

Sermon on the Second Commandment

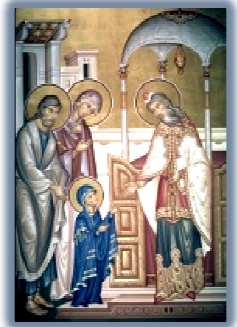
In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The second of the Ten Commandments is: "Thou shalt not make for thee any graven 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; thou shalt not bow down to them, nor serve them."

This is a continuation of the First Commandment which tells us not to have any false gods. As I said in last Sunday's sermon, this includes making gods of people, things, money, pleasures, etc. The second Commandment expands upon this by telling us to not create images of *false* gods, either. The idols of pagans are rather obvious, of course, but many Christians also worship their talents, their skills, their jobs, etc., which then become idols and graven images as surely as any statue of a pagan Hindu god.

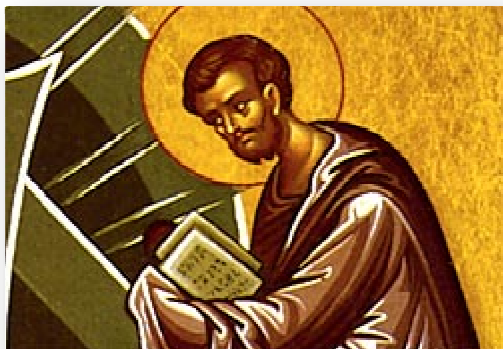
Some Protestants claim that this commandment forbids the use of icons and other holy images in churches and homes, and for this reason, most Protestant churches are (in our eyes) drearily austere and barren. Some Catholic churches, in an effort to be more ecumenically "protestant-friendly", have also stripped their churches of most of the sacred adornments Catholics were used to in the old days. (I remember visiting the new Roman Catholic Cathedral in San Francisco some years ago and was both astonished and saddened to see that other than a cross near the altar, the only other adornment in the entire huge cathedral was an copy of the famous Polish icon of the Black Madonna (the original of which was stolen from the Orthodox long centuries ago, by the way). Other than that, there were just soaring and completely barren concrete walls, not even any plaster or painting. It hurt the heart.)

To put it bluntly and frankly to our non-Orthodox brothers, it is simply WRONG to say that the second commandment forbids the honoring of icons! Why, because we do not see icons as deities, but rather as reminders of *spiritual truths* - of God as He appeared to the Prophets, of the Incarnate Savior, of angels and miraculous biblical events. An icon is theology in color or in paint, whereas Scripture is theology in words. They both describe and reveal the same truths. We lovingly hold the Bible, and not only read from it daily but press it to our hearts and kiss it, and we venerate the icons, but we do not see either of these as God or any other kind of deity; we do not worship them—we worship only the One that is revealed through them. And by the way, the fact that we Orthodox kiss icons is not worship or idolatry, any more than when we kiss a relative or a friend we are not worshipping them, but rather showing great respect and affection.



Entrance of the Theotokos
to the Temple

We urge the non-Orthodox to read their Bible more closely as see how the Holy Prophet and



God-seer Moses, through whom God forbade the worship of idols, was also ordered by God to place gold cherubim on the cover of the Ark of the Covenant. Was this idolatry? Of course not. Later, in the Temple of Jerusalem there were sculptures and embroidered likenesses of the cherubim (1 Kings 6:27-29 and 2 Chronicles 3:7-14)—and God gave His blessing to these sacred images during the dedication of the temple.

So, we see that the Second Commandment actually forbids the creation or use of any substitutes for God. In ancient times people defied all kinds of things—the sun and the moon, various animals, even reptiles like crocodiles, thunder and lightning, and also grotesque and demonic creatures—which we commonly see in Hinduism, for example. But in our own era we have an even worse form of idolatry: we deify our own egos, passions, wishes, desires, as well as other people with whom we have entered into very sick and co-dependent relationships. How can we know if we are doing this? Very simply: *when anything about us or around us in our lives becomes something to which we dedicate more thought and time than to God--then we have become idolaters and we are violating the first two commandments.* This is why the Holy Fathers encourage us to make use of the Jesus Prayer in all our activities, work, and in anything that doesn't require our complete focus and attention, so that we slowly begin to sanctify and bring the Lord into our whole lives and personalities, displacing our obsessions with self, things, and other people and events. I think about those who live for sports and games on TV, for politics, science, or celebrity news...such sad folk have created many different idols in their lives and they bow down and worship these false gods. Where have they left room for the Lord Jesus Christ, God Almighty?

In addition to this, we must add some other graven images: sex, drunkenness, drugs and smoking, gambling, gluttony, vanity, etc. St. Paul, in his epistles, even goes so far as to say of those who commit the sin of gluttony that "their god is in their belly" (Col. 3:5; Phil. 3:19)! And how can we know if we are gluttonous? Easy; just look in the mirror... So, brothers and sisters, all of the seven deadly sins described in Scripture show us the various kinds of idol worship that we see all around us and in our own lives today. To this, I'm afraid we must also add these days those who are overly-conscious of their weight and try to be very thin and fashionable. This, also can become a false god, especially when it begins to affect the overall health of this body, this Temple of the Holy Spirit. It is a form of self-

abuse, just as much as an addiction or gluttony is, and thus it is a sin against the Holy Spirit, who dwells in this fragile and frail temple of ours, our flesh.

Now, depending on the translation and the particular place that you look in the Old Testament, the following is also added to the Second Commandment or, sometimes, is attached to what I have just been commenting on: "Thou shall not take the name of the Lord, thy God, in vain, for the Lord will not leave unpunished the one who takes His name in vain."

The violation of this command is, I fear the most common sin of all in society today. It is not only a profanation but an abuse of the Most Holy Name, a name which, Scripture tells us, is above all names and before which every knee, "both in heaven and on earth" bows.

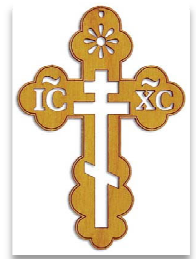
I remember once, some years ago, being in a auto repair shop where one of the mechanics was swearing mightily, taking the Lord's name in vain. A black woman who also waiting for her car stepped up to him quietly and gently said, "Excuse me sir, but I can't allow you to swear, taking my Lord's name in vain like this." And then she smiled and stepped away. What an example! What a model!



But taking the Lord's name in vain is not only done by cursing, swearing or the like, but also when we say the name of the eternal holy One mindlessly, without thinking about it--for example, when we exclaim, "Oh, God!" Yes, this too is sinful. Yet we hear it commonly out in the world and we sometimes do it ourselves. Perhaps we think this is just an empty expression? But the very name, the actual *sound* of the All-Holy One's name is *energy*, it is power, and it is truth, and to use it lightly or in swearing is a grievous offense to Almighty God. Remember that the New Testament says that we shall be answerable for every idle word—how much more so, then, shall we be accountable for taking the Lord's name in vain?

We often say, "Thank God," when something does or doesn't happen, which might appear harmless and even pious, but are we *actually* thankful to God or is it just an expression? I remember how, during Soviet times, Christians in the West would whoop with delight when some atheist dictator would say "Thank God" in response to something or other. Christians interpreted this as a slip of the tongue, perhaps revealing some secret belief in the hearts of these brutal anti-Christians. But not so. It had become just as much of a casual expression for these atheists as it is for most of us. So we must beware that God doesn't put us in the same category as these God-haters and butchers. If we do say, "Thank God," let us *mean* it and seal it with the Sign of the Cross, the way pious old country Orthodox Christians still do.

Finally, let us underscore this particular phrase from the Second Commandment and take it to heart: “for the Lord will not leave unpunished the one who takes His name in vain...” In other words, whether we like it or not, whether we think it is even “appropriate” or necessary or “relevant” or not, *we are accountable* if we break this commandment. Accountable in every way and at every level. We will not get off scot-free. But actually it is not so much that God will punish us; it is we who will punish ourselves, as the Lord says, “What you sow, you also will reap”. So everything we say, everything we feel, think, or do, is what we ourselves are “sowing” in our present life and in the life to come, and God has promised that He will show all of this—both the good and the bad—to us in the personal judgment immediately after death. For God is a God of *perfect* love, and perfect love also requires perfect justice and truth. Therefore nothing will be hidden from us at the personal judgment when we die. But everything we have cleansed ourselves of during this life through true and not frivolous repentance, from good works, almsgiving, prayer, uncomplaining acceptance of our trials, difficulties and sufferings—all of these are indeed cast out and forgiven, and will not be revealed before the entire mankind at the Last Judgment—as Scripture also assures us: “He will tear up the handwriting of our sins.”



So we see, once again, how the Ten Commandments are not just “thou shalt not” rules, but are profound and practical guide for healthy and good living as well as a safe guide back to our Heavenly Father and eternal life with Him, which actually begins now, today, in this very moment, and not just when we die. As Fr. Seraphim of Platina told us, his spiritual children, “Brethren, it’s later than you think; therefore let us hasten to do the work of God!”

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.