

The Second Commandment & Idolatry

Matthew Henry on the Second Commandment & Idolatry

From Henry's commentary on Exodus 20,

It is certain that it forbids making any image of God (for to whom can we liken him? Isa. xl. 18, 15), or the image of any creature for a religious use. It is called the changing of the truth of God into a lie (Rom. i. 25), for an image is a teacher of lies; it insinuates to us that God has a body, whereas he is an infinite spirit, Hab. ii. 18. It also forbids us to make images of God in our fancies, as if he were a man as we are. Our religious worship must be governed by the power of faith, not by the power of imagination. They must not make such images or pictures as the heathen worshipped, lest they also should be tempted to worship them. Those who would be kept from sin must keep themselves from the occasions of it.

From Henry's commentary on Exodus 32,

Having made the calf in Horeb, they worshipped the graven image, Ps. cvi. 19. Aaron, seeing the people fond of their calf, was willing yet further to humour them, and he built an altar before it, and proclaimed a feast to the honour of it (v. 5), a feast of dedication. Yet he calls it a feast to Jehovah; for, brutish as they were, they did not imagine that this image was itself a god, nor did they design to terminate their adoration in the image, but they made it for a representation of the true God, whom they intended to worship in and through this image; and yet this did not excuse them from gross idolatry, any more than it will excuse the papists, whose plea it is that they do not worship the image, but God by the image, so making themselves just such idolaters as the worshippers of the golden calf, whose feast was a feast to Jehovah, and proclaimed to be so, that the most ignorant and unthinking might not mistake it. Having made the calf in Horeb, they worshipped the graven image, Ps. cvi. 19. Aaron, seeing the people fond of their calf, was willing yet further to humour them, and he built an altar before it, and proclaimed a feast to the honour of it (v. 5), a feast of dedication.

From Henry's commentary on Deuteronomy 4,

(5.) He charges them particularly to take heed of the sin of idolatry, that sin which of all others they would be most tempted to by the customs of the nations, which they were most addicted to by the corruption of their hearts, and which would be most provoking to God and of the most pernicious consequences to themselves: Take good heed, lest in this matter you corrupt yourselves, v. 15, 16. Two sorts of idolatry he cautions them against:—[1.] The worship of images, however by them they might intend to worship the true God, as they had done in the golden calf, so changing the truth of God into a lie and his glory into shame. The second commandment is expressly directed against this, and is here

enlarged upon, v. 15-18. "Take heed lest you corrupt yourselves," that is, "lest you debauch yourselves;" for those that think to make images of God form in their minds such notions of him as must needs be an inlet to all impieties; and it is intimated that it is a spiritual adultery. "And take heed lest you destroy yourselves. If any thing ruin you, this will be it. Whatever you do, make no similitude of God, either in a human shape, male [or] female, or in the shape of any beast or fowl, serpent or fish;" for the heathen worshipped their gods by images of all these kinds, being either not able to form, or not willing to admit, that plain demonstration which we find, Hos. viii. 6: The workman made it, therefore it is not God. To represent an infinite Spirit by an image, and the great Creator by the image of a creature, is the greatest affront we can put upon God and the greatest cheat we can put upon ourselves. As an argument against their making images of God, he urges it very much upon them that when God made himself known to them at Horeb he did it by a voice of words which sounded in their ears, to teach them that faith comes by hearing, and God in the word is nigh us; but no image was presented to their eye, for to see God as he is is reserved for our happiness in the other world, and to see him as he is not will do us hurt and no good in this world. You saw no similitude (v. 12), no manner of similitude, v. 15. Probably they expected to have seen some similitude, for they were ready to break through unto the Lord to gaze, Exod. xix. 21. But all they saw was light and fire, and nothing that they could make an image of, God an infinite wisdom so ordering his manifestation of himself because of the peril of idolatry. It is said indeed of Moses that he beheld the similitude of the Lord (Num. xii. 8), God allowing him that favour because he was above the temptation of idolatry; but for the people who had lately come from admiring the idols of Egypt, they must see no resemblance of God, lest they should have pretended to copy it, and so should have received the second commandment in vain; "for" (says bishop Patrick) "they would have thought that this forbade them only to make any representation of God besides that wherein he showed himself to them, in which they would have concluded it lawful to represent him." Let this be a caution to us to take heed of making images of God in our fancy and imagination when we are worshipping him, lest thereby we corrupt ourselves. There may be idols in the heart, where there are none in the sanctuary.

From Henry's commentary on Job,

II. He protests that he never gave the worship and glory to the creature which are due to God only; he was never guilty of idolatry, v. 26-28. We do not find that Job's friends charged him with this. But there were those, it seems, at that time, who were so sottish as to worship the sun and moon, else Job would not have mentioned it. Idolatry is one of the old ways which wicked men have trodden, and the most ancient idolatry was the worshipping of the sun and moon, to which the temptation was most strong, as appears Deut. iv. 19, where Moses speaks of the danger which the people were in of being driven to worship them. But as yet it was practised secretly, and durst not appear in open view, as afterwards the most abominable idolatries did. Observe,

1. How far Job kept from this sin. He not only never bowed the knee to Baal (which, some think, was designed to represent the sun), never fell down and worshipped the sun, but he kept his eye, his heart, and his lips, clean from this sin. (1.) He never so much as beheld the sun or the moon in their pomp and lustre with any other admiration of them than what led him to give all the glory of their brightness and usefulness to their Creator. Against spiritual as well as corporal adultery he made a covenant with his

eyes; and this was his covenant, that, whenever he looked at the lights of heaven, he should by faith look through them, and beyond them, to the Father of lights. (2.) He kept his heart with all diligence, that that should not be secretly enticed to think that there is a divine glory in their brightness, or a divine power in their influence, and that therefore divine honours are to be paid to them. Here is the source of idolatry; it begins in the heart. Every man is tempted to that, as to other sins, when he is drawn away by his own lust and enticed. (3.) He did not so much as put a compliment upon these pretended deities, did not perform the least and lowest act of adoration: His mouth did not kiss his hand, which, it is likely, was a ceremony then commonly used even by some that yet would not be thought idolaters. It is an old-fashioned piece of civil respect among ourselves, in making a bow, to kiss the hand, a form which, it seems, was anciently used in giving divine honours to the sun and moon. They could not reach to kiss them, as the men that sacrificed kissed the calves (Hos. xiii. 2, 1 Kings xix. 18); but, to show their good will, they kissed their hand, reverencing those as their masters which God has made servants to this lower world, to hold the candle for us. Job never did it.

2. How ill Job thought of this sin, v. 28. (1.) He looked upon it as an affront to the civil magistrate: It were an iniquity to be punished by the judge, as a public nuisance, and hurtful to kings and provinces. Idolatry debauches men's minds, corrupts their manners, takes off the true sense of religion which is the great bond of societies, and provokes God to give men up to a reprobate sense, and to send judgments upon a nation; and therefore the conservators of the public peace are concerned to restrain it by punishing it. (2.) He looked upon it as a much greater affront to the God of heaven, and no less than high treason against his crown and dignity: For I should have denied the God that is above, denied his being as God and his sovereignty as God above. Idolatry is, in effect, atheism; hence the Gentiles are said to be without God (atheists) in the world. Note, We should be afraid of every thing that does but tacitly deny the God above, his providence, or any of his perfections.

From Henry's commentary on Psalm 106,

3. They made and worshipped the golden calf, and this in Horeb, where the law was given, and where God had expressly said, Thou shalt neither make any graven image nor bow down to it; they did both: They made a calf and worshipped it, Psa_106:19.

(1.) Herein they bade defiance to, and put an affront upon, the two great lights which God has made to rule the moral world: - [1.] That of human reason; for they changed their glory, their God, at least the manifestation of him, which always had been in a cloud (either a dark cloud or a bright one), without any manner of visible similitude, into the similitude of Apis, one of the Egyptian idols, an ox that eateth grass, than which nothing could be more grossly and scandalously absurd, Psa_106:20. Idolaters are perfectly besotted, and put the greatest disparagement possible both upon God, in representing him by the image of a beast, and upon themselves, in worshipping it when they have so done. That which is here said to be the changing of their glory is explained by St. Paul (Rom_1:23) to be the changing of the glory of the incorruptible God. [2.] That of divine revelation, which was afforded to them, not only in the words God spoke to them, but in the works he wrought for them, wondrous works, which declared aloud that the Lord Jehovah is the only true and living God and is alone to be worshipped, Psa_106:21, Psa_106:22.

From Henry's commentary on Ezekiel 22,

2. Idolatry: She makes idols against herself to destroy herself, Eze_22:3. And again (Eze_22:4), Thou hast defiled thyself in thy idols which thou hast made. Note, Those who make idols for themselves will be found to have made them against themselves, for idolaters put a cheat upon themselves and prepare destruction for themselves; besides that thereby they pollute themselves, they render themselves odious in the eyes of the just and jealous God, and even their mind and conscience are defiled, so that to them nothing is pure. Those who did not make idols themselves were yet found guilty of eating upon the mountains, or high places (Eze_22:9), in honour of the idols and in communion with idolaters.

Commentary on the Whole Bible V (Matthew to John):

Henry on Matthew 28:1-10,

Note, It is matter of comfort to those who seek Christ, and miss of finding him where they expected, that he is risen: if we find him not in sensible comfort, yet he is risen. We must not hearken to those who say, Lo, here is Christ, or, Lo, he is there, for he is not here, he is not there, he is risen. In all our enquiries after Christ, we must remember that he is risen; and we must seek him as one risen. (1.) Not with any gross carnal thoughts of him. There were those that knew Christ after the flesh; but now henceforth know we him so no more, 2Co_5:16. It is true, he had a body; but it is now a glorified body. They that make pictures and images of Christ, forget that he is not here, he is risen; our communion with him must be spiritual, by faith in his word, Rom_10:6-9. (2.) We must seek him with great reverence and humility, and an awful regard to his glory, for he is risen. God has highly exalted him, and given him a name above every name, and therefore every knee and every soul must bow before him. (3.) We must seek him with a heavenly mind; when we are ready to make this world our home, and to say, It is good to be here, let us remember our Lord Jesus is not here, he is risen, and therefore let not our hearts be here, but let them rise too, and seek the things that are above, Col_3:1-3; Phi_3:20.

Henry on Luke 24:6,

Now here, 1. They upbraid the women with the absurdity of the search they were making: Why seek ye the living among the dead? Luk_24:5. Witness is hereby given to Christ that he is living, of him it is witnessed that he liveth (Heb_7:8), and it is the comfort of all the saints, I know that my Redeemer liveth; for because he lives we shall live also. But a reproof is given to those that look for him among the dead, - that look for him among the dead heroes that the Gentiles worshipped, as if he were but like one of them, - that look for him in an image, or a crucifix, the work of men's hands, or among unwritten tradition and the inventions of men; and indeed all they that expect happiness and satisfaction in the creature, or perfection in this imperfect state, may be said to seek the living among the dead.

Henry on John 7:38,

See here what it is to come to Christ: It is to believe on him, as the scripture hath said; it is to receive and entertain him as he is offered to us in the gospel. We must not frame a Christ according to our fancy, but believe in a Christ according to the scripture.

From Henry's commentary on John 16,

Secondly, Christ's ascension is the great argument proper to convince men of this righteousness: I go to the Father, and, as an evidence of my welcome with him, you shall see me no more. If Christ had left any part of his undertaking unfinished, he had been sent back again; but now that we are sure he is at the right hand of God, we are sure of being justified through him.

From Henry's commentary on John 20,

(3.) He commends the faith of those who believe upon easier terms. Thomas, as a believer, was truly blessed; but rather blessed are those that have not seen. It is not meant of not seeing the objects of faith (for these are invisible, Heb. xi. 1; 2 Cor. iv. 18), but the motives of faith—Christ's miracles, and especially his resurrection; blessed are those that see not these, and yet believe in Christ. This may look, either backward, upon the Old-Testament saints, who had not seen the things which they saw, and yet believed the promise made unto the father, and lived by that faith; or forward, upon those who should afterwards believe, the Gentiles, who had never seen Christ in the flesh, as the Jews had. This faith is more laudable and praise-worthy than theirs who saw and believed; for, [1.] It evidences a better temper of mind in those that do believe. Not to see and yet to believe argues greater industry in searching after truth, and greater ingenuousness of mind in embracing it. He that believes upon that sight has his resistance conquered by a sort of violence; but he that believes without it, like the Bereans, is more noble. [2.] It is a greater instance of the power of divine grace. The less sensible the evidence is the more does the work of faith appear to be the Lord's doing. Peter is blessed in his faith, because flesh and blood have not revealed it to him, Matt. xvi. 17. Flesh and blood contribute more to their faith that see and believe, than to theirs who see not and yet believe. Dr. Lightfoot quotes a saying of one of the rabbins, "That one proselyte is more acceptable to God than all the thousands of Israel that stood before mount Sinai; for they saw and received the law, but a proselyte sees not, and yet receives it."

Commentary on the Whole Bible Volume VI (Acts to Revelation):

From Matthew Henry's commentary on Acts 17,

6. That he is not far from every one of us, v. 27. He is every where present, not only is at our right hand, but has possessed our reins (Ps. cxxxix. 13), has his eye upon us at all times, and knows us better than we know ourselves. Idolaters made images of God, that they might have him with them in those images, the absurdity of which the apostle here shows; for he in an infinite Spirit, that is not far from any of us, and never the nearer, but in one sense the further off from us, for our pretending to realize or presentiate him to ourselves by any image. He is nigh unto us, both to receive the homage we render him and to give the mercies we ask of him, wherever we are, though near no altar, image, or temple. The Lord of all, as he is rich (Rom. x. 12), so he is nigh (Deut. iv. 7), to all that call upon him. He that wills us to pray every where, assures us that he is no where far from us; whatever country, nation, or profession we are of, whatever our rank and condition in the world are, be we in a palace or in a cottage, in a crowd or in a corner, in a city or in a desert, in the depths of the sea or afar off upon the sea, this is certain, God is not far from every one of us.

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III. From all these great truths concerning God, he infers the absurdity of their idolatry, as the prophets of old had done. If this be so, 1. Then God cannot be represented by an image. If we are the offspring of God, as we are spirits in flesh, then certainly he who is the Father of our spirits (and they are the principal part of us, and that part of us by which we are denominated God's offspring) is himself a Spirit, and we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device, v. 29. We wrong God, and put an affront upon him, if we think so. God honoured man in making his soul after his own likeness; but man dishonours God if he makes him after the likeness of his body. The Godhead is spiritual, infinite, immaterial, incomprehensible, and therefore it is a very false and unjust conception which an image gives us of God, be the matter ever so rich, [g]old or silver; be the shape ever so curious, and be it ever so well graven by art or man's device, its countenance, posture, or dress, ever so significant, it is a teacher of lies.

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IV. He proceeds to call them all to repent of their idolatries, and to turn from them, v. 30, 31. This is the practical part of Paul's sermon before the university; having declared God to them (v. 23), he properly presses upon them repentance towards God, and would also have taught them faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ, if they had had the patience to hear him. Having shown them the absurdity of their worshipping other gods, he persuades them to go on no longer in that foolish way of worship, but to return from it to the living and true God.

From Matthew Henry's commentary on Acts 19:26,

Those are no gods which are made with hands, Act_19:26. Could any truth be more plain and self-evident than this, or any reasoning more cogent and convincing than that of the prophets, The workman made it, therefore it is not God? The first and most genuine notion we have of God is, that he had his being of himself, and depends upon none; but that all things have their being from him, and their dependence on him: and then it must follow that those are no gods which are the creatures of men's fancy and the work of men's hands.

...

There are those who will stickle for that which is most grossly absurd and unreasonable, and which carries along with it its own conviction of falsehood, as this does, that those are gods which are made with hands, if it have but human laws, and worldly interest and prescription, on its side.

From MHC on Romans 1,

2. The outward acts of their idolatry, v. 23-25. (1.) Making images of God (v. 23), by which, as much as in them lay, they changed the glory of the incorruptible God. Compare Ps. cvi. 20; Jer. ii. 11. They ascribed a deity to the most contemptible creatures, and by them represented God. It was the greatest honour God did to man that he made man in the image of God; but it is the greatest dishonour man has done to God that he has made God in the image of man. This was what God so strictly warned the Jews against,

Deut. iv. 15, &c. This the apostle shows the folly of in his sermon at Athens, Acts xvii. 29. See Isa. xl. 18, &c.; xlv. 10, &c. This is called (v. 25)changing the truth of God into a lie. As it did dishonour his glory, so it did misrepresent his being. Idols are called lies, for they belie God, as if he had a body, whereas he is a Spirit, Jer. xxiii. 14; Hos. vii. 1. Teachers of lies, Hab. ii. 18.

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It is observable that upon the mention of the dishonour done to God by the idolatry of the Gentiles the apostle, in the midst of his discourse, expresses himself in an awful adoration of God: Who is blessed for ever. Amen. When we see or hear of any contempt cast upon God or his name, we should thence take occasion to think and speak highly and honourably of him. In this, as in other things, the worse others are, the better we should be. Blessed for ever, notwithstanding these dishonours done to his name: though there are those that do not glorify him, yet he is glorified, and will be glorified to eternity.

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