

No Props, Please!

Exodus 20, Romans 1

Introduction

A few years ago, the *Chicago Tribune* reported a story of a Mexican woman who was frying tortillas when she noticed the skillet burns on one of her tortillas resembled the face of Jesus – whatever that looks like. She was so amazed that this represented, what she felt to be, the face of Jesus that she showed it to her husband, and to her friends and neighbors. They all agreed that it definitely did resemble the face of a man and they concluded that it must be Jesus.

So the woman took the tortilla to her priest. Though he was not in the practice of blessing tortillas, he agreed. She then took it home and put it in a glass case on mounds of cotton, so that it looked like it was floating. In just three months time, eight thousand people came to worship at the shrine of the Jesus of the tortilla.

One newspaper reporter from America went to see the tortilla. In classic American style, he came back saying it seemed to resemble the former heavyweight boxing champion Leon Sphinx.

We wonder, “How could that happen?” Very easily. In fact, we are going to discover today, what the scriptures have to say about worship.

Turn in your Bible to Exodus, chapter 20. We will pick up our study of this chapter, as we move through this book. We are centering our thoughts on the Ten Commandments and how they apply to the this century.

The Second Commandment

The second commandment begins with verse 4 of Exodus, chapter 20. It is a logical progression of the first commandment that says, in verse 3,

“You shall have no other gods before Me.”

In other words, God is to be prominent; God is to be preeminent.

Now, because God is prominent, because He is preeminent – this Elohim, this Yahweh of the Israelite – then verses 4 through 6 say,

“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. 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, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing loving kindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.”

Before we get into exactly what I think is the application of this commandment, I want to note two points.

The importance of a role model in worship

1. The first point is the importance of a role model in worship.

You may have noted this. In verse 5, there is a phrase that I think is often misinterpreted. God says,

“. . . I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me,”

I have heard this taught that God is saying that if a father sins, the consequences of that sin are passed down from generation to generation, and that it will normally take four generations before the consequences of that sin are finally abated.

However, in the context of this passage, God is saying that the way the father worships is translated to the way the son worships and to the way the grandson worships. Normally if a father is an idolater; if a father refuses to acknowledge God, that is picked up by his son and his grandson and his great grandson.

So I believe God is teaching the tremendous importance of a role model in worship.

For those who are fathers and mothers, raising children at home, realize that they, by observing you, are perhaps determining the way they will worship God.

The importance of correct worship

2. Secondly, note that it is not only important to have a proper role model in worship, but God stresses as well, the importance of correct worship.

Look at verses 23 through 25. I love this, but it is often overlooked.

“You shall not make other gods besides Me; gods of silver or gods of gold, you shall not make for yourselves. You shall make an altar of earth for Me, and you shall sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen; in every place where I cause My name to be remembered, I will come to you and bless you. If you make an altar of stone for Me, you shall not build it of cut stones, for if you wield your tool on it, you will profane it. And you shall not go up by steps to My altar, so that your nakedness may not be exposed on it.”

Let me explain what God is saying in these verses. It is fascinating that when He says to build an altar, He wants them to build it out of rough stones; that is, boulders they dig from the ground. He does not want the stone mason to cut the stones and in a sense, reveal their beauty. God does not want our focus to be on the altar. He wanted their focus, and He wants our focus today, to be on what is *done* at the altar.

We are not to come and admire the vehicle of worship. The Israelites were not to come and say, “Man, didn’t the mason do a tremendous job on that altar? Look at the way that stone lays. Look at the beauty; look at the sparkle.”

The Israelites were to come, not to look at the altar, but to look at the God they were worshipping through that vehicle.

God is saying, in effect, “I don’t want any props in worship.”

The Israelites were guilty of that later, and I think we are guilty of that today. We get so caught up in all of the props. We get so impressed with the stained glass. We get so impressed with all of the vehicles that we focus on them and forget that it is God we have come to worship. We are not to be attracted to the things we make to the exclusion of the character of God.

God says, “Don’t go up by steps to the altar.”

It was the practice of the Canaanites to build high steps and high altars and the priests were normally

naked. They then, by that activity, drew attention to themselves.

God did not want the priests to draw attention to themselves. He does not want the modern day preacher or expositor to draw attention to themselves either. That is not the focus of attention. The attention was to be on God who was worshiped.

So God says, “Do away with the stairs. Wear clothing. Don’t draw attention to yourself. Worship Me.”

Three Ways to Worship Incorrectly

Now the Bible has a lot to say about worship, as we all know. It also has a lot to say about how not to worship. In our discussion today, I want to give from scripture, three ways to worship incorrectly.

The worship of false gods

1. The first way to worship incorrectly is in the worship of false gods.

Now you might think that in America, we have no difficulty with that. Let me tell you, ladies and gentlemen, a person is not born idolatrous. A person is not necessarily born an idolater of some object; some stump or some piece of stone, a person becomes an idolater. I want to point out how a person becomes idolatrous.

Three steps toward idolatry

Turn to Romans, chapter 1. I want to give, from this chapter, three steps toward idolatry. Paul is writing to a New Testament church. He is writing to a contemporary scene that we are finding today in our own community. I want you to notice what he is saying and the three steps toward idolatry.

They did not glorify God

- The first step toward idolatry is that they did not glorify or honor God.

This is found in verse 21a of Romans, chapter 1. Paul is talking about the unbeliever.

For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God . . .

In other words, they did not glorify God.

The word “honor,” is “doxazo,” from which we get our word “doxology”. We sing the *Doxology* that is the simple,

Praise God, from whom all blessings flow;

Praise Him, all creatures here below;

Praise Him above, ye heavenly host;

Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

These people were not acknowledging the glory of God. He was *not* prominent; He was *not* preeminent.

That is, in itself, the first step downward that will ultimately, lead you and I to worshiping some stump; some false god; some out-of-body experience; some of the contemporary idols of today.

They did not thank God

- The second step toward idolatry is that they did not thank God.

If you do not honor God, you will not thank Him. Look at the next phrase in verse 21 of Romans, chapter 1.

. . . they did not honor Him as God or give thanks . . .

The interesting thing about an atheist is, they have a dilemma. When they feel grateful for something and want to give thanks, they do not have anyone to give it to.

One of the problems of not acknowledging God is that there is a point at which you do not thank God for what He has done, and that ultimately, leads to step number three.

They did not acknowledge God

- The third step toward idolatry is that they did not acknowledge God in their lives.

Verse 21b says,

. . . but they became futile in their speculations . . .

The word “futile,” is the same word the Jews used for “idols”. Paul is saying that they became idolatrous in their speculations.

If you do not acknowledge God; if you do not thank God, you have to put something else there; something else has to fill that void in your life. And if it is not God, it must be something else. Because of

that, those who do not acknowledge God become idolatrous in their thinking.

These are the three steps toward idolatry.

Four results of idolatry

Now let me give, from chapter 1 of Romans, the four results of idolatry. Pay careful attention to these.

A loss of discernment

- The first result of idolatry is a loss of discernment.

This is characteristic of the individual who does not acknowledge God. I think this is characteristic of our nation.

The last phrase in verse 21 says,

. . . their foolish heart was darkened.

“Darkened” is literally, “without insight; unintelligible”.

The wisest people in our society today, are people who know Jesus Christ. The foundation for wisdom is a vertical relationship with Jesus Christ. If that relationship is right, then the horizontal relationships; the horizontal judgments; the horizontal decisions are taken care of; sound judgments can be made.

We want to see someone on the Supreme Court bench who knows Jesus Christ. If that relationship is established, they can have insight in making decisions. That is the individual we want in political office. That is the kind of individual who will make an impact in this society. It is someone who knows Christ; who acknowledges God, and by that, is given the basis for insight.

Without God, we should not be surprised at the decisions that are made. Verse 21b says that when you do not acknowledge God, as a nation or as an individual, you become foolish and without insight.

An increase in selfishness

- The second result of idolatry is an increase in selfishness.

Look at verse 22.

Professing to be wise, they became fools,

This is the thought, “Why, if God doesn’t have the answer, then I must.”

They become the center of their lives and they become fools.

The word “fool,” is “moraino,” from which we get our word “moron”.

I think that is a classic way of viewing the people who do not acknowledge God. They make decisions and they stand back and say, “Isn’t that wonderful? Isn’t that wise?”

God says they are morons and their decisions are moronic.

I was cleaning out the church rental shed last winter and I will never forget an experience I had. There was a fellow who was cleaning out the shed next to ours and I thought, “Well, Lord, you put him next door for a reason.”

So I went over and started talking with him. My kids were in the truck waiting and it was cold and drizzling, but I wanted to just ask him if he knew the Lord.

I usually begin the conversation by asking a person where they go to church. That gives me a small clue as to where they stand. He did not go anywhere and he asked where I went. I told him I went to Colonial Baptist Church. He responded by saying, “Oh, are you a Christian?”

I replied, “Yes, I am.”

I did not want to tell him I was the preacher. “Christian” and “preacher” may not be synonymous in society’s eyes. So I said, “Yes, I am.”

He said, “Great! I love to discuss the theory of Christianity with people.”

I thought, “Oh brother.”

It started to drizzle harder and the kids were ready to go. I thought, “Why did I have to be an evangelist this morning?”

He finally ended the conversation with saying these words, “I worship whatever I believe is acceptable to me.”

That is the statement in verse 22.

Professing to be wise, they became [moronic].

They become so self-centered that they will worship whatever they think is acceptable to themselves.

Ladies and gentlemen, if you and I do not worship God according to His revelation, we have not worshiped God. If we worship anyone other than the

God of the Bible, we have not worshiped God, we have become foolish.

The creation of a religion without a creator

- The third result of idolatry is the creation of a religion without a creator.

Look at verse 23 and note what God is exchanged for.

and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.

If you had told an individual, months before this point, that ultimately, they would be worshiping some object – their front lawn, their automobile, their career, their expectations, their spouse, their child, whatever object has found first place in their heart – they would say, “No, I won’t worship that.”

Yet, they do. Why? Because they began, long before, as verse 21 tells us, by not acknowledging God.

The leading of an unaccountable life that produces uncontrollable sin

- Finally, and this is essentially a summary statement, the fourth result of idolatry is the leading of an unaccountable life that produces uncontrollable sin.

Three times in Romans, chapter 1, we are told, . . . ***God gave them over . . .***

The excess of natural function

- Verse 24 is the first of these. We will call this “the excess of natural function”.

Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them.

Why? Because they are immoral? Yes. But, what is the root of the problem? Look at verse 25.

For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. . . .

Ultimately, the problem in a person’s life, when they are living without the values of the Bible, goes

back to the problem of exchanging *God* as prominent in their life, and then they lose their heart.

Why not? Where is the accountability? Where is the authority? They have the attitude of, "I do what I please."

So they experience the excess of a natural function.

What I find happening in this country is startling. Let me read a couple of things.

The first is from a survey that was written up in *Straight Talk to Men*. There was a survey of college students – Christian and non-Christian.

Of the college students surveyed, sixty-nine percent of those who did not claim the name of Jesus Christ felt that sexual relations outside of marriage was all right. Thirty-nine percent of the Christians surveyed, those who named the name of Jesus Christ, believed it was all right. Of those individuals having five or more partners, those who knew Christ comprised ten percent. The most startling statistics were of those who had between one and four partners. Those with between two and four partners, who did not claim to know Christ, comprised twenty-six percent; those who claimed to know Jesus Christ comprised twenty-three percent. There was only a three percent difference. Those with one partner, who did not know Christ comprised twenty-three percent; those who knew Jesus Christ comprised twenty-six percent. There were more Christians having sexual relations outside of marriage with one partner than non-Christians!

One of the problems in the sexual revolution that is sweeping this country is that there is no longer the distinction between those who are admittedly idolatrous and those who say they know Jesus Christ.

James Dobson recently wrote, in the *Focus on the Family* magazine, the fact that fifty-six percent of all females and eighty percent of all males experience sexual relations outside of marriage; fifty percent of them between the ages of eleven and thirteen.

Why? It goes back to that when we exchange God for ourselves, we open the door to immorality. There is the excess, in this country, of a natural function, and I think there is an excess in the church as well.

The indulgence of unnatural affections

There is a second time in Romans, chapter 1, that we are told,

. . . *God gave them over . . .*

- Look at verses 26 and 27. We will call this "the indulgence of unnatural affections".

For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.

This is the indulgence of unnatural affection. The reason that I would say America is an idolatrous nation is because we are having a surge of homosexuality and lesbianism as never before in this country. What scares me more than anything, ladies and gentlemen, is the fact that this is the second step toward total idolatry.

I read another article that bothered me, in a magazine that I take to keep current. It talked about the advances that homosexuals are making. In New York City, they have already organized a homosexual public high school, at tax payers expense. They are controlling many state run educational efforts and are using public dollars to print brochures and other materials that are in the schools, including those in our state and our town. These materials encourage elementary school students to think of perverted acts as normal. They have also convinced mayors in a half dozen of the nation's largest cities, to participate in gay pride days to celebrate their deviant behavior.

I also received a special edition of *Newsweek* in the mail. It was the winter/spring 1990 edition, entitled "The 21st Century Family". If you want to look at it, it is available. It was startling that the definition of a family has been rewritten now to be anyone who says they want to live with anyone. The article highlighted two couples. One couple, made up of two women, and another couple, made up of two men, have already adopted children and are raising them in that kind of lifestyle. The two men were interviewed and had the audacity to say that they had the same values of their moms and dads, but had just expressed them in a different way.

When you read an article like that, your blood could either boil or you could be overwhelmed with pity and compassion for individuals who have replaced God with something or someone else.

The acceptance of sinful attractions and practices

There is a third time we are told, in Romans, chapter 1, that,

... God gave them over . . .

- Look at verses 28 through 31. We will call this “the acceptance of sinful attractions and practices”.

And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful;

This is happening in our country. Why is this happening? Because, as God says, “they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer”.

The tragedy of this passage though, ladies and gentlemen, is that it is speaking, not just to a country, obviously, but to individuals. And the context indicates that these are things that are not only being practiced, they are being accepted; they are being applauded.

Murder, for example, whether it is cold-blooded or by an abortionist who will take the life of an unborn child, is being accepted. We live in a state-istic state; that is, whatever our state says is legal, is now legal, whether it be murder or whatever. God’s word is supposed to re-write our culture, yet murder is being accepted

It is interesting, as you go through this list, that “disobedient to parents” is listed in verse 30. A philosopher came to America from the Soviet Union and left saying these words, “It is very fascinating to me that moms and dads in America have learned the art of obeying their children.”

In verse 31, “unloving” is listed. That is a Greek word for love that we hear little about when we talk about the words for love. This is the word “stergo,”

which refers to family love. These individuals are “unloving”; that is, they have no family connections; no family love. A husband loves his career more than his children or wife. There is no relationship engendered under his roof anymore – and that is acceptable.

Continue to verse 32.

and, although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.

There is the acceptance of sinful attractions and practices.

Ladies and gentlemen, there has never been a time more than today that you need to win your next door neighbor or your co-worker to Jesus Christ. That little girl next door is going to grow up in a society that will ultimately, give her the choice as to when her mom and dad die. Abortion has opened the door to infanticide; to the killing of the unborn based upon sex, “Oh no, I didn’t want a boy, I wanted a girl.” There are doctors who are now propounding that parents should be given three days after their child is born to determine whether he or she will live. They suggest the infant be subjected to genetic tests to find out if there are any disabilities. That little girl or boy growing up next door will make some awesome decisions and we need to win her or him to Christ.

The worship of the true God in a wrong form

2. Now, a second way to worship incorrectly is in the worship of the true God in a wrong form.

Turn to Exodus, chapter 32, and look at verse 4. The Israelites are worshiping the true God in a wrong form.

He [Aaron] took this [gold] from their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool and made it into a molten calf [a bull]; and they said, “This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.”

This was a symbol of power; it was one of the chief gods in Egypt and the Israelites had never gotten it out of their minds. Continue to verse 5 and note what Aaron says.

Now when Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made a proclamation

and said, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the Lord [Yahweh]."

This was the worship of God, but they wanted a prop; they wanted something that they could see and touch. So they created this bull, fashioned it, and what it turned into. It was obviously idolatry.

In Numbers, chapter 21, the Israelites, because of disobedience, received God's chastisement. God sent serpents to bite them. Do you remember that story? The serpents bit many of the Israelites and they died. Moses interceded on behalf of the people to God, and God said, "Okay, fashion a bronze serpent, put it up on a pole, and if anyone will look at it, they will live."

Do not misunderstand, looking at the bronze serpent on the pole was not an act of worship, it was an act of obedience. It was also a beautiful type of Jesus Christ, who would one day, be on a cross. Because of their obedience then, the Israelites would live. That is the usual point at which we finish the story.

However, II Kings, chapter 18, verse 4, tells us what happened to that snake on a stick. Verse 1 tells us that,

... Hezekiah ... became king.

That gives us a time element. In verse 4, King Hezekiah did something for God.

He removed the high places and broke down the sacred pillars and cut down the Asherah. He also broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the sons of Israel burned incense to it; and it was called Nehushtan.

Do you know what this is saying? For eight hundred years, the Israelites had been carting that bronze serpent around. It was never intended to have incense burned to it. They had created an idol. They were worshiping God, but they wanted this prop. They were using it as a vehicle to worship Him and burning incense in front of it. Finally, this king broke it in pieces and threw it away. Can you imagine – eight hundred years of carting that thing around?

We are exactly like the Israelites. We love the fetish; we love the tangibles, and God has given us so little. In fact, He says that our experience is one of faith.

How tragic that these Israelites became idolaters. God is not in a snake. God is not in a tortilla; He is not in a shroud; He is not in a splinter from the cross.

God is not in relics; He is not in stained glass; He is not in any of those things. If we do not worship Him according to the Bible, in Spirit and in truth, we have not worshiped.

The worship of the true God with the wrong attitude

3. Thirdly, the final incorrect way to worship, is in the worship of the true God with a wrong attitude.

Now let us get quite practical. There are two problems that I see in relation to this form of wrong worship.

Christians coming to church to be entertained

- Number one, there is the problem of Christians coming to church to be entertained.

Thomas Beecher once substituted for his famous brother, Henry Ward Beecher, who pastored the Plymouth Church in New York. When the people saw Thomas approach the pulpit, many got up to leave. So Thomas raised his hand and said, "All those who have come to worship Henry Ward Beecher may leave. All those who have come to worship God may remain."

That is like the little boy who was praying and said, "Dear God, we had a great time in church today, but I wish You had been there."

A. W. Tozer used to lament; in fact, he would cry and say, "Oh, it is so difficult to get people to come to church where God is the main attraction."

We come to church and if the hymns are the ones we like, we have worshiped. If the sermon is entertaining and interesting, we have worshiped.

We could do without those things and worship God. I entertained the radical idea of getting rid of all of the stuff, closing the curtains, getting on the floor, having you stand while I speak! That is a funny idea, but Christians come to church today to be entertained, and they will choose the church with the greatest show.

Christians coming to church out of fellowship

- Number two, there is the problem of Christians coming to church out of fellowship.

Men and women, you and I bring to this church service a heart that we have cultivated all week long. We cannot live throughout the week as if God does not exist; we cannot live lives that selfishly focus on ourselves and then, come to church at 10:30 on Sunday morning and say, “Now I shall proceed to worship.”

We bring to this church service a heart of worship that we have cultivated throughout the week. We collectively unite our hearts and continue what we have done on Saturday.

I John, chapter 5, verse 21, is an interesting passage in which the apostle John says,

Little children, guard yourselves from idols.

Is he talking about stumps; stones? No. He is talking about anything that will replace the prominence of God in your heart. If you live throughout the week worshiping something other than Jesus Christ, you will never be able to worship Him on Sunday morning.

A Closing Challenge

What is the New Testament challenge to the second commandment? Turn to Colossians, chapter 1, verse 18. Paul is talking of Jesus Christ in a fantastic passage of scripture that seems to pull worship out of every pore.

Look at verses 16 through 18 and note the last phrase of verse 18.

For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything.

Men and women, are we today, breaking the second commandment? Are there idols in our lives? Or are we in the process daily, of breaking the idols before they ever reach the mantel place of our hearts?