

Word #2: Have you cut God down to size?

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 26 July 2026

Preacher: Brian King

[0:00] Let's pray as we begin. Heavenly Father, though we cannot see you with our eyes, there was a young woman in China who became an internet sensation.

Her videos were heartbreaking. With tears and great emotion, she told how she had been abandoned as a little girl and taken in by a foster mother who struggled with mental illness. And now, years later, the roles had reversed. The little girl had grown up and she was caring for the woman who at once cared for her.

People couldn't get enough of the story. They followed her online. They cried watching her videos. They sent money. They cheered her on.

If you had asked any of those followers, do you know who she is? They would probably have said, yes, I do. But then things started to unravel.

[1:25] Investigators began asking questions. They pulled at a few loose threads. And eventually, the whole story fell apart. It turns out that the foster mother wasn't a foster mother at all.

She was her biological mother. Much of the suffering had been made up. Scene after scene had been carefully scripted to win sympathy, followers, and donations.

And yes, this is a true story. But here is what fascinates me. It wasn't just that she had lied.

It was how she lied. She crafted an image of herself. She decided how she wanted to be known.

And then she placed that carefully crafted image between herself and the world.

And when the truth came out, people didn't just feel deceived. They felt betrayed. Not simply because some facts were wrong, but because they realized they had fallen in love with a picture.

[2:36] But that picture wasn't the person. Now, before we are too hard on her, isn't there something in that instinct that feels uncomfortably familiar?

Most of us are not inventing dramatic backstories, but we all know what it's like to curate ourselves.

We choose the flattering photo. We tell the story that makes us look a little bit better.

We quietly leave out the awkward bits. We manage the impression we leave behind. But this

morning, scripture is going to tell us that our problem runs deeper than that.

Because our greatest act of image management isn't something we do on Facebook or Instagram.

It isn't even something we do with one another.

We do it with God. We don't only curate ourselves, but God. We fashion versions of Him that we can live with.

[3:46] Versions that fit our preferences, our comfort, our plans. But today, God Himself will come and blow that all out of the water.

For the second word essentially says, God will not be curated. He alone determines how He is to be known.

Let me read to you again Exodus 20, starting from verse 1. And God spoke all these words. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

You shall have no other gods before me. 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.

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, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

[4:59] Last week, God told us whom we must worship. He alone is the one true God and He will tolerate no rivals. That was the first word in verses 1 to 3.

But now we have the second word in verses 4 to 6. And on first reading, we might ask, wait a minute, is God just repeating Himself?

Don't have any other gods before me? Don't make for yourself any images? They're the same thing, right? Well, not quite.

If the first word teaches us whom we worship, then the second word teaches us how He is to be known. Or as Kevin the Young puts it, if the first commandment is against worshipping the wrong God, the second commandment is against worshipping God in the wrong way.

And that really is the subject matter at hand today. So this morning, I want to show you how to live by the second word. If we want to do so, then there are three things we should do.

[6:13] Firstly, don't cut God down to size. Secondly, let God tell you who He is. And thirdly, behold the true image of God.

So firstly, don't cut God down to size. Look again at verse 4. You shall not make for yourself an image.

That's the basic command. During the time Exodus was written, people made all kinds of images to represent their gods. Some were shaped like people, some like animals, some like trees or heavenly bodies like the sun and the moon.

Now that doesn't mean they literally thought that their God looked like a bull or an eagle. Rather, each image was meant to capture something about what they thought their God was like.

So for example, a lion might represent strength. The sun might represent life and power. The image was a way of expressing what they believed that God was like.

[7:24] And really, at its core, it was an attempt to pin the divine down. To have something you can point to. Something you can handle.

But now, in the second word, God says, you can't do what your neighbors are doing. Not at all. In fact, did you notice how comprehensive the ban is?

God says you can't make an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or the waters below. So basically, that's the ancient way of saying the whole created order from top to bottom.

Whether it's birds, bees, fish, sun, moon, or stars, nothing in all creation is fit to stand in for the creator.

The maker of everything cannot be represented by anything he has made. Now, let's be clear.

[8:31] Some Christians have taken this verse to mean a blanket ban on any kind of art, especially in church. But God is not against art or beauty.

If you were to look at the mercy seat in Exodus 25, you would notice that there are cherubim sculpted onto it. The key lies in the way this second commandment is worded.

Notice the link between verses 4 and 5. What is God warning against in particular? What he is warning against is for us to make those images specifically to bow down to them and to serve and worship them.

So what God forbids is not art in itself, but art turned into an object or channel of worship. Now, that word I just used, channel, is very important.

Because God is not just saying, don't adopt the idols of other nations. Rather, he is saying, don't try to worship even the true God through an image of your own making.

[9:51] You might sincerely believe that you are honoring the one true God and still break this commandment because you are approaching him in ways he never authorized.

You see, can you actually worship the true God falsely? The answer is yes. In fact, scripture gives us one prominent example occurring just 12 chapters later in Exodus 32.

In Exodus 32, Moses is still on the mountain receiving these very stone tablets carrying these 10 words. He has yet to come down.

Meanwhile, at the foot of Sinai, the people are growing restless. So Aaron decides to take their gold and make a calf. Now, watch closely what Aaron thinks he's doing.

Once the calf is finished, he doesn't declare some grand worship service to Baal or to some new God of his own. Instead, verse 5, he announces tomorrow day will be a festival to the Lord.

[11:07] to Yahweh, to the God who brought them out of Egypt. So Aaron isn't trying to swap Yahweh for an idol.

Instead, he's trying to give Yahweh a face, a God you can see, a God you can touch, a God whom you can even carry in a parade. And what is heaven's verdict on this sincere act of worship?

The mountain burns, the calf is ground to powder, and before the day is over, 3,000 lie dead, and Moses is pleading with God not to consume the whole nation on the spot.

Because this is not an oversight, it is a violation of the second commandment, and it nearly cost Israel their existence.

But why? Why is God so against us making any images of him? There's actually one very simple but significant reason.

[12 : 20] It's because every image we make ourselves cuts God down to size. Let's take that example of the golden calf.

what might it communicate? Well, a bull speaks of strength, fertility, and raw power. And yes, God indeed is strong.

So in that sense, the calf says something true about God. He's strong. But look at everything the bull does not say.

Where in that gleaming statue is his holiness? Where is his mercy? Where is his knowledge? In Isaiah 40, God compares himself with idols that people make and he asks, with whom then will you compare God?

To what image will you liken him? And the answer is crystal clear. No image can ever fully capture God.

[13 : 28] It will always shrink him, reduce him, diminish him. Indeed, Tim Keller puts it particularly well. He says, any picture of God we make will always conceal more than it reveals.

So he says, suppose you try to paint God's face. Is he smiling or frowning? You must choose one. a canvas cannot hold both.

Paint the smile and you have hidden his righteous anger against evil. Your God now beams indulgently at cruelty and abuse. Paint the frown and you have hidden his grace and tenderness. Your God now glares at his children even when they come home. You see, there's no way of getting around the fact that you will cut God down to size.

That's why the second commandment makes sure we don't have editing rights over God. For if we did, we would not just cut him down to size, but we would almost certainly make him fit our own image of him.

[14 : 46] Did you notice in verse 4 that little phrase, for yourself? You shall not make for yourself an image.

So the emphasis isn't simply on making an object, it's on taking the initiative yourself. You choose the material, you choose the design, you decide what to include and what to leave out.

In other words, you curate God. You are no longer letting him tell you who he is. Instead, you remake him as you would like him to be.

And that is not merely Israel's problem, it is the universal instinct of the fallen human heart. That is exactly Paul's diagnosis in Romans 1.

Humanity exchanges the glory of the immortal God for images. Left to ourselves, we do not receive God's self-revelation, we replace it with representations of our own making.

[15 : 56] Or as John Calvin once famously observed, the human heart is a perpetual factory of idols. So, this morning, God's word asks us, have we cut God down to size?

Have we curated God in this way? true, we might not melt gold anymore to build physical images, but we can still build images in our minds.

So, perhaps you have built a gentle cosmic therapist, always affirming, endlessly understanding, whose greatest goal is your self-esteem and who would never dream of calling your behavior sin. that image conceals his holiness. Or perhaps you have built a harsh heavenly accountant, someone with arms folded, keeping meticulous score of every failure, quick to punish, and slow to forgive.

That image conceals his grace, and leaves you exhausted and ashamed. Or perhaps you've built a genie, a cosmic cheerleader whose main job is to bless your plans, grow your platform, and make your dreams come true.

[17 : 22] That image conceals his lordship. Each of these images might reveal a partial truth, but each conceals far more than it reveals.

They are God cut down to a size we can manage. God as we prefer him, not as he has revealed himself. And just like how we dislike it whenever someone projects their image of us onto the real us, so God dislikes it when we project our image of him onto the real him.

Which brings us to the second way we live by the second word. Let God tell you who he is. Let God tell you who he is.

You see, God has just told us not to make images of him. But that doesn't mean we are stuck squinting at a God we can never quite make out. Because God does want to reveal himself. In fact, that is what Deuteronomy 4 is all about. So turn there with me for a moment. for it is here we get perhaps the clearest explanation of why God gave the second word.

[18:45] Let me set the context. Forty years after Sinai, Moses stands before the next generation and he takes them back to the day when the ten words were first given.

He says to them, do you remember what it was like at Sinai? The mountain was covered with blazing fire. But at the very same time, it was wrapped in thick darkness and cloud. Now that sounds almost contradictory, doesn't it? Fire gives light, darkness hides things. And that, Moses shows us, is exactly the point.

God is making himself known, but not in a way that could be captured or contained. That's why Israel saw the fire, but they never saw God himself.

So if we can't see God, how can we know him? Well, according to Moses, even though God didn't give us a picture of himself, he did give us something else.

[19:53] Verse 12. It should be on the screen. Then the Lord spoke to you out of the fire, you heard the sound of words, but so no form, there was only a voice.

So Moses' point to the people was this. When God wanted to make himself known, what did you see? Answer? Nothing. You saw no form, no shape, no figure.

Instead, all you heard was a voice. that is to say, God deliberately gave his word rather than an image.

And that's why Moses said you have the second commandment. That's his conclusion in Deuteronomy 4, verse 15 and 16. you saw no form of any kind the day the Lord spoke to you at Horeb, that's another name for Sinai, out of the fire.

Therefore, watch yourselves very carefully so that you do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape, whether form like a man or a woman.

[21:03] So here is the logic. You saw no form. Therefore, make no form. Simply let God tell you who he is.

Don't fill in with your chisel what God has chosen to reveal with his voice. That's why the God of Israel must have seemed so strange to all the surrounding nations.

every other temple in the ancient world gave you something to look at. Egypt, Babylon, and Canaan all had their images. But walk into the heart of Israel's sanctuary, and what would you find?

A box and inside it tablets of stone covered in words. You see, Israel was to be the people of the ear in a world obsessed with the eye.

Dear God, our God had not posed for a portrait. He had spoken. So, brothers and sisters, here's the other side of the coin.

[22:19] The second word isn't only asking you not to tell God what he should be like. It's also inviting you to let him tell you who he is.

You see, God really does want you to know him. But he chose to make himself known, not by what you can see, but by what he says. And that's why our worship together must be word centered, not we centered.

You know, come back to that golden calf with me. What was it really? It was worship the people cooked up for themselves, designed by the congregation for the congregation.

It was built to match the God of their imagination, to give them the God they wanted. But you and I don't gather to meet the God we've imagined.

We gather to meet the God as he actually is. And if he makes himself known by the word, by his word, then surely to borrow the language of our second core conviction, everything we do here must be driven by God's word.

[23:37] That's why when we gather together, we come to hear his word read, his word preached, his word sung into one another's hearts, and his word prayed back to him.

Because when you do that, you are no longer handing God a script, asking him to follow your direction, rather you are letting him tell you who he is, what he has done, and what he asks of you.

And you know that you are hearing the real God and not an echo of yourself when he says something that you would never have dared to make up.

Something like this, verses 5 and 6. Now, if it were up to you, would you ever have come up with those words?

I doubt it. As J.I. Packer once wrote, nobody would imagine a jealous God. To our ears, jealousy sounds like a flaw.

[24 : 59] It sounds exactly like the kind of thing we would want to edit out if we were curating God. So it is very unlikely his jealousy here is our projection.

Rather, it is his self-revelation. It is God telling us who he is, whether we like it or not. But what does it mean?

Why would God even describe himself in that way? Let's slow down to ponder this. Now, jealousy, it can take many different shades, can't it?

Most of them are ugly. So at work, we can be jealous of someone else's ability, salary, or popularity. And that jealousy can cause us to indulge in ungodly office politics, or bitter gossip, or something else equally terrible.

But not all jealousy is ugly. In its proper sense, jealousy is guarding what rightly belongs to you.

[26 : 06] So if a husband feels nothing when another man pursues his wife, he does not love her. He is indifferent. But if he is jealous for her, it is actually a sign of his love.

It is the fruit of marital affection. In that sense, jealousy is right. And that's why God describes himself as jealous.

God's jealousy is not petty insecurity, it is the fierce love of a husband who refuses to share his bride with rivals or let her settle for a cheap imitation of himself.

But what are we to make of the rest of verses 5 and 6? Again, it's not how we would imagine God, is it? But what is that about?

You know, sometimes people read verse 5 and get scared. Does God punish children for what their parents did? Does this mean that a family can be stuck under a curse?

[27 : 14] Or that some evil gets passed down the bloodline until someone breaks it? Now, if that's you, don't worry. These are not some sort of references to generational curses or demonic oppression.

You see, look carefully at the verse again. And notice, God doesn't say to the third and fourth generation and stop. Rather, he continues, of those who hate me.

So, God isn't targeting innocent grandchildren just for being born into some particular family. No.

He's talking about future generations who keep walking in the same rebellion their parents did.

He's talking about children who refuse to turn from their sin just like their father before them. So, God is talking not about those who inherit some sort of curse, but those who choose to maintain the same sinful lifestyle.

Indeed, God also makes clear elsewhere, as in Ezekiel 18, for example, that we will face God for our own sins, not our parents.

[28 : 33] God says. So, why does God say what he says? Well, think about it. What gets passed from one generation to the next more naturally than our picture of God?

Like it or not, our children see how we relate to God. And if we relate to God by cutting him down to size rather than letting him tell us who he really is, if we prefer to relate to God on our own terms rather than humbly listen to his word, that is going to have an adverse effect not just on us, but on our children too, wouldn't it?

They too are likely to relate to God in the same way and therefore suffer the same consequences. A distorted picture of God is one of the things that can easily outlive us.

But thankfully, we don't just have verse 5, but also verse 6. You see, did you notice the proportions? Judgment is the third and fourth generation, but his steadfast love extends to a thousand generations.

In other words, God's mercy far outweighs his judgment. That's the point, not the exact maths. He is not eager to judge.

[30 : 05] He delights to show his steadfast love. Yes, idolatry has consequences that can ripple through a family, but God's ultimate desire is not to pass on judgment.

His desire is to pass on covenant love, to generation after generation of those who love him, and keep his commandments. That is who he really is.

And we know this because in the end, God did not leave this to our imagination. Indeed, he did not even leave it to words alone.

God because God does not permit us to make images, he does provide the one true image of God.

And that brings us to the third and final way we live by the second word. Behold the true image of God. Listen to how the book of Hebrews opens.

[31:09] In the past, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days, he has spoken to us by his son.

So notice, God has never ever stopped speaking. But his final fullest word is no mere sentence. Rather, it is the very son of God himself. And who is this son? Hebrews 1 verse 3 tells us, the son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.

Or as Paul puts it in Colossians 1 verse 15, he is the image of the invisible God. You see, why does God forbid us from making images of him?

Not because God refused to be seen, but because he always intended to show us himself in his own son to represent him perfectly.

[32:26] And unlike every image we could ever make, this one does not cut God down to size. Remember what Tim Keller told us was the issue earlier?

Paint God smiling and you hide his anger. Paint him frowning and you hide his grace. But go to the cross and there in one place, in one moment, you see them both held together perfectly.

There is God's righteous anger against evil poured out. And there is his tender mercy towards sinners poured out in the very same act.

The cross holds together what our man-made images could never have held. When Jesus said, anyone who has seen me has seen the Father, he meant it.

look at him and you are not looking at a reduction of God, you are looking at God. Now, as an aside, let me just quickly deal with something that some people might ask.

[33:45] If Jesus is the image of God, is a painting of Jesus a breach of the second commandment? Here, faithful Christians differ, and I think that this is a matter of conscience.

But my own view is that while I don't think there is an absolute ban, I do believe we should be cautious. I think the underlying principle of the second word is a ban against misrepresentations of God.

And since God really did take a human face, it is not idolatry to acknowledge he had won. In that sense, I don't think a drawing of Jesus is necessarily wrong.

The incarnation does make a difference. But, we must remember, the command still stands against any image made to be worshipped.

So we should never ever have any images of Jesus as an object of devotion. That crosses the line.

[34:54] God and secondly, again, it is probably still true that every image we make, even of Jesus, can potentially conceal rather than reveal.

So for example, could a painting of a gentle European Jesus unintentionally misrepresent God? God? I think yes, because it might wrongly cause us to think of Christ as overly westernized and sentimental.

Indeed, could the depiction of Jesus in the hit series, The Chosen, which is a popular TV series, attempting to depict the life of Jesus, unintentionally misrepresent God in a similar way?

while not inevitable, I think yes, it is possible. So although I don't think we should go as far as to say there is an absolute ban, I do think it is wise to be careful.

And remember that the safest and surest place to behold the true image of God is in the pages of Scripture itself.

[36:09] And in the end, that's what the second word has been pointing us towards all along. It was never simply about refusing false pictures.

It was about something better, receiving God's true picture of himself. And when you behold Christ, something remarkable happens.

Listen to how Paul puts it. And we are who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, that's Jesus, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory.

In other words, when you behold the true image of God, you will slowly but surely be remade into what you were always meant to be. Don't forget, from the very beginning, humanity was made to be God's image bearers to reflect him to the world.

But instead of reflecting God, we started remaking him. The image bearers became image makers. And that is exactly what Jesus came to undo.

[37 : 22] He became God's perfect representative so that he might become our perfect mediator. And as we behold him, God restores us to what we were created to be.

God restores because the Bible says you become like who you worship. Worship an idol and you become as small as that idol. But behold Christ and you will share in his glory.

And true, that day has not come yet. For now, we know him by faith through his word. But one day, faith will become sight.

God, as the Bible simply puts it, right at the very end, we will see his face. That's where the second commandment has always been leading.

We don't need to make a picture of God because one day we will see him. So let me come back to where I started. Do you remember how I said so many people were disappointed when they discovered that they had fallen in love with a picture?

[38 : 33] not the person? But the good news is, with Jesus, you know that won't happen. With Jesus, what you see is what you get.

So stop settling for pictures of your own making and come to the person of Jesus because in him, you discover that image and reality line up perfectly.

So remember that and with that, let us pray. Father, I pray now that as we have heard your word, I pray that your word really would be heard by us, that it would go through the ear to our minds and to our hearts.

Help us, Lord, to ponder if we have, whether intentionally or unintentionally, remade you in our own image, we have reduced you, we have made you smaller than who you are.

And Father, we repent of that and we ask that you would again show us who you really are. Let us just listen to you and let you show us who you really are.

[39 : 59] And Father, help us then to bow down and worship you. In all this we pray for his name's sake. Amen. Amen.