

Deuteronomy 5:8-10

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The LORD prohibits the Israelites from worshipping idols.

The Second Commandment

The worship of idols was common in the ancient Near Eastern countries such as Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. These idols were man-made images. But they were often connected with fertility cults, where “worship” included sexual promiscuity. For example, the worship of Baal and Ashtaroth included prostitution and ritual sex. The Ashtaroth pole referred to in scripture likely referred to a phallic symbol (a penis shape). These have been uncovered by archaeology and can be viewed today. So, the allure of idolatry was not just a desire to gain spiritual power to “get what I want.” It was also an excuse to rationalize immoral behavior as something holy and good, serving a religious purpose. The worship of Molech was perhaps the culmination of this, justifying the burning of children as a religious observance ([Leviticus 18:21](#), [2 Kings 23:10](#)).

[Leviticus 18](#) chronicles the common sexual practices of both Egypt and Canaan, that included multiple forms of promiscuity and incest, and even sex with animals. The Israelites are warned not to practice all they saw in Egypt, or what they will see in Canaan.

Israel likely reflected this culture when the nation sinned with the golden calf. Upon seeing the newly-fashioned idol, the people of Israel declared, “This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt” ([Exodus 32:4](#)). The next day they had a feast and “rose up to play,” ([Exodus 32:6](#)) likely referring to Egyptian sexual practices. So, one allure to idolatry is a rationale for pleasure-seeking at the expense of others. One bad act leads to another.

Idol worship also fed the idea that “I can get what I want if I appease the idol.” Another form of self-seeking. This mentality can be seen throughout scripture. One place it can be readily observed comes from an episode that comes much later in time, in a dispute between the prophet Jeremiah and the people of Israel concerning their worship of the “Queen of Heaven.” The people claimed their service to the false god brought prosperity, saying to Jeremiah:

“As for the message that you have spoken to us in the name of the LORD, we are not going to listen to you! But rather we will certainly carry out every word that has proceeded from our mouths, by burning sacrifices to the queen of heaven and pouring out drink offerings to her, just as we ourselves, our forefathers, our kings and our princes did in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem; for *then* we had plenty of food and were well off and saw no misfortune. But since we stopped burning sacrifices to the queen of heaven and pouring out drink offerings to her, we have lacked everything and have met our end by the sword and by famine” ([Jeremiah 44:16-18](#)).

Jeremiah answered them that just the opposite was true, saying: “Because you have burned sacrifices and have sinned against the LORD and not obeyed the voice of the LORD or walked in His law, His statutes or His testimonies, therefore this calamity has befallen you, as *it has this day*” ([Jeremiah 44:23](#)).

Amid such a context of wide-spread idol worship, the true God issued the second commandment to His people as a warning saying, “*You shall not make for yourself an idol.*”

The word for “idol” comes from the verb “to hew into shape.” The verb was used to describe the stone tablets upon which God wrote the Ten Commandments ([Exodus 34:1, 4](#); [Deuteronomy 10:1, 3](#)). Thus, an idol is something that men hew out of wood or stone, as in [Habakkuk 2:18](#), or of metal, as in [Judges 17:3](#).

God prohibited Israel from worshiping idols *or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth*. Such images would misrepresent God and would replace dependence upon God and His laws. Making such images to represent the creator God would reduce Him to the level of His creatures. The phrases “*in heaven above,*” “*on the earth beneath,*” and “*in the water under the earth*” include all things. This closes any loopholes — all idols are prohibited. There is no excuse to moralize self-seeking idol-worship. God’s self-governing society will only be possible if people seek the best for others, in obedience to God’s commands.

Moreover, God said, “*You shall not worship them or serve them.*” The verb “to worship” can also be translated as “to bow down,” or “to prostrate oneself.” The idea is of bowing down before a superior to show reverence to him. In ancient times, such an action sometimes involved placing one’s face to the ground, as in [Genesis 18:2; 19:1](#), and [Isaiah 49:23](#).

The verb “to serve” refers to the act of making offerings to a god as a way of paying homage to it ([Exodus 10:26](#); [Isaiah 19:21](#)). God used these two verbs to prohibit His people from prostrating before any idol, whether it is a representation of the true God or a representation of other gods. As previously stated, this worship was likely an act born of self-seeking, appeasing the idol in order to gain a benefit.

The reason God gave as to why He prohibited His people from worshiping idols is because He is *a jealous God*. The adjective “*jealous*” means that God wants to preserve what belongs to Him ([Isaiah 42:8](#); [48:11](#)). Israel entered a covenant relationship, where the Suzerain (Ruler) God, who had redeemed His vassals out of bondage in Egypt. The people, as vessels, had “signed” the covenant, saying “all the LORD has spoken we will do.” In doing so, they promised to be loyal servants, serving God along. God insists that they can only keep their part of the bargain if they are loyal to Him, and serve Him only. It is apparent that if they are like other nations, they will not be able to serve the priestly function God has appointed for them.

God often portrays Israel as His bride. Seeking protection and benefit from idols is an act of infidelity to God. In passages such as [Ezekiel 16](#) and the book of Hosea, God illustrates disobedience to Him as like an unfaithful wife in adultery. God’s jealousy is that of a husband seeking fidelity with a wife, or the jealousy of a wife seeking fidelity from a husband.

Negative consequences always follow disobedience to God’s commands. So, as consequences of worshiping idols, the jealous God visits *the iniquity of the fathers on the children, and on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Him*. To visit *the iniquity of the fathers on the children* means to inflict punishment for their wrongdoings upon their descendants. Such a penalty does not make children personally responsible for the sins of their fathers, because the Bible says, “everyone shall be put to death for his own sin” ([Deuteronomy 24:16](#); see also [Ezekiel 18:20](#)). Rather, this statement shows God’s mercy, that He will wait three to four *generations*, allowing time for repentance before iniquity is punished in those who *hate* God by disobeying His commands to love others, not to seek selfish interests.

In contrast to the negative consequences that follow disobedience, the LORD rewards those who remain loyal to Him. Moses said the jealous God shows *lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Him and keep His commandments*. The word translated “lovingkindness” speaks of God’s reward to those in covenant relationship with Him who are faithful in obeying His commands ([Deuteronomy 7:9](#)). This lovingkindness refers to the

covenant agreement where blessing is given for obedience. God shows loyalty and love to *thousands* of those who understand that His benevolence is superior to all competing alternatives. Those who remain faithful to His covenant.

The word *generations* that appears after *the third and the fourth* is in italics in the NASB text because it does not appear in the original Hebrew text, but rather is implied. It could be that it is also implied in the contrasting statement of blessings *to thousands generations*. This would mean that God will see that blessings stemming from obedience will continue for many generations for those who walk in obedience.

Idolatry was an issue from this point in the Bible all the way through New Testament times. The Greeks in the New Testament times also practiced idolatry, and that was addressed by the Apostle Paul during his ministry to the Gentiles ([Acts 17:16-31](#)). In [1 Corinthians 8:4](#), Paul says, “Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one.” Paul’s statement reflects his understanding of the Old Testament.

The practice of worshiping idols was also prohibited by other New Testament writers. For instance, in [1 John 5:21](#), John says, “Little children, guard yourselves from idols.” Believers today are not likely to be tempted by bowing down to figurines. However, idolatry includes any rationalization of self-seeking behavior. Jesus’ primary command was to love one another. Self-seeking is incompatible with seeking the best for others. Anything we appeal to in an effort to rationalize self-seeking serves the same function as idols did in the ancient world.

Biblical Text:

⁸ You shall not make for yourself an idol, *or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth.* ⁹ You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, and on the third and the fourth *generations* of those who hate Me, ¹⁰ but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.