

“God is Greater Than Your View of Him”
Greater Than
Downtown
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There is a New Testament professor who every year with his “first-year” students makes them go through a little experiment. He tells them to get out a sheet of paper and make two columns on it. On the left-hand column, he tells them to write down the things they think God is like. Then in the right-hand column, he tells them to write down what they think describes themselves. And you know what he found almost without fail? That when he put them side-by-side, the two columns wound up being almost 90% identical.

Now we are made in God’s image, so there are absolutely *some* similarities and I don’t even know what the correct percentage would be. But it does raise the question, if not the concern, that perhaps we sometimes tend to imagine God as though he’s just a slightly smarter, slightly stronger version of ourselves.

Voltaire

“God created man in His own image, and man has been trying to repay the favor ever since.”

How do we actually know what God is like?

We said last week that God operates on a whole other playing field than we do. That He is greater than we can think or imagine. His ways are higher than our ways. His thoughts are purer than our thoughts. He is full of power and goodness the likes of which we can only begin to fathom.

Today, however, I want to help us answer that question - “Why is it so important that we know what God is really like... and how do we do that?”

To do so we’re going to start in the Old Testament.

Let’s go to **Exodus 20:4-5** and **Exodus 32:1-6**.

Exodus 20 is a popular one in that it’s where we get the Ten Commandments.

Depending on your background, you might be familiar with these. If you were a church kid like me, you may have memorized these with a song and dance. But the Ten Commandments were God’s commands given to Moses on top of Mount Sinai just days after they miraculously were brought out of Egypt. God parted the Red Sea for them to escape Pharaoh and his army, God closed the waters on Pharaoh and the Israelites were saved. Then according to the Scriptures, God leads them through the desert with a pillar of smoke by day and a pillar of fire by night. In other words, they saw first-hand things that were supernatural. No doubt about it, this is God showing up right in front of us.

And then shortly thereafter God creates the Ten Commandments as a way of saying, “I love you like a parent loves his child and because of that I’ve created some rules for you to know my love and for you to love others.”

So God gives commandment number one: “you will have no other gods before me. Don’t worship anything or anyone that will draw away your devotion from me. You worship me alone.” Which sounds simple enough, but is loaded with all sorts of stuff that we’ll get into in the Midweek podcast later this week.

Then we get to commandment number two:

Exodus 20:4-5

“You shall not make for yourself a carved image, 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. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me.”

Now at first glance, it sounds like the same thing as commandment one. As though he’s saying in number one “Don’t worship any gods” and then number two “Don’t worship any statues of gods.”

But that’s not quite it. The first commandment is about worshipping the right God: Yahweh. Whereas the second commandment is about worshipping the right God but in the wrong way. Back then, the common practice of Ancient Near East religions was to make statues for the gods - called icons or “images” that they worshipped. Now, these images were not gods in and of themselves. They were pieces of rock or wood. But these images often served as this sort of gateway between the spiritual realm and the human realm. And if you garnered enough favor with your god, and offered the right sacrifices, the spirit of your god would descend into these images for you to worship and you would receive their blessing.

And God - the one who last week we said is the Creator, Ruler, and Sustainer of the Universe says, “No no, that’s not how our relationship works.”

And what’s wild is, of all the Ten Commandments - don’t murder, don’t lie, don’t steal, etc - this is the very first one they break. They set up a false image of God. And again to remind us, all this happens **just days** after they were rescued out of Egypt.

Skip on down to chapter 32. Moses is coming down the mountain of God, Ten Commandments in hand when this happens:

Exodus 32:1-6

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, “Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.”

You can sort of pick up on the tone? They’re bullying Aaron around and you can sense how they’re mocking Moses.

So Aaron said to them, “Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.”

Which, side note. The gold in their ears - where'd that come from? Just days before from the Egyptians when they left Egypt. It was a literal, tangible reminder that God was on their side and yet they hand it over right away.

So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" 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."

Notice who the feast is for: "the Lord." Aaron used the name YHWH, saying that this is the image of the God that had saved them. Verse 6, then things get a bit out of hand:

And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.

That word "play" is the Hebrew word "*tsikah*" and it was a Hebrew idiom most likely referring to sex. So basically they make an image of God into a big golden cow and begin worshipping in front of it, offering sacrifices to it - trying to evoke God's favor, for Him to come down and inhabit the image and as part of their ritual, naturally, thousands of them get drunk and then...you know.

Now with us removed some 3,500 years from this story you might be thinking, "Okaaaaay. So the moral of the story is...don't make statues? Got it. And no thousand-person sex party....well, ok, fine."

And while most of us might scratch our heads at this one and ask "Why is this in the Bible" this story actually says something pretty revealing about the human condition. And the first clue to figuring out what that is by looking at what they made: a calf.

Ok, so why a calf? Two reasons:

1 - Because the surrounding pagan nations had images of their gods that looked just like this. And the surrounding nations would do exactly what the Israelites did. But God's people were supposed to be set apart. To look differently, to behave differently. Instead Israel wanted God to be like everyone else. They were trying to take the mystery and the bigness of God and put Him into more manageable terms that best suited them.

And reason number two:

2 - The bull in the ANE was a symbol of strength and power. In the Ancient Near East, many of which were agrarian societies, people would bow down and worship animal images/icons pending their need - whether that be a bull or a horse or a goat - each one had their own special attribute that you had to perform for.

And if you're the Israelites and you don't have a country or kingdom to call your own, you would probably be feeling weak and powerless. So what type of god would you worship? What would it look like? A bull. So the Israelites out of this craving desire for power and control, created this false projection of who God was to give them a sense of security. They were feeling insecure, they felt like God had bailed on them and that God wasn't working according to their own timelines, so they had to take matters into their own hands because God wasn't matching up to their expectations.

And while none of us are building giant golden calves in our living room bowing down and worshipping it, the reality is all of us try to make God into our own image in some form or fashion. And this manifests itself in all sorts of ways in our culture and in our lives:

- Often we shape God based on our background - specifically **our upbringing**. Maybe you grew up in a religious home and were brought up to believe a certain way about God that wasn't entirely accurate. Or perhaps based on the way your parents treated you, you projected that onto God.
- Oftentimes we allow **our feelings and our culture** to dictate who we think God is. When we come up against a passage or a command or a narrative in the Bible that really upsets or offends us, our tendency is to skip it over and say, "Well *I feel* like God wouldn't do this" or, "*I feel* like God would want me to do that" But the thing is, the moment when we begin to let our feelings shape our perception of God, we make Him into our own image.
- Or there are times when we let **our desires** shape our view of God. We fear not having something whether that be a relationship, or comfort, or a career - so we create a false God that seeks to serve us and give to us what we want. This is what happened to the Israelites by the way, they were insecure about feeling powerless so they fashioned God to give them something they were lacking in.
- Or sometimes this happens with particular **sin** struggles that we wrestle with. We are quick to say, "Yea look I know God forgives me and understands me, but *I feel* like this person's sin is a little bit worse than whatever I'm dealing with right now and God ought to really call that dude out." **OR YOU FLIP IT** you might believe God is generous and merciful to every one us, but when it comes to what you've done, well there's no way He can forgive me

Often we do some sort of mix of all of these. Like for example, I decided to list all the ways in which I've inadvertently made God into my own image over the years

- According to my view false view of God: If I'm a "good enough" Christian then God would bless me with **financial security** and would never have to think about money again
- Or, if I'm a good enough dad, God will make sure that **my kids** will always obey me and make straight As
- Here's one I believe a lot - If I do good at my job, people will always show me **respect** and think I'm awesome and people would always be content in our church and never leave
- My false image of God is very gracious with my sin, but the sin of other people, especially **those who sin against me**, oh man are they in trouble

The problem is when we create a false image of God, you know what we end up doing? We end up creating just a bigger version of ourselves. We end up creating our own **Thomas Jefferson Bibles** where we take our mental scissors and cut out all of the stuff that we don't like that doesn't match up with what we want and when it's all said and done we create this sort-of wonky version of God like He's some big funhouse mirror with certain attributes overly emphasized and other attributes are ignored altogether.

In fact, Hollywood has picked up on this idea of how often we make God in our image. It was parodied most notably in 2006 cinematic classic Talladega Nights. Where Will Ferrel and John C Reiley are praying to Jesus at the breakfast table and begin to project their own ideas about God. And the scene went something like this:

WF: I like Christmas baby Jesus best, so that's who I pray to. 8lb 6oz. baby Jesus, all snuggly there in your diapers in your crib and yet Omnipotent.

OG: I like to picture Jesus in a tuxedo T-shirt because it says I want to be formal, but I'm here to

party.

Or, I like to picture Jesus as a figure skater. He comes out wearing a white outfit, and He does interpretive ice dances of my life's journey.

Part 2 - This goes really bad for you...

Now that's a silly example but even though we're some 3000 years after this story in Exodus, it reveals that we all do this.

And here's what happens. When we up-play or down-play certain things about God to suit our liking, to fit our mold, when we end up creating a false image of God, it actually goes terribly for us.

Check out how God talks about it back in **Exodus 20**, look how commandment number two ends the way it does. For those who make a false image of Him, He will punish those who, according to 20:5, "hate me."

When we reinvent God in our image, when we **prune off parts** we don't like and elevate parts we do like... **God calls that hatred** of Him.

And what it exposes in us when we do this is that we really hate who He actually is. **We don't want** to come to God humbly and submit before Him, asking His design for ourselves and how life should work...No no no. We want Him to come to us and submit to our desire for Him and how He should work.

But as anyone who's ever had a close friendship or is married, we know full well that's not how relationships work. We don't make demands on what another person ought to be. To use them and distort them and make them fit our mold, according to the Bible, is to hate them. It's a rejection of the whole person.

To give you an illustration. Suppose it's a normal work week and I come home from work after a long day. And my wife Lucy has been watching the kids all day, which for the record, is a huge blessing to me and I'm so thankful for that. But then she asks me how my day was, and I say something to the effect of, "Yea it was good, but would you mind watching the kids just a little bit longer?" She may be annoyed by that but she may say, "Yea I can watch the kids a little bit longer sure that's fine." Then let's say it's 6pm and she needs help with the kids at the dinner table, and she says, "Honey can I get some help here?" And I say, "I'm a bit tied up, can you watch the kids a bit longer?" Well then 7:30 rolls around and the kids are noticeably running around the house, things are falling over, our littlest is crying hysterically and my wife is pleading for my help and I say while staring at my phone scrolling through Instagram, "Honey I love you so much but you're the best person for this job, not me, you got this!"

Question. How do you think that's going to go for my relationship? Terribly. Because at the end of the day, I'm just using her to get something I want, and it ends up destroying our relationship altogether. My love for her in reality is hatred because I'm not respecting her as a person. My call to be in relationship with her is to love her in all her fullness, to partner with her, and to cherish her.

And this is what God says happens when you create a false image of Him. What God is saying is you're using me to get what you want. You're not loving me according to who I am. What you're really doing is hating me.

But here's the thing - when we love a false image of God, a God that we've made in our own image, He

actually becomes pretty weak and frail because He ends up being just a slightly bigger version of you, He's no longer the omnipotent God of the Universe, He's a God that you can manage.

But your God cannot handle the test of time for too long. It's inevitable that this fake God that you've propped up for yourself will eventually disappoint you.

If you remake God into thinking He's all about giving you **comfort and happiness**, then the moment hardship comes your way your tiny, frail God falls apart and you walk away from Him completely. **OR** If you believe God exists to give me what I want - like a spouse - but then you don't get what you want, you get upset with Him and walk away." But do you know what really happened? You walked away from a fake God. You were worshipping a God of romance and comfort, you weren't worshipping the God of the Bible.

Or, if you remake God into thinking He can be explained away to suit your **cultural preferences**, then the moment someone says something that bucks up against it, or who has differing theological preferences you know what happens? You become self-righteous and judgemental of other people because you've created a fake god who is explainable and always on your side. Or what often happens, you run into something you have no explanation for and so you deconstruct and walk away from your puny fake God.

Or if you remake God into thinking He's okay and comfortable with **your sin**, you know what happens? You become a person who slowly and slowly doesn't repent of your sin, who gets angry anytime someone who loves Jesus and loves you calls you out on your sin so you tune them out, and your blind spots grow larger and larger until your sin - whether that be your pride, or greed, or apathy, or lust, ends up destroying you before you know it. **OR** if you believe God is gracious with other people's sins but not yours, over time the shame and guilt of what you've done because to crush you because your fake god is neither gracious nor forgiving.

In all these things, your deformed version of God ends up deforming you.

Karl Barth

If our God never contradicts us, or makes us mad, then we are likely not worshipping him, but a reflection of ourselves.

When we set up a false image of God we end up setting ourselves up for an avalanche of disappointment and failure because at the end of the day what we're really doing is putting ourselves on the throne, not God.

Part 3 - ...and here's why Jesus is good news for you

But if you want to really know God, you need to be willing to let God say things to you through His Word and through His people that you don't want to hear. To hear things that just might upset you, because it's good for you. Because if you let God speak into your life what He's really about even if you're feeling upset or offended, on the other side of that is healing and deeper intimacy.

Tim Keller

Only the faith that believes God regarding things it doesn't want to hear can believe God about the things it desperately does want to hear.

God's love. God's forgiveness. God's kindness. God's power. God's control. It requires hearing everything about God, not just certain parts.

- If you are here this morning and you desperately want to hear that **God loves you** and is with you and will never forsake you, then that includes listening to the same God who will also inevitably offend your sensibilities from time to time. It requires being open to people in our church family who love you and care for you enough to call you back to Scriptures when you're off. But you don't get the option to pick and choose.
- Maybe you're here this morning and you're wracked by guilt or shame or anxiety and you desperately want to cling to the God of peace, who is in control over all things, then it also requires that you accept even the parts of Scriptures that you don't like, because that's good for us. Even if you don't feel like it.

Only when we see Him rightly can we experience real intimacy and relationship with a God who is greater than us. Only then can we experience a life more and more in His presence. Only then, when we allow Him to shape us into His image and not the other way around, can we begin to walk in a life filled with the Spirit - full of love and joy and peace and we, in the process begin to look more and more like Jesus.

Jesus is calling us not to look within ourselves to figure out who He is. He says you lift your eyes up to me.

Colossians 1:15 says this of Jesus:

Colossians 1:15
He is the image of the invisible God

Notice that word: image. Jesus is the image of God. In Exodus God said, "You will not make any images of me." Instead, God out of his love and grace towards you says, "Instead, if you really want to know who I am, let me show you an image of myself, His name is Jesus.

We have something the Israelites didn't have 3,000 years ago, we have Jesus, the image of invisible God. We don't have to guess and try to figure out who God is, Jesus puts that on full display for us.

In Jesus we see the beautiful mosaic of all of God's attributes:

- We see Him as fully God with all power and wisdom AND we see Him being born in a manger as a helpless vulnerable child
- We see him confronting people stubbornly stuck in their sin, and we see Jesus compassionate with those who know their need a Savior for their sin. He's both!
- We see him confront the woman caught in adultery in John 8, showing forgiveness and mercy towards her sexual sin. And we see that same Jesus call her to repentance.
- We see Jesus filled with gentleness towards the weak, the poor, the destitute and the broken and the very same Jesus who is filled with righteous anger towards those who defile His temple
- We see Jesus, with His disciples on the mount of transfiguration shining in all his brilliance and glory - His full God-ness on display and just a few chapters later, we see Jesus on the mount of crucifixion in all his humility and glory dying, abandoned on the Cross for our sin.

If you really want to see Jesus, look at Good Friday and Easter Sunday to see who God is and what He is really like, because

- On the Cross, we see a God who is loving AND a God who is Holy
- We see a God who hates sin AND a God who goes to great lengths to bring you into His family
- A God who loves you where you are AND a God who loves you enough to call you towards repentance and truth
- A God who allowed Himself to be crushed by your sin AND a God who conquered death because

sin could not hold Him down

And when you receive Him and follow Him in all His fullness and His glory, here's what happens: His image begins to radiate off of you. You become what you worship, and when you worship Jesus, the image of the invisible God, He begins to remake you to look more like Him. The peace of God, the joy of God, the love of God, the patience of God, the holiness of God, all of that becomes accessible to you as we begin to reject more and more our false images of God and gaze at the beauty of Jesus, the perfect image of God.

This is the God we worship. This is who we are called to believe. To close the gap between who we think God is and who He really is. To know that God is greater than our own image of Him and that's the best thing for us.

Pray.