

10 Commandments

Commandment 2: The Jealous God

Jealousyⁱ

Here is the way jealousy works:

I love something very much.

Indeed, I love it TOO much.

I pursue it with zeal.

I desire.

In fact, I desire to possess it completely.

And then the object of my desire slips away.

It slips out of my hands and passes into another's.

I begin to experience the gnawing pangs of jealousy.

Strangely, the feelings of zeal and love begin to change.

My love begins to turn to another emotion – to hate.

Once I was open, happy, and filled to the brim with exquisite delight at the sight or in the presence of the one I loved.

But not any more.

Now I am closed.

Inner rage has replaced happiness.

I am intensely raging and insanely angry at the sight of the one I love.

William Shakespeare wrote a play called *Othello*.

This play spends a large amount of its time focussed on the theme of jealousy.

Othello fears that he is losing his love, Desdemona.

And at one point he puts it this way:

*I had rather be a toad
And live in the vapour of a dungeon,
Than keep a corner in the thing I love
For others' uses (Othello III,iii.270)*

Jealousy is a savage master.

It decimates friendships.

It dissolves romance.

And it destroys marriage.

It nullifies unity in a team.

It ruins churches.

It separates preachers.

It fosters competition.

It brings bitterness.

It questions other people's motives.

And it deplores the success of others.

It is severe, suspicious, narrow, and negative.

And yet ... in Exodus 20, verse 5 ... God says,

For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God.

What does God mean?

Jealousy is such a negative emotion.

How can God use it so positively?

What does God mean when he says he is a jealous God?

Let's have a look at our passage from Exodus 20:4-6 and see what we can make of it.

Exodus 20:4-6

'You shall not make for yourself an idol'

- What it means

You will see from today's outline that I intend to work my way step by step through the main statements of the second commandment.

As we come to each statement we will apply it to ourselves.

Let's have a look and see what God has to say to us today.

The first statement occurs in verse 4 – 'You shall not make for yourself an idol'.

This statement is explained by two other statements that follow...

'You shall not bow down to...'

'Or worship'

Now, it is very important that we understand what is being said in this commandment.

There are two possibilities, aren't there?

God could be following up his first commandment.

In his first commandment he said that Israel should have no other gods but him.

Perhaps he is saying more of the same here.

That is, Israel should not worship other gods.

It should not make an image of another god and worship it.

But God could be saying something very different, couldn't he?

The stress could be on the idea of an image rather than on the idea of another god.

God could be saying that his people must not make a physical representation of HIM.

You see, from the very first page of the Bible God is clear that he is separate from his creation.

He is of a different essence from his creation.

He is wholly separate.

He is like nothing the human mind can conceive of.

He is like nothing the human imagination can picture or depict.

Therefore any material representation of him is prohibited.

This is what I think is meant by this commandment.

I think God is saying that his people cannot make an image of him.

And I can understand why.

You see, whenever you make an image of something it is not long before the image becomes the reality.

It's not long before you capture the person in the image.

It's not long before you domesticate and tame the thing represented by the image.

It's not long before the image itself becomes the focus of your reverence and the object of your worship.

And the God of the Old Testament is clear – he cannot be domesticated in this way.

He cannot be tamed.

He is the free and sovereign God.

And the only place he chooses to confine himself is in his word.

This is what is meant by Deuteronomy 4:12 and 15-19.

Listen to Deuteronomy 4:12.

Moses says:

Then the Lord spoke to you out of the fire.

You heard the sound of words but saw no form;

There was only a voice.

This is a cornerstone of Biblical faith.

God does not reveal himself in images.

He reveals himself in his word.

If God allows himself to be captured, it is in his word.

There, in his word he reveals himself.

And if you want a picture of what he is like, then listen to his word.

- What it means for us

As a way of thinking about what this means for us, I want us to reflect upon some incidents that hit the front page of a number of our newspapers in Australia a couple of weeks ago.

The largest Anglican diocese in Australia – the diocese of Sydney – had just elected its next Archbishop, a man called Peter Jensen.

Soon after his election, Peter made some very bold statements.

He had the temerity to imply that the Prime Minister of Australia might be out of step with God on a number of issues facing Australians today.

And he implied that God's will could be known on these matters in the Bible.

As I watched the Television that night, I was intrigued by the response.

Politician after politician was interviewed.

Each of them were from very different political perspectives.

They were people who I could not imagine would readily agree on much at all.

But agree they did.

They were unanimous that no one could presume to speak for God.

They were unanimous that God's will could not easily be known.

You see, it is very easy to make an idol.

You don't need a carving in the corner of your room.

For behind the carving in the corner of your room is a person with an imagination.

A person who imagines that God is like this or God is like that.

You can tell an idolater by the way that they talk.

They will say such things as, 'I believe that God is like this' or 'I like to think that God is like that.'

The God of the Old Testament warns us against such idolatry.

He is not the God we imagine.

He is the God who reveals himself in his word.

Who he is and what he is like is known.

It is not known in our personal or collective imagination.

It is known in his revealed word.

Peter Jensen was right.

We cannot be soft on idols.

God and his will can be known.

It can be spoken about.

And it is always confronting because God will not be tamed.

'For I am a jealous God'

- What it means

Okay, let's now turn to the next statement.

In verse 5 God says, 'For I am a jealous God...'

The Hebrew word here literally means something like 'to become intensely red'.

This is because the person who was jealous obviously displayed intense emotions that affected the colour of their face.

The word is very strong.

However, the form of the word that is used here is unique.

It is a form that is never used in the Bible in reference to human beings.

It is only used in reference to God.

In other words, when the writers of the Bible use this term, they want us to understand that the jealousy we are talking about here is very different to human jealousy.

Let me see if I can explain it.

Underneath the use of the word 'jealousy' here there sits the idea of a marriage bond.

God is in a covenant relationships with his people, not unlike a marriage bond.

And God demands the same sort of exclusive loyalty that a husband or wife demands of a spouse.

He is deeply involved in a relationship with his people.

Unlike human jealousy, which is tinged with envy, God is a God who is deeply in love with his people.

He is filled with passion for relationship with them.

He wants their exclusive allegiance.

He will allow them no other suitors, no other husbands.

- What it means for us

So, what does this mean for us?

Come with me into the New Testament and we will see what one writer has to say on the topic.

The passage I want to look at comes from James 4:1-6.

Let's have a look at them.

I'll read James 4:4-6

¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. ¹⁵ Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. ¹⁶ For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

¹⁷ But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸ Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? ² You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. ³ When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

⁴ You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you think

Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely? ⁶ But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says:

“God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

The verses I want to concentrate on are verses 4-6.

However, the context of the verses has been set by chapter 3 and the early verses of chapter 4.

These verses speak about human jealousy or envy.

For example, James 3:14-16 say:

¹⁴ But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. ¹⁵ Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. ¹⁶ For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

The people James is writing to are jealous or envious of what others have.

Look at what James has to say to them in James 4:4-6.

He tells the people that when they seek to make friendship with the world they are committing spiritual adultery.

James is echoing what God says in Exodus – God will have no rivals.

The people’s jealousy, their selfish ambition, and their earthly attitudes, demonstrate their allegiance.

They are allied to the world much more than they are allied to God.

James pushes this home in verse 5.

Although this verse is notoriously difficult to translate from the Greek, the thrust of it is clear.

God created us for him.

He intensely desires friendship with us.

He intensely desires our allegiance to him alone.

And he intensely opposes anything or anyone who draws us away from him.

And he intensely reacts when we seek to supplant him with anything or anyone else.

This passage is a great example of how we can apply the second commandment.

You see, in our world there are many things that call for our allegiance.

There are many idols we make...

You can tell those idols by the way we fight and quarrel amongst ourselves or within ourselves.

Our desires fight their way to the surface of our existence and demonstrate where our allegiances lie.

And this passage tells us that it is possible to do this even in church and while engaged in the most godly of practices.

It is possible to be building God’s church and to be jealous that another church is growing more rapidly.

It is possible to become jealous that someone else is being asked to be involved in a particular form of ministry where you are not.

It is possible to envy the fact that someone else is more gifted than you are.

And such things demonstrate that our huge propensity for sin.

They demonstrate that friendship has drifted from friendship with God to friendship with the world.

We have become adulterers and enemies of God.

And God’s advice is clear.

First, be warned – God is a jealous God and to hate him is to incur his anger.

Second, return to him.

In the words of James...

⁷ Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

'Punishing...'

- What it means

Okay, let's now turn to the last two statements in the passage.

First, let's look at the second half of verse 5.

We have been told that God is a jealous God.

Well, his jealousy rises to the surface in two ways.

On the one hand, his jealousy can be seen in his punishment of those who forsake him.

On the other hand, his jealousy can be seen in his massive love toward those who love him.

Let's have a look at the issue of punishment first.

We are told in these verses that God's jealousy results in him punishing sin to the second and third generation of those who reject him.

An important thing to remember here is that we are talking about a covenant with a community of people.

What is being said here is that the conduct of individuals affects the life of the community.

The Bible is full of examples of this.

For example, in Genesis we find that Isaac and his wife, Rebekkah, play the favourites with their children, Jacob and Esau.

This favouritism sours their family life and is perpetuated into succeeding generations.

We also hear that Jacob is a deceiver.

His actions as a deceiver also sour his family life in succeeding generations.

These people act in ungodly ways.

Their sinfulness had a detrimental affect on the subsequent life of their communities.

And God's punishment on them in some means carries down through subsequent generations.

- What it means for us

This is a sobering truth, isn't it?

We have a graphic example of this principle in our corporate life here in Australia, don't we?

A previous generation of ours decided that they would take Aboriginal children away from their parents.

They attempted to forcibly assimilate Aboriginal people into white culture.

This act has come back to haunt us, hasn't it?

Aboriginal people in our culture are somehow cut loose, fractured, disoriented.

Our relationship with them is strained by our past actions.

And our whole society is affected.

We also see examples of this in our own personal lives, don't we?

Actions taken by our parents or people that have been responsible for us have deeply affected us.

Think of the child whose parents broke up when they were young.

The child that has now become an adult and lives with the impact of that act.

There is a sobering truth to what God says here, isn't there?

For our sin is never committed in a vacuum.

Sin is always committed in the context of other people.

Sin always affects other people.

However, I could not leave this passage without giving the other side of the story.

You see, the Old Testament people heard these words and knew that they were true.

But as time went on they began to think of them rather fatalistically.

They began to think that their own actions were irrelevant.

They began to think that their situation had come about because of something their ancestors had done and that there was nothing they could do about it.

God was punishing them and there was nothing they could do about it.

They even had a little proverb that summed up their thinking.

The prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel record this proverb for us.

It went like this:

The parents have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge.

In other words, our parents have sinned and we are getting the consequences.

Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel are called upon by God to respond.

Let's take a look at what Ezekiel has to say in Ezekiel 18.1-4 and 18:20

The word of the LORD came to me: ² "What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel:

"The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'?"

³ "As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel. ⁴ For every living soul belongs to me, the father as well as the son—both alike belong to me. The soul who sins is the one who will die.

²⁰ The soul who sins is the one who will die. The son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous man will be credited to him, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against him.

The point being made is very important.

While it is true that we are undoubtedly affected by the sins of our forefathers, we are also responsible for our own existence.

We can make our own choices.

And so, to some extent our existence now is our own responsibility.

We cannot blame our parents.

We cannot blame Adam and Eve.

We have made our own choices.

We can choose to follow in the footsteps of our forefathers.

Or we can choose to take another direction.

This too is a sobering truth, isn't it?

An example:

- I am very like my father.
- There are things my father did that I don't think were right.
- I learnt from him and his decisions have shaped me.
- However, I don't have repeat his mistakes.
- I am my own person, able to make my own choices.

'But showing love to...'

- What it means

Okay, now let's take a look at verse 6.

We have been told that God is a jealous God.

His jealousy rises to the surface in two ways.

On the one hand, his jealousy can be seen in his punishment of those who forsake him.

However, verse 6 tells us that his jealousy can also be seen in his massive love toward those who love him.

There are two things to concentrate on in this verse.

First, we need to notice the comparison between God's punishment and his love.

His punishment may affect two or three generations.

However, his love affects thousands of generations.

God's disposition is not towards judgment but mercy.

In the OT God's judgment is called his 'alien' or 'strange' work (Isaiah 28:21).

Judgment is not God's first choice – mercy and love are.

Second, we need to notice the actual word used here for God's action.

In our translation the word is 'love'.

The Hebrew word means God's unobligated, surprising, unprecedented, overflowing, generous kindness, love and grace.

It is not something that is deserved.

It is not something that is merited.

It is surprising and unexpected.

It is overflowing and generous.

This is God as he seeks to be.

This is God how he demonstrates himself to be.

- What it means for us

Now we as Christians know this God, don't we?

Take a look at Romans 5.1-8

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. ³ Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴ perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵ And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

⁶ You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Paul is clear.

We were God's enemies.

We had chosen to be God's enemies.

We had done nothing to earn God's mercy.

But God acted in surprising, unobligated, overflowing love and grace.

He sent his only Son into the world to die in our place.

God demonstrated his love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

The nature of our God

These few verses from the book of Exodus have captured great truths about the nature of God, haven't they?

They tell us of a God who...

- loves relationships
- is holy
- is just
- is faithful
- and is overflowing with mercy and love.

All of these great truths reach their full expression in Jesus.
In his life, death, resurrection, and ascension we see the same God we see here.
He is a God who is worthy of our worship.
So let us approach this God in the appropriate way.
Let's approach him with fear.
And with care.
And with awe.
But let's also approach him with great gladness.
With huge joy.
And with deep thankfulness.
He is a God worthy of worship.
He alone is worthy of worship.
And so, let's not substitute him with something far less.
Let's keep ourselves from idols.
From gods that are not serious about themselves.
From gods that are not exclusive.
From gods that are not just.
And from gods that are not overflowing with mercy and kindness.
The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.
He alone is worthy of worship.

ⁱ The introduction to this sermon draws considerably from Charles Swindoll, *Killing Giants, Pulling Thorns* (p23f)