

## ***The Second Command: God's Favourite Idols***

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Who am I? Why was I born? Will anyone remember me after I die? What am I supposed to do with my life?

I've thought a lot about these questions. It would take a long time for me to explain why I'm so focussed on them. But perhaps the most poignant reason is something my brother said, a few weeks before he died of ALS. He asked me to write a book about his life.

"A book?" I asked. "Why?"

"Because," said my brother. "I want to be remembered."

Now, don't get me wrong. My brother, Art, was a great guy. A good man. Generous to a fault. Kind. He volunteered his spare time doing emergency ward triage and fighting fires. It was easy, at his funeral, to say wonderful things about him.

But, as is the case for every one of us, my brother Art wasn't famous. He didn't do anything so amazing as to have the CBC show up at his door. He wasn't rich. He didn't have children. Early in life he went bankrupt. No one will really remember him in 50 or 100 years, even if I do write a book.

But still, Art wanted to be remembered. Or rather, what was even truer, Art wanted to believe that his life counted for something.

So, in the years since I've often wondered, "what would count for a life well lived?" I've read at least thirty books on that theme. I've written at least ten chapters of my own for a new book on that theme. But so far, I have not written anything so insightful as to deserve publication.

Since I'm a pastor, it probably won't surprise you that I continue to think about the meaning of life when I read scripture. That is how I came to today's text, too, the second command. It reads, "You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath." And as I thought about these words, something clicked—a partial answer, perhaps, to the question, "What is the meaning of life?"

Usually we don't pay attention to this command because, frankly, "graven images," that is, "carved idols," are not part of our experience. I have seen idols in several countries. For example, in Bali I saw Hindu idols on most street corners and in private yards. Some, on taxi

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dashboards, were a few inches tall. Others, in temples, were ten stories tall. But we don't see many idols in Toronto.

Still, the prohibition against idols embodies a startling insight close to the heart of the ancient Jewish faith and that gets very close to the ancient Jewish understanding of the meaning of life. You see, the point of this command is that we should not make carved images on earth because God already has human image bearers on earth. You might even say that we humans are God's own creation day, divinely made idols, so we don't need to make any more.

Here's the background. Even though it is second nature for many North Americans to think of God as loving and all-powerful, ancient Near-Eastern people did not think of Baal or their other gods in this way.

In fact, they thought that Baal was pretty much like most humans, only more so. He fought with and killed his family members. He was greedy. And Baal was also far too busy for his own good. He had to find time to make the seasons come and go. Baal sent rain, good harvests and children to humans. And he had to party.

Since Baal was so busy, he didn't actually have time to listen to all the prayers of people on earth who wanted stuff from him. And anyway, according to their ancient myths, those people had been created by the gods to be slaves, to put food on the tables of the gods for when they partied. So why should Baal bother with human prayers?

Which was, of course, a problem for humans. How do you get the attention of a god who doesn't care about you?

Well, when ancient humans thought about this, they decided that they probably needed ambassadors who could fly from earth to heaven and, once there, grab Baal's attention. And that's what idols were. Idols were not the gods themselves, but ambassadors sent by humans to the gods they represented.

But there was an obvious problem with this plan. You see, there were a lot of idols made in the image of Baal. So how would busy Baal choose which idol ambassador from earth to listen to? Well, Baal—who was thought of being very vain, even though he was a god—Baal listened to the idol ambassadors whose image, whose design, did him the most honour. The bigger the idol, the more jewels, gold and silver that went into its construction, the more beautiful the sculpting the more likely Baal would notice that idol and respond to its requests.

And so in an effort to convince Baal to listen to their prayers first, ancient worshippers spent lots of money—mostly given to the priests who controlled access to the most impressive idols—ancient people spent lots of money for the privilege of bringing their petitions to temples where there were especially impressive, thus persuasive, idol ambassadors to Baal.

The Jews surprisingly rejected both this view of God and of humans. You see, according to their creation story, God created Adam and Eve not as slaves, but in his own image, not to be ambassadors to heaven, but to be God's ambassadors to earth. Adam and Eve were not created by God to be his slaves labouring in the garden to provide food for the gods. No. Adam and Eve

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were created to rule over the earth, that is, to make the garden grow, to name its animals, and to make it a pleasing place to walk with God. Adam and Eve didn't need idols because as God's image bearers, they already walked and talked with God 24/7. As God's image bearers they could pray to God anytime and expect to be heard.

The second command, then, contains a surprising reversal from what the ancient Near-Eastern people expected. The Jews were not allowed to make carved idols of stone to get through to a nasty Baal because they were already, themselves, living, breathing divine images of a loving God. To make an idol, in other words, was to reject what God made you for. It was dehumanizing.

New Testament writers picked up on this theme. They described Jesus as the perfect image bearer of God and as the one image bearer the rest of us should imitate. According to Colossians 1, for example, "The Son—Jesus—is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation." Paul adds in 2 Corinthians 5 that we are all, like Jesus, to be ambassadors of reconciliation in the world, lights set on a hill. Ambassadors. That word again.

So what does this have to do with the meaning of life? Well, how many secular ambassadors do you know? Out of 36,000,000 or so Canadians, only about 250 or 300 are ambassadors. To be an ambassador for Canada is a big deal, an honour, a real opportunity to do good for your nation and in the world. Very few people get to be so honoured.

But, being a secular ambassador chosen by Justin Trudeau, in the traditional Christian view, is nothing compared to being an ambassador chosen by God. And it is in that life-long divine vocation of being God's ambassador of reconciliation to the world that we are to find our life's meaning.

Now, I understand that Genesis is mostly myth, and that some of us are unsure as to whether or not God—whoever and whatever we think of God—takes such a keen interest in what humans do.

On the other hand, the ancient Jewish second command contains a great insight into the human condition that is close to the heart of all enlightened religions. The meaning of our lives is not to be found in what we can get out of god, in grasping for answers to prayers, whether selfish or not. The meaning of our lives is not to be found doing something so incredible that God takes note and decides to reward us—or not. No, according to the second command, the highest meaning of our lives is found, rather, in being a good ambassador for the shalom that God wants us as his or her ambassadors to work on earth.

My brother Art did that, as best he could, sometimes under difficult circumstances. He went bankrupt, but over his lifetime, paid off those debts anyway. He was a confidante and friend to many just getting started in business. He spent his own limited resources volunteering overseas. He worked for a company that built recycling facilities. He forgave people who did him great harm. He tried to bear his illness with hope and dignity.

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And so have countless others, including most of us, each adding our own brick to the growing foundation of human shalom. And our names will not be so much forgotten as merged in a great cloud of witnesses to the secret of real joy—a life that blesses others whenever possible, working at a job where you aim to make a contribution to the common good as well as earn a living, walking with friends even when they need a helping hand, seeing the earth as a global oasis that needs to be preserved rather than used up. You get the idea.

Do not make any graven images, for you are already a holy image bearer of God. And the good news is that there is no life like it.