred times over. Every treasure we earn in His service shines with undiminished beauty through all the years of this life and through eternity to come. Every life we touch in His Name causes a chain reaction of redemption, reconciliation, and renewal that reaches into eternity itself. *Why would we ever choose another way?*⁸

Through Jeremiah, God lamented—and still laments: “*My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water*” (Jeremiah 2:13). That's another way of phrasing the Second Commandment, and it's why John would later write, “*Little children, keep yourselves from idols*” (1 John 5:21).

When all is said and done, there's room for only one woman's picture in my wallet, and there's room for only one Lord in my heart. *What's in your wallet?*

⁶ Mehl, 56-57.

⁷ Mehl, p. 63.

⁸ Mehl, p. 66.