

VAIN IMAGINATIONS

Paul E. Penno, Jr.

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Suppose a lady should walk into a restaurant and catch her husband passionately embracing another woman. He sees his wife out of the corner of his eye and protests, "Wait a minute, I know what you're thinking. I want you to know this is not what it appears to be. When I saw this woman she had an amazing resemblance to you. She just looked so much like you that I simply couldn't resist. But I want you to know that when I'm hugging her, I'm hugging you. When I'm kissing her, I'm really loving you." This guy is not going to make it halfway to first base with his wife. He has a graven image of his wife and his real wife isn't going to buy his misplaced affection. It's time he hit the road!

"You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor 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 generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments" (Exodus 20:4-6).

Let's look at the good news that is in this second commandment. Our God and Savior is too great and wonderful for any idol on earth to represent Him in any way. He is the Creator of heaven and earth! The Maker of the Milky Way! The ocean is but a teacup in His hand! And He knows every one of us, all of our secrets, better than a mother can know her children. How could we drag Him down to the level of any "thing" that humans could devise? God is revealed through nature and may be seen in and through his creation, but to worship that creation as the Creator is as foolish as playing the first three notes of Handel's Messiah and saying you have thereby captured either Handel or the Messiah. Idolatry sees God captured and confined in the thing.

A girl was busily drawing at school. The teacher came over and asked, "Honey, what are you doing?" She replied, "Oh, I'm drawing a picture of God."

The teacher smiled and answered, "Nobody knows what God looks like." The girl said, "They will when I get through!" That's a cute

story, but you and I recognize that there is no adequate means of representing who God is by any physical form—any attempt to represent Him.

He is not only “great” in the sense of vastness, bigness, and power. He is “great” in the sense that His love for each of us is personal and never ending. Not only did He fling into endless space the numberless suns and worlds of the Milky Way, He also designed and made the tiny humming bird with its delicate wings. And Jesus told us that when one of them flies against my window in summertime and breaks its neck and falls, that same infinite Father in heaven looks down and notices what happened and He is sorry.

After telling us about this, Jesus said: “The very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows” (Matthew 30, 31). Why, there’s not an astronomer on earth who can tell you how many suns and stars are in the Milky Way! Nor can any mother on earth count how many hairs are in her child’s head. But although “the Lord your God” knows all your secrets and even shameful thoughts, He still loves you!

Since God is Spirit, it’s impossible that any idol or statue could represent Him. He wants us to learn to worship Him, not some useless idol. When mom and dad kiss baby goodnight, often he wants a teddy bear in bed with him, a kind of surrogate “mom or dad.” But our loving heavenly Father is too wise to let us ever have a surrogate of Himself. No beanie baby “god” for anyone who has learned lesson number one about the love of God!

How would you feel if you were God and people made images of your creation and worshiped them? Most of us don’t like to have a poor picture made of us. Have you ever had someone make an embarrassing photo of you and show it to everybody? Maybe one of your baby pictures when you were a fat little kid? That’s embarrassing. Nobody likes a poor representation of oneself. In fact, most of us want a photographer to make it look better than we deserve. I like the motto of the photographer who said, “Where there is beauty I take it; where there is none I make it.”

The baby’s teddy bear or beanie baby is clutched in bed because mom or dad can’t stay in the bedroom all night. But “the Lord our God” is always with us, not down the hall somewhere: “He Himself has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you’” (Hebrews 13:5). One of the names of Jesus is “Immanuel,” which is translated, “God with us” (Matthew 1:23). David asks, “Where can I go from Your

Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? . . . If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall fall on me,' even the night shall be light about me; indeed, the darkness shall not hide from you, but the night shines as the day" (Psalm 139:7, 11, 12).

But His nearness is even greater than David saw it to be! The New Testament reveals Jesus as One who came so close to us that He became one of us (that's what "Immanuel, . . . God with us" means). As our Creator and Redeemer, He was utterly without sin, but He took upon His sinless nature our sinful nature, that He might know what it is to be tempted in all points like as we are, yet always without sin (Hebrews 4:15). He experienced all of our temptations and our feelings. He even tasted that bitter cup of feeling forsaken. He cried out on His cross, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). He felt that way and conquered it, so that we might never have to feel forsaken by God.

Why did Jesus, the Son of God, come down to this earth? Not simply so He might take us to heaven when we die. He has another blessed purpose. The angel Gabriel told the virgin Mary before He was born, "You shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).

"For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Romans 8:2-4).

That was a greater achievement even than making the Milky Way! It's "easy" for the Creator to make a world or a sun; He simply speaks the word—and it's done. But conquering sin in fallen, sinful human flesh? "Condemning" it there? Delivering us who have fallen, sinful flesh from the dominion that sin has over us? That's something God could not do by simply saying an empty word, "I conquer sin!" No, that would never do.

He cannot tell a lie, or claim to have accomplished something that's not real. So, He does it! He becomes a real baby in Bethlehem's manger, a true human being, grows up as a child and a youth, meeting all our temptations to sin, and saying "No!" to every one of them, even until He was hanged on a cross.

And there on His cross, the devil throws his worst temptations at Jesus, trying to get Him to sin in one tiny, almost insignificant way so that Jesus might fail of His mission “to save His people from their sins.” But Jesus conquered every subtle temptation!

No idol or image can ever represent that glorious achievement! No angel in heaven would ever think of bowing down to an image of any kind. He couldn't do it! And neither can you or I if we have an adequate understanding of the righteousness of Christ our Savior. Once we know this good news, we want to sing the “Hallelujah Chorus” forever!

The second commandment is not a stern warning of doom if we bow to an idol, it is good news that we simply could never get involved in any idol worship or even idol “veneration” if we remember what a wonderful God and Savior we already have.

Some years ago Donald Barnhouse was counseling a young woman on the sidewalk in front of the church following an evening service. She said she was a Christian and that she wanted to follow Christ. But she wanted to be famous too. She wanted to pursue a stage career in New York. “After I have made it in the theater, I'll follow Christ completely,” she said. Barnhouse took a key out of his pocket and scratched a mark on a postal box standing on the corner. “That is what God will let you do,” he said. “God will let you scratch the surface of success. He will let you get close enough to the top to know what it is, but He will never let you have it, because He will never let one of His children have anything rather than Himself.”

Years later he met the girl again, and she confessed that this had indeed been her life story. She had dabbled in the stage. Once her picture had been in a national magazine. But she had never quite made it. She told Barnhouse, “I can't tell you how many times in my discouragement I have closed my eyes and seen you scratching on that postal box with your key. God let me scratch the edges, but He gave me nothing in place of Himself.”

In the first chapter of Romans we read of the heathen that they changed the truth of God into a lie. The truth is that the invisible things of God, namely His everlasting power and divinity, are seen in everything that He has made. But none of these things are a likeness of God. The truth was changed into a lie when men assumed that the things which reveal God were God Himself, or representations of Him.

There is a vast difference between pantheism and God's omnipresence, but the heathen did not discern it. "When they knew God, they glorified Him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things" (Romans 1:16-20).

God looks upon the heart, and understands the thought afar off, and what one purposes to do is counted as the act itself. What one has not definitely purposed to do, and is not conscious that he will do, is counted as the act already done, if the thing that he has in his mind naturally leads to it. If we have in us the spirit which would result in open sin, that is sin, for "the thought of foolishness is sin."

Notice that before the heathen changed the truth of God into a lie by making images to represent Him, they "became vain in their imaginations," trusting in themselves that they were wise. The work of the Spirit of God is to cast down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and to bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ. 2 Cor. 10:4, 5. Every one, therefore, who has vain thoughts,—the imaginations of his own heart,—who trusts in his own wisdom, which is foolishness in the sight of God, is essentially an idolater.

Weak believers think God has forgotten them, cannot use them, will not forgive them, is still angry at them for past sins, cannot bless them due to past sins, or does not love them.

They lie against the truth and the facts and turn Him into a monster that deals fear and pain. These thoughts are blasphemous and lying suggestions of the devil to pervert God's reputation, which one can resist and quench with the pure words of scripture about the Lord.

How few have thought of the connection between an image and imagination. Before a man makes a molten or graven image, he has the form of it in his mind. The evil does not consist merely in the image made, but in the imagination of it, "We know that an idol is nothing." 2 Cor. 8:4. And the reason why it is nothing is that it is the product of an empty thought. Therefore "they who make them are like unto them," for he who thinks nothing, is nothing; and every thought that is not of God is a vain thought.

This is why those who profess themselves to be wise become fools. They could not think that they themselves were wise if they had the true knowledge of God. When men lose the knowledge of God, they really know nothing at all. Therefore the difference between those who make and bow down to images, and those who trust in the imagination of their own heart, is only one of outward form and circumstance.

“I am . . . a jealous God,” He says. Why? Because He loves us! A husband who truly loves his wife is “jealous” if she strays from him to give her attentions to some other man. A husband has a right to be jealous of his wife. I’m not talking about that in the bad sense. Not a suspicious, destructive, detrimental kind of jealousy—that’s not what I’m talking about. I’m using jealous in a good sense. A husband has a right to be jealous of his wife because she is his wife. She doesn’t belong to anybody else in the world but to him. A wife has a right to be jealous of her husband because he is her spouse. He belongs to her and no one else in the whole world.

Our Lord and Savior (whose name is “the Lamb”) has come so close to us that He is eagerly awaiting the glorious day when it can be said, “Let us be glad and rejoice, . . . for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife [His church] has made herself ready” (Revelation 19:7). Such “jealousy” is holy. God is saying, “I’m the only God there is. I am your God, you belong to me. I am jealous of that.” He is protecting that which is very precious to him.

That day will come once His church chooses to believe how good this good news is, and permits Him to “cleanse us from all unrighteousness,” for the “fine linen” in which the “wife” is dressed at the wedding feast is “the righteous acts of the saints” (see 1 John 1:9; Revelation 19:8).

But here the good news gets even better. Look at the promise of His forgiveness in the second commandment. Although He has to “visit” the iniquity of evil fathers upon the children if they choose to continue to hate righteousness, refusing to learn any of the lessons of grace their fathers could have known, still the Lord shows “mercy to thousands [of generations], to those who love Me and keep My commandments.”

One day is a 365th fraction of a year. In Isaiah 61:2 the Lord says that His “vengeance” is as one “day,” but His grace is 365 times as great—it’s a whole “year” long.

He loves to forgive! He delights in mercy! The Bible says that He has “fun” being kind to sinners, redeeming them, saving them from ruin, treating them generously. “He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward those who fear Him” (Psalm 103:10, 11). Note: it does not say that His mercy is “great” toward people who do everything just right. No, His mercy is great towards sinners who “fear Him,” who call upon Him. Joel says, “Whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved” (Joel 2:32). Luke says that Jesus’ enemies criticized Him for He “receives sinners” (Luke 15:2). But that’s why Jesus is so wonderful!

When they said that about Him, He responded by telling the story of the one sheep that was lost, and how the Good Shepherd left the ninety-nine that were “safe” and went in search of the one that was lost. That’s Jesus, looking for you, unworthy or sinful as you may be.

In fact, while we have “fun” going to Disneyland or playing golf or fishing or playing games, Jesus has “fun” seeking out discouraged, broken-hearted people who have messed up their lives, wandered far away, lost their marriages or homes perhaps, alcoholics, or drug addicts or criminals who have lost hope, and by the Holy Spirit He whispers words of encouragement to them. Micah 7:19 says He “will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.” It’s as if He says, “I am ‘the LORD your God,’ your Savior. My very name ‘Jesus’ has a built-in special meaning, ‘I will save you from your sins.’ And those sins that have brought you so much heartache and guilt, I have cast behind My back, far deeper in the ocean than the wreck of the Titanic; no one will ever be able to find them again.”

When Peter was sinking in the waves, he cried out to Jesus, “Lord, save me!” And Jesus heard that prayer immediately, caught him by the hand, and lifted him up. He will never refuse anyone: “All that the Father gives to Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out” (John 6:37).

You may ask, “But how can I be sure that ‘the Father’ has predestined me to be saved?” The truth is that the Father has given you to Jesus! He “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). He has already paid the penalty of your sins, died the second death that your sins would have to “pay” for. And even though “the wages of sin is death, . . . the gift

of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord,” your Lord (Romans 6:23).

Every word that God says is important. He has no fine print like lawyers who can wriggle out of a contract. He has given the gift to you, not merely “offered” it provided you first do everything right to deserve it. You don’t deserve it, I don’t either, for Adam gave us “condemnation” but Christ is the One who has already given us “grace.” “To each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (Ephesians 4:7). Grace brings with it a special “gift”—“justification of life” (Romans 5:15-18). The Father treats the world of sinners as though they have not sinned, “not imputing their trespasses to them” (2 Corinthians 5:19). You have wondered why He doesn’t strike some wicked criminals with lightning; it’s His grace, purchased for the human race by Christ’s sacrifice.

But when you realize the truth about that amazing grace, you simply cannot go on living a life of sin. It’s not fear that motivates you; it’s grace. “The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age” (Titus 2:11, 12, NIV). You keep the second commandment. “You shall have no other gods before Me.” It’s a guarantee!

A pastor got into his car. His passenger had to move a little sack in order to sit down. When he picked it up, it clanked, and he asked, “What do you have there?” “I’m just going to trash those things.” His passenger replied. “What are they?”

He pulled one out, and he saw a beautiful piece of Indian copper work. “You’re going to trash that?” the passenger asked.

“Yes, it’s a Hindu idol. The family it belonged to has just become Christians, and they have been baptized, and I’m taking their idols away. They have given them up, and I’m going to destroy them.”

By “a graven image” is meant a humanly devised construction of truth. A “graven” image refers to a product of human intelligence as opposed to a product of Divine intelligence. A “molten” image refers to a product of the human will. To have either the one or the other for a god, or to adore it, is to love above all things all that which proceeds from self. Here is a clue to the real issue in the first commandment. That which we love above all things may take many forms. It may be a love of power, possessions, prestige, or humanly devised doctrine. In every case, however, it has its roots in the love of self as opposed

to the love of the Lord. The primary enemy of our love of the Lord is our inborn love of self.

So, again the ten commandments become good news. God is tired of writing them in stone. That's fruitless work! Now He wants to write them in human hearts, so our greatest joy is to live in harmony with Him and in harmony with the great universe where His love prevails for all eternity. He will write His commandments in our hearts, if only we will make a choice to let Him do so.