



A group of 30 people kneeling with heads facing toward a 30 foot tall statue of a Canaanite god, with paintings of animals and fruit on the walls behind the statue. There is a large altar in front of the statue with a ram cooking on it and flame rising up. Prompt for <https://app.aitubo.ai>, January 30, 2024.

The Ten Words/Commandments: Jewish and Christian Understandings



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*Hosted by St. Matthew Evangelical Lutheran Church
Luther Hall, 4026 Macon Road
6:00 p.m. Wednesdays starting January 17*

Part 1: January 17-February 7

- Session 1: The Decalogue: What are the Ten Commandments; What is the first Commandment?
- Session 2: "You Shall Have No Other Gods"
- Session 3: "You Shall Not Make a Graven Image;" "You Shall not Bow Down to Them"
- Session 4: "You Shall Not Swear Falsely By God's Name"

Part 2 (After Easter, dates TBA)

- Session 5: "You Shall Keep The Sabbath"
- Session 6: "Honor Your Father and Your Mother"
- Session: 7: "You Shall Not Commit Murder;" "You Shall Not Commit Adultery;:" "You Shall Not Steal"
- Session 8: "You Shall Not Bear False Witness"
- Session 9: "You Shall Not Covet"
- Session 10: Review and Wrap-Up

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Part 3: "You Shall Not Make a Graven Image;" "You Shall not Bow Down to Them"

Hebrew, with Jewish Publication Society Translation (2006, used by permission)

לֹא-תַעֲשֶׂה-לָּךְ פֶּסֶל וְכָל-תְּמוּנָה אֲשֶׁר בַּשָּׁמַיִם וּמַמְעַל וְאֲשֶׁר בְּאָרֶץ
מִתַּחַת וְאֲשֶׁר בַּיָּם | מִתַּחַת לְאָרֶץ:

You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth.

לֹא-תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לָהֶם וְלֹא תַעֲבֹדֵם כִּי אֲנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֵל קַנָּא פֹקֵד עֹן
אָבֹת עַל-בָּנִים עַל-שְׂלֵשִׁים וְעַל-רְבָעִים לְשָׁנָא י:

You shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I your God יהוה am an impassioned God, visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generations of those who reject Me.

וְעֵשָׂה חֶסֶד לְאֲלֻפִּים לְאַהֲבָי וּלְשִׁמְרֵי מִצְוֹתַי: {ס}

but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep My commandments.

Septuagint, 3rd c. BCE

οὐ ποιήσεις σεαυτῷ εἶδωλον, οὐδὲ παντὸς ὁμοίωμα, ὅσα ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ ἄνω καὶ ὅσα ἐν τῇ γῆ κάτω καὶ ὅσα ἐν τοῖς ὕδασιν ὑποκάτω τῆς γῆς.

You shall not make for yourself an idol, nor any likeness, neither [of] anything in the sky above, nor anything on earth below, nor anything in the waters beneath the earth.

οὐ προσκυνήσεις αὐτοῖς, οὐδὲ μὴ λατρεύσεις αὐτοῖς· ἐγὼ γάρ εἰμι Κύριος ὁ Θεός σου, Θεὸς ζηλωτής, ἀποδιδούς ἁμαρτίας πατέρων ἐπὶ τέκνα, ἕως τρίτης καὶ τετάρτης γενεᾶς τοῖς μισοῦσί με

You shall not bow down to them, neither shall you worship them. For I am the LORD your God, a zealous God, rendering upon the children the sins of the parents, to the third and fourth generation of those hating me,

καὶ ποιῶν ἔλεος εἰς χιλιάδας τοῖς ἀγαπῶσί με καὶ τοῖς φυλάσσουσι τὰ προστάγματά μου.

and enacting mercy to the thousands of those loving me and keeping my precepts.

Vulgate, 4th c, CE

⁴ Non facies tibi sculptile, neque omnem similitudinem quae est in caelo desuper, et quae in terra deorsum, nec eorum quae sunt in aquis sub terra.

Do not make for yourself a sculpted thing, nor any likeness of anything which is in the sky above, nor on the earth below, nor of things in the waters beneath the earth.

⁵ Non adorabis ea, neque coles: ego sum Dominus Deus tuus fortis, zelotes, visitans iniquitatem patrum in filios, in tertiam et quartam generationem eorum qui oderunt me:

You shall not now in adoration to them, nor worship; for I am the Lord your God, strong, zealous, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the sons to the third and fourth generations of those who despise me;

⁶ et faciens misericordiam in millia his qui diligunt me, et custodiunt praecepta mea. and enacting mercy to the thousands of those who love me and keep my precepts.

Luther's German Bible, 16th c, CE

Du sollst dir kein Bildnis noch irgend ein Gleichnis machen, weder des, das oben im Himmel, noch des, das unten auf Erden, oder des, das im Wasser unter der Erde ist.

You shall not make for yourself any sculpture nor likeness, whether of things above in the sky, nor of things below on earth, nor of things in the water under the earth.

Bete sie nicht an und diene ihnen nicht. Denn ich, der HERR, dein Gott, bin ein eifriger Gott, der da heimsucht der Väters Missetat an den Kindern bis in das dritte und vierte Glied, die mich hassen;

Do not pray to them or serve them. For I, the LORD, your God, I am a keenly attentive God, visiting the iniquity of the father upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me;

und tue Barmherzigkeit an vielen Tausenden, die mich liebhaben und meine Gebote halten. and enacting mercy to many thousands of those who have love for me and keep my commands.

SO... What is a **לִפְסֵל** (pesel)

The root verb behind this is **לִפַּסַּל** (pasal), to hew into shape.

Part of the concern expressed here is about making gods for oneself. The question becomes, if you are making the god, what does that make you in relationship to the god?

The second key Hebrew word here is תְּמוּנָה (temunah), image. The sense of this noun is an image that is made of another person or thing. This is not the same word used in Genesis 1:17 and translated as “image of God.” That noun is צֶלֶם (tselem), and there means something more like resemblance or expression. The key difference, though, is in who the maker is. In Genesis 1:27 the maker is God. The warning in this commandment is against humans fashioning their own gods by any means—whether by hewing them (pesel) or by using other artistic forms to make them, and in particular fashioning their gods to look like anything one can see in the sky, on the earth, or under the earth, that is, any part of this creation.

About Worship

The verbs used in this statement describe physical acts— bowing down and service/servitude in a ceremonial form that generally implies the presence of a gathered community in some way. The commands themselves, as always, though, are individual. Each individual is responsible to abstain both from the preparation for worship that involves gods made by human hands, and from the acts of worship related to such gods.

What is not forbidden is the use of imagery and human-created art as part of worship. Both the tabernacle and the temple were full of images of all kinds of things, from pomegranates woven into the fabric of the tent-cloth of the tabernacle, to the cherubim (sky/heaven creatures) that were upon the ark of the covenant in the innermost chamber of the temple, the Holy of Holies. None of these represent God as such, but all point to God in one way or another. One does not bow down before them in worship of them, but one may have bowed down in the presence of them as part of worship offered to God.

Christianity experienced significant divisions over what qualified as “graven images” in what was known as the iconoclastic controversy of the 8th and 9th centuries in the East (largely), and some versions of Protestantism, especially Calvinist and Zwinglian versions, whitewashed the insides of churches when they became Protestant and took out and destroyed other works of art (sculpture, stained glass, other paintings). This occurred not just on the continent of Europe, but in England as well during the period referred to as the Commonwealth. This is why in England to this day one may travel to many very old churches and see only whitewashed walls and clear glass.

About “Zealous”

The JPS translation gets this right—and I (Pastor Taylor) have followed suit in my translations of the Greek, Latin, and German). The term in question in Hebrew speaks of utmost commitment and intentionality. “Zealous” and “jealous” share a common origin in English, but the usage of “jealous” has moved into more of a negative connotation, even a morally negative one. The point here is that God is adamant about God’s people not making their own gods by any means and not offering worship to what they have made.

This adurance, or zeal, is reflected in the curse and the promise that follows, either of which can have generational effects. What is important to note is that God's zeal is not represented principally by curse, however, but by blessing, which is here listed as at least 250 times more enduring than any curse.

From Luther's *Large Catechism*:

"[I]dolatry... it consists not merely in erecting an image and worshiping it, but rather in the heart, which stands gaping at something else, and seeks help and consolation from creatures, saints, or devils, and neither cares for God, nor looks to Him for so much good as to believe that He is willing to help, neither believes that whatever good it experiences comes from God." (Source: <https://bookofconcord.org/large-catechism/#lc-i-0021>)

"In order that it may be seen that God will not have this commandment thrown to the winds, but will most strictly enforce it, He has attached to it first a terrible threat, and then a beautiful, comforting promise which is also to be urged and impressed upon young people, that they may take it to heart and retain it" (Source: <https://bookofconcord.org/large-catechism/#lc-i-0029>)

"Learn, therefore, from these words how angry God is with those who trust in anything but Him, and again, how good and gracious He is to those who trust and believe in Him alone with the whole heart; so that His anger does not cease until the fourth generation, while, on the other hand, His blessing and goodness extend to many thousands, lest you live in such security and commit yourself to chance, as men of brutal heart, who think that it makes no great difference [how they live]. 34 He is a God who will not leave it unavenged if men turn from Him, and will not cease to be angry until the fourth generation, even until they are utterly exterminated. Therefore He is to be feared, and not to be despised." (Source: <https://bookofconcord.org/large-catechism/#lc-i-0032>)

Core questions for reflection :

1. Are you making your own gods?
2. How can images be helpful in the worship of God? What images or artifacts do you use as part of worship in your congregation? How do these not cross the line into idolatry?
3. How do you respond to the zeal of God in defending this commandment in particular?