

Worship on His Terms and for His Glory

Ex 20:4; LD 35

Pre-recorded video message for Members of the

Reformed Church of Wainuiomata

For listening on the evening of 10th May 2020 (seventh Sunday after lockdown started)

(Sermon put together by Pieter van Huyssteen)¹

Song before service: Organist to choose, please

Reading before the worship: Ps 116:6-7

The LORD protects the simplehearted; when I was in great need, He saved me. Be at rest once more, O my soul, for the LORD has been good to you .

Silent Prayer

START OF SERVICE

- 1 Votum: Our help is in the Name of the Lord, our God, the Maker of heaven and earth.
- 2 Greeting: Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father & from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.
- 3 **SttL 34:1,2,3 (too different in the Blue Ps/H's no.58) "The LORD I will at all times bless..."**
- 4 Profession of Faith (Apostles' Creed)
- 5 **SttL 34:6 "The righteous cry; the LORD responds..."**
- 6 Readings: Ex 20:4; LD 35
Ex 20:1-4

- 1 Then God spoke all these words, saying,
- 2 "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.
- 3 "You shall have no other gods before Me.
- 4 "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.²

Lord's Day 35

96 Q. What is God's will for us in the second commandment?

- A. That we in no way make any image of God¹
nor worship him in any other way
than he has commanded in his Word.²

¹ Apart from God's Word, I'm greatly indebted to the wonderful & comprehensive work of DOUMA, J. (1996). The Ten Commandments; manual for the Christian life. Translated by N.D. Kloosterman. Phillipsburg : P&R Publishing. 533p), which has been the main source of my studies towards writing this sermon.

² [New American Standard Bible: 1995 update](#). (1995). (Ex 20:1-4). La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

¹ Deuteronomy 4:15–19; Isaiah 40:18–25; Acts 17:29; Romans 1:23.

² Leviticus 10:1–7; 1 Samuel 15:22, 23; John 4:23, 24.

97 Q. May we then not make any image at all?

- A. God cannot and may not
be visibly portrayed in any way.

Although creatures may be portrayed,
yet God forbids making or having such images
if one's intention is to worship them
or to serve God through them.¹

¹ Exodus 34:13, 14, 17; 2 Kings 18:4, 5.

98 Q. But may not images be permitted in the churches as teaching aids for the unlearned?

- A. No, we shouldn't try to be wiser than God.
He wants his people instructed
by the living preaching of his Word—¹
not by idols that cannot even talk.²

¹ Romans 10:14, 15, 17; 2 Timothy 3:16, 17; 2 Peter 1:19.

² Jeremiah 10:8; Habakkuk 2:18–20.

7 Sermon

Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Ex 20:4 says, “*You shall not make for yourself a carved (graven)³ image...*”

Then it continues, “*...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*” (ESV).

Does that mean we are not allowed to make any image of anything at all? No art? No statue of Abel Tasman or James Cook, no photo to hang on the wall etc.?

No!

It just means we should not make an image of *God*!

And is Dt 4:15ff not clear about this? You see, here Moses says...

You saw no form of any kind the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire. Therefore watch yourselves very carefully,¹⁶ so that you do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape, whether formed like a man or a woman,¹⁷ or like any animal on earth or any bird that flies in the air,¹⁸ or like any creature that moves along the ground or any fish in the waters below.

It’s clear, isn’t it? No image of *God*!

Well, our sermon has three points. Here’s the first one...

Why no Image of God?

There are at least two answers to this question.

Firstly: how can anyone do justice to the person or power of the everywhere-present Almighty Creator by trying to shrink Him to the size of a human-made idol?

You simply can’t!

But, **secondly**, is it not true that making an image of God is trying to *manipulate/control* Him?

Is it not like making an electric transformer to control electricity?

You see, if you’d touch a “live” wire carrying 220 volts, it will kill you! It’s too powerful for your body to handle!

But if you make a transformer to bring the 220 volts down to 12 or 9 volts, then *you* are in control – you can now use the power that comes out of the transformer in whatever way *you* want – to charge your cell-phone battery or your laptop battery! You can even with your finger touch the end of wire coming out of the transformer and you will not be killed!

³ The NIV just says “idol.” The ESV says “Carved image,” and the NASB says “idol” with footnote “graven image.” The LXX says εἶδωλον (acc neut sing “idol, image, phantom”), and the MT says חֲצֹצְלָהּ from חֲצֹצֶה (hew out of stones).

See? With your transformer, YOU are in control!

That's exactly why God, through the 2nd commandment, forbids us to make an image of Him! After all, as Almighty Creator, God is not at the beck & call (or whim) of any creature!

And, yet, that's exactly what Ancient Israel, time & again, forgot!

You see, remember what happened in Eli's time?

Israel had turned their backs on the LORD. So, God withdrew His blessing from them, with the result that they lost a battle against the Philistines.

But then, 1 Sm 4 (vv. 1-11) tells us (that) they went even further in their sin! Because, thinking that they could *enforce* God's blessings (that they could *manipulate* or *control* God), they used the Ark of the Covenant like one would use an *image* (or *idol* or *statue*) of God.

Indeed, here is what must have gone on in the Israelites' mind: "*We will make God bless us – we will demand His presence with us in battle, so we will use the Ark of the Covenant as an image/statue of God! Yes, we will take it with us into battle. This way, we will be in control of God and the battle! We will use God on our terms and to our advantage!*"

One Bible scholar describes it well. He says (that) when the Israelites, on their own terms, took the Ark of the Covenant into battle, the LORD "became like an ambassador in chains, an image/statue in fetters."⁴

See? As we use an electric transformer, by which we have brought 220 volts down to 9, so did the Israelites, by abusing the ark, think they could bring God's power down to an easy-to-control level!

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Now, you & I might think that we're not guilty of breaking this commandment, because you & I have not made a visible/tangible image of God – an image before which we're worshiping.

But let's be careful! You see, man has a natural bent to making images of God. And right through the ages, we see this bent – which brings us to point 2...

Image-making through the ages

Let's go right back to when God gave the Ten Commandments at Mt Horeb! You see, at Mt Horeb, when Israel thought that Moses was not going to ever come down from the mountain, they started to panic.

So, in an effort to still have the LORD (Yahweh) near them, the Israelites then decided to make an image, which, in their minds, would represent the LORD!

We know the story!

The Bible tells us Aaron "*took what they* (i.e. the people) *handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then*

⁴ cf. DOUMA, J. 1996. The Ten Commandments; manual for the Christian life. Translated by N.D. Kloosterman. Phillipsburg : P&R Publishing. p.40.

they said, “This is your god⁵ (or these are your gods⁶), O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.”⁷

Well, it seems that Aaron & Israel intended this calf to be an image of the *true* God! After all, this is clear from the next verse (Ex 32:5), which reads:

“When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, “Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD (YAHWEH).”⁸

See?

Because Israel feared that Moses and the LORD were gone, they wanted to bring the LORD down to their needs – to downsize Him, to manipulate Him – again that idea of an electric transformer or ... like when one controls a big dog or a lion by putting him on a leash or in a cage, then you can use big power on your own terms & conditions!

Well, about 300 years⁹ after this golden-calf incident, King Jeroboam (Jeroboam I) did the same thing!

You see, it was *more convenient* for Jeroboam if the people of his country (the Northern Kingdom) would not go to Jerusalem’s temple to worship! So, for *his convenience*, he, too, made two golden calves – the one at Bethel (in the South) and the other at Dan (in the North). And he, too, did not mean to (with these calves) worship *other* gods; no, he wanted these calves to represent the *LORD* (Yahweh).

See? That’s why Jeroboam said about his calves exactly what the people at Mt Horeb/Sinai said about theirs, *“Here are your gods (or here is your G/god), O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.”¹⁰*

Well, people never learn!

Right through the ages even Christians made images of God: we see this with Christians in the Eastern Orthodox Church (Greek)...and in the Roman Catholic Church.

⁵ So the NASB *“This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.”*

But the ESV has, *“These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!”* Of course, the Hebrew has, *וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלֶּהָ אֱלֹהֵיהֶם יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלוֹךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם*. In the light of 32:5b, I’d prefer to read, *“This is your G/god...”*

⁶ So the NIV

⁷ cf. Ex 32:4

⁸ Emphasis mine. Ex 32:5 *וַיֹּאמֶר תַּג לַיהוָה מָחָר: וַיִּקְרָא אֶהָרֶן וַיִּקְרָא אֶהָרֶן וַיִּקְרָא אֶהָרֶן וַיִּקְרָא אֶהָרֶן*

⁹ If the Exodus is taken at c.1250 BC and Jeroboam I at c.924 BC (cf. e.g. Afrikaans Bybel in Praktyk).

¹⁰ 1 Ki 12:28 *After seeking advice, the king made two golden calves. He said to the people, “It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt”* *וַיִּעַץ הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיַּעַשׂ שְׁנֵי עֲגֹלֵי זָהָב וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם רַב־לְכֶם מֵעִלּוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלוֹךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם*

Yet, *every time* they're confronted with the sin of having these images, these people say (that) they're not worshipping the images; that, for them, these images just *represent* God or Christ or Mary or the saints!

Or they would say, "These images were just to teach the Bible message to those who could not read!"¹¹

Yet, every so often one sees these believers kissing a statue or an image, or even bowing before them and directing their prayers through them to God!

No wonder A. 98 (HC LD 35) says, "... *we shouldn't try to be wiser than God. He wants His people instructed by the living preaching of His Word – not by idols that cannot even talk.*"¹²

Well, someone might say, what about having just an empty cross (a cross without a Jesus figure on it) against the inside wall of a Reformed Church?

My brother & sister, in principle, there is nothing wrong with that!

You see, such a cross is for a mere *decorative* purpose – in other words, to make it plain that this room (or this building) is not just used for ordinary (everyday/secular) purposes, but that, here, the *Gospel of Jesus Christ* is proclaimed and that, in this room (in this building), *Christians* assemble for corporate worship!¹³

And I have to say: I have never seen any Reformed Christian bow before (or even look towards) such a cross when praying – let alone kissing it!

Now, someone might ask, "But what about pictures in children's Bibles, like when God, in human form, accompanied by two angels appeared to Abraham (Gn 18:2-16; 19:1), or when Ezekiel saw in a vision "a likeness with the appearance of a man"(Ezek 1:26) and when Daniel saw in a vision "the Ancient of Days... His garment was white as snow, and the hair of His head was like pure wool" (Dan 7:9)"?

"What about pictures of Christ in the children's Bible? After all, was Christ not, among other, God in full human form?"

Well, to these questions, the Reformed Bible scholar¹⁴ argues that *art may portray whatever Scripture shows*: no-one has seen God *as He exists in His blinding majesty*. But Abraham did see Him in *human form*! And Ezekiel and Daniel did see pictures of Him in the *appearance* of a man!

Thus, children's Bibles do not transgress boundaries set by the second Commandment when they convey their impressions of the evidences of God's presence *which believers in Biblical times were permitted to see*.

We must understand that this kind of art is different to *worshipping* the images made by it!

¹¹ cf. e.g. Douma (ibid:58-63)

¹² Emphasis mine

¹³ cf. Douma (ibid:65)

¹⁴ cf. Douma (ibid:67)

So, again, we have to say that the Reformed Christian does not have the intention – nor even the desire – to worship the drawings in the children’s Bible.

However, here is where you & I should be careful – making a *mental* image of God, which brings us to point 3...

Mental Images (Today’s way of making an image of God)

You see, was John Calvin not right when he once said¹⁵ that for every idol/image made by human hands, there was first a brain-wave, an idea, a mental image!?

So, my brother & sister, you & I may not make an image of God *with our hands*, but, because of our sinful nature, we all are constantly inclined to make images of God *in our head* – wrong images, images by which we still want to control God!

For example: On the one hand, there are among human beings those who mentally make/transform God into a sweet Santa-Clause character.

And on the other hand there are those who mentally transform God into the image of a Scrooge – that main character in Charles Dicken’s novel, “A Christmas Carol;” yes, a Scrooge who has no appreciation for fun and kindness.

So, let’s look at these two opposites – 1) those who see God as a sweet Santa Claus; and 2) those who see Him as an angry Scrooge!

First, then, those who try to make the sweet Santa-Claus image of God. Here’s what they would say: “Ah, man, it is not true that God will punish those who did not receive Jesus Christ.” “We will all be right with God! You’ll see!” “She’ll be all right, mate!” “When we die, we’ll *all* be with God!”

Thus they make God into a kind of “Santa Clause” – a people’s pleaser!

My brother & sister, do you see what such people are doing?

They cannot “handle” God the way He really is. So, like what that electric transformer does with high voltage, so, too, in their *minds* they “limit” God to suit themselves – to manipulate Him!

Is that not, among other, the image of God portrayed by a church leader in Christchurch when he was asked how God could allow an earthquake that took people’s lives?

Congregation, remember his answer: “God had nothing to do with these quakes. It was just the earth’s plates moving that did all this!” “But,” says he,

¹⁵ Calvin, J. Institutes, 1.11.8; also cf. Douma (ibid:69 fn)

“I’ll tell you where God is working!” “In the love that quake-sufferers now give to one another.”

See? By what he said, this church leader reduced the Sovereign God to a people-pleaser – as if that were possible!

But, with such a reduced image of God, this church leader was more comfortable, for he could in his mind and emotion (and in his explanation to the public) “handle” such a god!

Are you & I guilty of that – seeing God only/mostly as only love!?

Well, so far re the sweet Santa-Clause-like image of God!

Here’s the other extreme – the “Scrooge-like” image of God:

You see, you get those believers (and you & I may at times also be in their group) who simply cannot grasp that God, through Jesus Christ, has forgiven their sins. So, they continue to mentally make God into some sort of Scrooge – someone cold and harsh from whom we should try to *earn* our salvation!

They are the kind who forget that God is our Heavenly Father who so loved His chosen ones, that He gave even His precious Son to, through untold pain & God-forsakenness, save them!

Please don’t understand me wrong: I do not want to insinuate that, once we have received Jesus Christ in faith, we do not have to in fruit-bearing way obey His commandments! No, Jesus said, “If you love Me, you will obey my commandments!”¹⁶

I’m not against obeying Christ’s commandments as fruit of our God-given faith!

But what is wrong is obeying God’s commandments in Pharisaic way – as an attempt to earn our salvation; yes to try and score points with God! That would be making a mental image of God – yes, the Scrooge image!

Let me ask you as I ask myself: Which image of God are you making?

The sweet *Santa-Clause-like* old man who just condones your sins – pretends he has not seen them – the people’s pleaser?

Then, let me warn you. You are underestimating God’s hatred of sin – His justice!

Or are you perhaps only seeing God’s wrath & anger – yes, as if God is some sort of Scrooge? Are you in a constant state of fear, trying to earn God’s favour – to deserve your eternal salvation! So, you never have peace before God, because you find that you’ve never done enough to satisfy His anger?

If that’s you, then I declare to you that you have underestimated God’s *love*!

Yes, then I urge you to come to the cross of Jesus – that is: receive Him in your heart – for the first time or for the nth time!

¹⁶ Jn 14:15

You see, the only correct image of God that any person could have of Him, is through the cross of Christ!

Why?

Because only through the cross of Christ is God seen for whom He really is: the God of justice *and* of love – the one who punishes *sin* yet loves the repentant sinner!

My brother & sister – these are God’s terms – the terms of the God who, at the cost of His Son, saved us – not from slavery in Egypt, but from slavery to our own sins!

Now why will you & I not obey the Second Commandment? Why will we not continue to worship Him on His terms and for His glory?

AMEN (2,499 words excluding footnotes)

8. Prayer regarding preached sermon:

9. **SttL 331 (= Blue Ps/H 368 with 3rd stanza varying) “Rejoice, the Lord is King!”**

10. Benediction

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
and the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. **“Amen!”**