

II: Making No Idols

If you've got a bible, go with me to **Deuteronomy, chapter 5**. In 2016, a popular Christian author and blogger named **Glennon Doyle** announced a separation from her husband of fourteen years. Three months *later*, she announced that she had fallen in love with a female soccer star. Shortly after *that* announcement, she and the soccer star were married. In a post online informing her 600,000 online followers of all of this, Doyle said this, seemingly trying to get ahead of the inevitable pushback she would get about her decision:

Please don't pretend to know what God thinks of us. Please think deeply about the chasm-wise difference between leaving a man and leaving God. Please remember that when a woman leaves, she just brings God with her. She then goes on to say: *...we are women who have become far too wise to believe in shame.*

Now, I don't pretend to know much of *anything* about Glennon Doyle's life. I don't know hardly anything about her *previous* marriage—about how healthy or unhealthy it was, about what they were going through, or about whether they should or shouldn't have split up. I also don't know much about the intricacies of her *current* marriage. I do know what the Scriptures teach about marriage in *general*, and I know that much of this current marriage wouldn't align with that. But other than that, I simply do not know. But to be honest, what I am far more interested in dissecting is the view of *God* she set forward in that quote. In her words, “when a woman leaves [her husband], she just takes *God with her*.”

Regardless of how you feel about Glennon Doyle, I would argue **that statement is actually fairly representative** of the way a *lot* of people *think* about God. Even some self-proclaimed *Christians*. It's **the functional belief that at the end of the day, the decisions that we make—even major, life-altering decisions—are of little actual concern to God**. The *specifics* of them, at least. The functional belief is that God is *there* in the background of our lives. And there, he stands ready to go *along* with and even *applaud* whatever decisions we feel led to make, regardless of how ill-conceived or out of line they are with the teaching of the Scriptures. We just, in Glennon *Doyle's* words, “take God with us” wherever we choose to go.

There's **two metaphors** I've heard for describing this approach to a relationship with God. One is “God as **cheerleader**.” If you ever watch a sporting event, you'll notice that the incredible thing about cheerleaders is that they are *always* on your side. If you've ever

seen the videos online of cheerleaders cheering right after their own team fumbles, you know this. Cheerleaders are *perpetual* optimists, at least while they're on the field. They're *always* going to be excited for you, they're always going to be cheering you on, and they're going to applaud most anything you do. Some people, from what I've seen, tend to think about *God* like that. He's just perpetually cheering us on. He just *believes* in you. And no matter what decision you make, and no matter how poorly conceived that decision was, he's there to applaud you in it. Now, for clarity, the Scriptures *do* say that God is "for" us, as followers of Jesus.¹ But by that, they don't mean he blindly cosigns anything we do. They mean that he is *for* our ultimate *good*, as we *follow* him.

The other metaphor I've heard used the "God as *consultant*" metaphor. So if you've ever worked for a company where they hired an outside consultant, you know the way this works. The consultant gets access to the company and company culture. And then the expectation is that they will speak into the things the company does, and give input on how to make things better; how to *improve* things, as a result. But usually, the thing about hiring a consultant is that the company is under no actual obligation to do *anything* the consultant recommended. Like, at all. They can ignore *everything* if they want to. Some people, I think, treat God like *that*. He's a *consultant*. So he's worth seeking out when you feel like you need wisdom or advice or thoughts on how to improve things in your life; but you're under no obligation to listen to much of anything he says. To *implement* any of the feedback he gave you. He's just one of many advisory resources available to you.

And truth be told, there are probably *other* apt metaphors out there that we could use. There's God as cheerleader; God as consultant; God as life coach; God as therapist; God as enabler; God as Santa—he rolls in every once in a while with a bag of presents...and the list goes on. **But here's the problem with *all* of those conceptions of God: none of them are *accurate*.** At least not on their own. *None* of them give us a full, accurate picture of who God actually *is*. *All* of them are just conjured up from our imagination and preferences about what God is like, rather than the *description* of God we find in the Scriptures.

And *that*, in many ways, is what the *second commandment* cautions us against. So let's read the commandment in its entirety, and then we'll spend some time unpacking what it means. This is Deuteronomy 5, starting in v. 8. God says, through Moses:

¹ See Romans 8.

8 “You shall not **make for yourself an image** in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. **9** You shall not bow **down to them or worship them**; for I, the **Lord your God**, am a **jealous God**, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who **hate me**, **10** but showing **love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments**.

So I would *guess*, that for a lot of us, **the latter half** of that passage **really stands out**—the part about God “punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.” That part probably puzzles, or maybe even *bothers*, a lot of us when we read it. And we’re going to work our way *to* that part of the passage. But before we get there, I just want to make sure we understand what the commandment as a whole is about. Then, we’ll make sure we’re correctly understanding the more confusing *parts of* it. Sound good?

Okay. So upon first read, *this* commandment **sounds fairly similar to last week’s** commandment. *Last* week we read, “you shall have no other *gods* before me.” This week we read, “you shall not make for yourself [any] *images*.” And there is some overlap between them, to be sure. But here’s how I would describe the difference. And this isn’t original to me; I actually borrowed it directly from a book by Kevin DeYoung.² He draws the distinction between the first and second commandment like *this*. He says **if the first commandment** (the one from last week) **is against worshiping the wrong gods, the second commandment** (this week’s) **is against worshiping the right God, in the wrong way**. *This* commandment is about interacting with God in the way *we* want, rather than in the way *he* wants. It’s about worshiping God *as we want* him to be, rather than *as he is*. **We could say, it’s about worshiping a projection in our minds of God, rather than the God revealed to us in the Scriptures**. Make sense so far?

Okay. Now, **in ancient Israel**, doing that took the form of what the passage says: people would carve and fashion “idols”—small, physical objects—that were meant to be *stand-ins* for the god they worshiped. This is the way most ancient cultures operated. They would focus their attention and imagination on these carved images as they worshiped. And since the Israelites—God’s people—came *from one of* those ancient cultures in Egypt, many of them might have *assumed* that they should also do that with the God of the *bible*. That they should carve and create a physical representation of God to be the object of their worship. But *God* says in the second commandment, “I don’t want you to do that with me. You do not need to create idols, representations of me.”

² Book available [here](#)

Now, here's the thing: **in today's day and age,** I highly doubt that many of us have a carved image of God that we focus our worship on. At least not here in the States. *Maybe you do—maybe in your room at home, you have your bobblehead LeBron, your bobblehead Joe Milton, and then bobblehead Jesus right next to them. And when you pray, you pray to bobblehead Jesus. And if that's you, you can consider this commandment your official invitation to stop doing that.* But I would guess that it doesn't take *that form* for the bulk of us today. That's not really how we roll.

But **at the same time, I would just about guarantee** that at one point or another, you **have found yourself worshipping God as you wanted him to be, rather than as he is.** Am I wrong? I mean, I certainly have. I would just about guarantee you that we've all been guilty at some point of worshipping a *projection* of God we came up with, rather than the God revealed to us clearly in the Scriptures. We've interacted with God as primarily a *cheerleader*, or God as a *consultant*, or God as a *therapist*, or something else along those lines—some sort of *caricatured* image of God. And *when* we do that, two things happen: it *limits* God's presence in our lives, and it *shortchanges* us from knowing the *real* God. And if we've ever found ourselves in *that* situation, I think the second commandment is actually very, very *relevant* to us.

Because **whether you realize it or not,** **what you believe about God is perhaps the most important thing about you.** If for no other reason than this: **what you believe about God often shapes the type of person you become.** Here's how the late theologian J.I. Packer once put it:

We tend, by a secret law of the soul, to move toward our mental image of God. [...] Were we able to extract from any man a complete answer to the question, 'What comes to mind when you think about God?' we might predict with certainty the spiritual future of that man."

Our future—who we *become*—is derived largely from who we believe God to be. Here's the other way I've heard it said: **we become like what we behold.** Which means that there are few more important things in the *world* (theologically *and* practically) than what we think about God. **To list out just a couple examples.** If *God to you* is primarily an angry, hyper-conservative fundamentalist—an angry deity in the sky who goes around yelling at all the people not currently living the right way—that will turn you into a certain type of person as a result of believing that. It will cause you to *interact* with the world around you in a certain way as a result. If you believe God is a West-coast, hyper-educated, uber-tolerant *progressive*—*that* too will turn you into a certain type of

person as a result. If you think of God, as we mentioned earlier, as a type of “life coach”—someone who’s just there to support you, sign off on all your choices at all times, and remind you to “be kinder to yourself”—*that* will shape you into a certain type of person as a result.

In his fantastic book *God Has a Name*, author **John Mark Comer** puts it this way:

The ISIS terrorist beheading the infidel, the prosperity gospel celebrity preacher getting out of his Hummer after late-night drinks with Kanye West, the Westboro Baptist picket outside a military funeral screaming “God hates f—s!”, the Hindu sacrificing a goat to Shiva, the African witch doctor sacrificing a little boy, the U.S. Army sniper praying to God before he takes the shot, the peace activist risking her neck to stop another war because she believes in Jesus’ teachings on enemy love, the gay singer who stands up at the Grammys and says thank you to God for his song about a one-night stand, the Catholic nun giving up a “normal life” to live in poverty and work for social change—all of these men and women do what they do because of what they believe about God.

What you believe about God is **massively important. Who you perceive God to be is **massively important**.** So it becomes *essential*, then, for any of us who claim to follow Jesus, to ensure that the picture we have in our heads of who God *is*, is the *right* picture. To ensure that we are at least moving *toward* a *correct* picture. To ensure that that picture is more formed by the Scriptures—by who *God* reveals *himself* to be—than it is formed by our own preferences and perceptions (or by the culture *around* us and the things *they* value). Hence why the second commandment is so very important for us to understand.

Put another way, there are **massive consequences** for who you believe God to be. Both for getting it *right*, and for getting it *wrong*. And that, I would argue, is actually what the **second half of the commandment** is all about. That *odd* part we mentioned earlier about future generations. So let’s spend some time breaking this down. God says first, **“for I, the Lord your God, am a *jealous* God, *punishing* the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me...”** So we hear that as modern, individualistic Americans and go “that doesn’t seem *fair*.” For God to punish the children for the sins of their parents? That doesn’t seem “just” to us. So what is this part of the text saying? Is God saying that future generations will suffer, simply because their ancestors sinned?

My answer to that question would actually be “no,” and also, “yes.” Let me explain. No, in the sense that when you choose to follow Jesus, you’re not going to get to heaven and hear God say “well, you did pretty good—but your granddad? He was a piece of work. Your great-grandma? I’ve got beef with her, so unfortunately your access to heaven has been denied.” That’s not what the commandment is saying. God makes it clear elsewhere that the bulk of the punishment for a person’s sins will be on them, and not on their descendents. Take a look, for example, at this from Ezekiel:

*The one who sins is the one who will die. The child will not share the guilt of the parent, nor will the parent share the guilt of the child. The righteousness of the righteous will be credited to them, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against them.*³

So in one sense, no. Future generations will not be held accountable or liable for the sins of their ancestors. That’s not how it works. But in a different sense, there are often consequences for future generations, of their parents’ and grandparents’ and great-grandparents’ sins. So think about a couple scenarios with me. Let’s say your granddad was a really tough man. And I don’t mean “tough” as in he suffered well through the difficulties of life—I mean tough as in he was a very difficult person to be around. He expected a lot from people—arguably too much. Especially from his family. Let’s say he was very quick to jump down the throat of anyone who crossed him, or even anyone who he perceived to be crossing him. Let’s say that led to various types of verbal, emotional, maybe even physical abuse towards members of his own family.

Okay well if that’s the case with him, I would imagine that’s going to have a significant impact on his kids—right? Either they’re going to live in a constant state of fear and anxiety about accidentally crossing their dad, or they’re going to grow up thinking that that’s how a man should behave, and emulating that behavior—or pursuing romantic relationships with men who embody that behavior. And any of that, is going to impact their kids’ lives in return. And that’s probably going to impact how those kids treat their kids. And so on. There are absolutely negative consequences of one generation’s sins on the generations after them.

I’ll give you another example. Let’s say that your mom or grandma grew up thinking that her physical appearance was the most important thing about a woman. Like that’s all that matters. She at some point decided that the most important things in life were a person’s weight and the clothing that they wear and the way they present themselves in

³ Ezekiel 18:20

public. That's what she believed or *believes*. And let's say that in a number of different ways—implicit or explicit—she ends up communicating those beliefs about life to *you*, her son or daughter, *grandson* or *granddaughter*. Chances are, *that's* going to have an impact on how *you* think about *yourself*—is it not? That's going to influence how you approach life, how you view others, what you think is most important to spend time and money on. And I would imagine, in some way, it's probably going to impact *your* kids and how they think about *themselves* too. Either in the same way, or as a knee-jerk *reaction* to all of that.

Now, I *do* think it's **very important that we realize**: none of that is necessarily God *punishing* you for your parents' sin. But at the same time, it absolutely should be *sobering* to us. Especially those of us that *have* kids or *want* to have kids one day. And to be honest, even if you *don't* plan to have kids one day, it should be sobering to you for this simple reason: **our sin never impacts just us. There is always collateral damage to us choosing things other than God. To us choosing to perceive of God in incorrect ways. Our sin always impacts those around us, especially those closest to us—whether we realize it's happening or not.**

So **while this passage may not be saying** what it *appears* to say at a surface-level reading, I still think it contains a powerful word of *caution* for us. The *caution* being that there are always *consequences* for our sin—for *us*, and for others. And more *specifically* to our topic this *morning*, there are consequences of forming incorrect pictures in our minds of who God is and the types of things he cares about. All of that has an impact. On us, and on future generations after us.

And, **don't miss the rest of the sentence**. It's actually very important for understanding the meaning. It says that God punishes "*the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation...of those who hate me...*" That's very important context. God is not just talking about visiting the sin of the parents on the children in general, for every single human being on earth—Christian or not. He's talking about doing that for both parents *and* children "...that *hate* him." People that *reject* God and choose to run after other things instead. God is saying that for *those* people, there are long-lasting (and sometimes, *generational*) consequences. Does that make sense?

But—whatever you do—be sure you do not miss the contrast in the next part of the passage. God says all of that about the impact of *sin* on future generations. But then he says this: "...**but showing love**—remember this is talking about who God is. "Showing love..." **to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.**" Notice that the contrast between someone's *sin* impacting "three or four generations,"

and God's love and compassion extending to a "thousand" generations. Do you hear the difference? Notice that while God *does* judge, while he *does* show wrath, while he *does* respond swiftly to injustice and sin...still, according to the Scriptures, that's not *who he is*. God *has* wrath, but God *is* love. And, you *could* even argue, his *wrath* is an *outworking of his perfect* love. God will punish, God will allow consequences of sin—but he *longs* to show compassion. He longs to extend his mercy and grace toward all who know and follow him. That's the *essence* of who God is: *love*. Not *love* as we define it, but *true* love as *he* defines it. 1 John tells us that God *is* love.⁴ Which brings us *back* to the second commandment as a *whole*: understanding who God actually *is*. This commandment is God saying, **in essence, 'I want you to worship me, not as you imagine me to be, not as you wish that I was—but as I really am.'**

And you know, it's interesting: **that very idea** (worshiping God for who he really is) is actually embedded in the very language of the passage. It's right smack in the middle of the commandment—it's just easy to miss if you don't know what you're looking for. I'll show you. The passage says this, in v. 9:

You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God...
(and it goes on from there...)

Okay, I'll give you a quick **bible reading tip**. Everytime you read the word "LORD" in your bibles, and it's formatted in all caps like that—that's telling us that the author has actually used **God's proper name**. Did you know God has a proper name? **I don't know that I knew this until well into my journey of following Jesus**. God has a *proper* name. And believe it or not, it's not "God." *God*, in the ancient world, was actually not a very descriptive word. We mentioned this last week, but *everybody* back then had *gods*. **If you told someone back in the day that you worshiped "God," people would respond with "cool, me too. Which one do you worship?"** Gods were everywhere, or at least people thought they were. Gods were a dime a dozen.

Which is why **at a very key moment in Israel's history**, God actually gives Moses his *proper* name.⁵ He tells Moses the *essence* of who he is. And then later, he tells it to God's *people* as a whole. **He tells his people, not just that he is God, but specifically what kind of God he is**. He tells them that he goes by the name **Yahweh**. I won't walk you through all the quasi-technical details, but **Yahweh, in the original language, means something like "I am, who I am."** It means "I will be who I will be." Or, if we wanted to expand it a little, we could put it like this: **I will show myself to be who you've always**

⁴ 1 John 4:8

⁵ See Exodus 3:14

known me to be. Now, maybe to you that sounds somewhat *redundant*, or somewhat *ambiguous*. Maybe it sounds like it doesn't really provide very much additional information.

But before you assume *that*, I want you to try and **put yourself in the story** for just a moment. As Eric mentioned last week, Israel had just been rescued out of a horrendous situation: they were enslaved by a brutal Pharaoh in Egypt. And right when things seemed like they could not get any worse, God brought them *out* of Egypt with a mighty hand and outstretched arm. *Pharaoh*, who claimed to *be* a god, was changing his mind by the day on whether or not he would let the Israelites leave: one day he said he would, the next day he would change his mind. And then, change his mind again. And again. But then, right at the moment they needed it most, God *rescued* them.

And so **knowing that**, once again, put yourself in the story. **You're an ancient Israelite**. You've been rescued out of something horrific that your ancestors have been stuck in for *generations*. But to be honest, things right now don't seem so great *either*. You're wandering around, a bit lost in the desert. You've got the same thing to eat every day. It's this thing called *manna*, from the sky. And you're kinda wondering if this God who brought you *out* of Egypt maybe changes *his* mind like *Pharaoh* does. You're wondering if he actually has a plan. And if he *does* have a plan, if it's even a *good* one. And sometimes you're just not sure. **And in one of these moments of doubt and uncertainty...Moses comes down from the mountain where he's been meeting with God, and he says to you, "here's what God told us to call him: *Yahweh*." He said "he is who he is." *He will be who he said he will be. He will continue to be who he's always been: a rescuer. A deliverer. A savior. Do you think maybe...that could put a bit of strength in your bones?* I think it certainly *could*.**

But **even if you're not so sure** about *that*, let me try to bring it down one more level to you and me, and our lives today. Let's say you're a little bit like *me*. Which means that *most* days, you've got a genuine desire in you to follow Jesus; you *like* that idea. You're on board with it. But also, there are quite a *few* moments—maybe more of them than you'd like to admit—where you're just not completely sure. Where you look at the circumstances in your life. You look at the things you *have*, and all the things you *don't* have. You think about where you *thought* you'd be at this point in your life, what you *thought* your life would look like, and then you look at what it *is*.

You **take a survey of all of that stuff** and, if you're entirely honest, you think: *I don't know about this. Does it work like God said it would work? Does stuff work out the way he said it would work out?* And in those vulnerable moments you ask, consciously or

subconsciously: *is God really who he says that he is?* Is God the type of God that I've been *believing* him to be? If you've been following Jesus long, and you're honest with yourself, I would bet that you've probably asked a version of that question before. And I believe with everything in me, that in those moments, if you'll listen...I believe he is speaking back to you: *Yahweh. I am who I am. I will be, who I said I will be. I will continue to be, who I've always, always, been.* Yahweh. That's who our God is.

And so **what God is saying, here in the second commandment**, I believe, is an *invitation*. The invitation sounds something like this: **don't worship me as you want me to be. Don't worship me as you would like for me to be. Don't worship a projection of yourself who you think is me. Worship me, as I really am. So I want everybody to look right at me for a second, if you don't mind. Because I think every single one of us need to hear this—especially me. You ready? The God of the bible is so much better than who your flesh wants him to be. The God of the bible is so much better than anything you or I could think up. He's so much kinder than any picture we have in our minds of what kindness is. He's so much better than any picture we have in our minds of what good is. And what he wants to do with your life is so much better than what you could want out of your life.**

You **want some honesty?** There have been so many times in my life where I thought I knew *exactly* what I wanted my life to be, from that point forward. Where I thought I knew exactly what my life was *going* to be, from that point forward. And every time, God has come along, and he has blown the whole thing up entirely. And you know what? What *he* made it into has been *better*. There have been so many times that I thought I knew exactly who God wanted *City Church* to be. And can I tell you, every single time, God has come along and blown *that* up too. He did it again last week. And you know what? *Every single time* it has been better than what I thought I wanted *City Church* to be. *Every. Single. Time.*

Now, I **certainly don't mean it's been easier** than what I wanted it to be. I certainly *don't* mean it's been more *comfortable*. I don't mean it's been more *ideal* or more *enjoyable*. I don't think God promises us those things—at least not in the bible I'm reading. **But here's what he does promise. He promises that a life lived with him, is better than a life lived without him. A life lived walking daily by the power of his Spirit is better than a life without that. The real God is worth more than one thousand faulty projections of God. And because he loves us, he's not going to let those who follow him settle for a conjured up image of himself, when only the real God will do.**

And **that, in essence, is why God sent Jesus.** John 1—Jesus arrives onto the scene. The gospel writer John describes that moment like this:

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Most theologians would say that's the New Testament writer John referencing the very essence of who God is. *Yahweh*. "Showing love to a *thousand generations* of those who keep my commandments." *That* God—the God that brought Israel out of Egypt, the God who makes his presence known to them in the wilderness, the God who is the same yesterday, today, and forever—is the God who extends his hand for a relationship with us through his son, Jesus.

So for followers of Jesus, I would argue there are **a few things we need** if we are going to operate out of an *accurate* perception of who God is. We're going to need regular time in the Scriptures, where we can be reminded of precisely who God is and what he's like. We're going to need Spirit-filled community—other followers of Jesus who we've given the freedom to tell us when we're operating out of a *false* understanding of God. People who can say "hey I don't think that's true." "I'm not sure that's accurate."

But **underneath it all, we need a vision of Jesus**—the glory of the one and only son from the Father—*full of grace* and truth. So **every week as a community**, we participate in one simple, profound act to reset ourselves on the person of Jesus. We go to the tables, and we take the bread and the cup. Those two things are representative of the body and blood of Jesus, which was shed for us on the cross, to demonstrate to us who God really is. What he's really like. The cross is the clearest demonstration of all of that. So if you're a follower of Jesus in the room, you're invited to participate in that with us as we respond.

Let's pray.