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Advanced Bible Correspondence Course
Lesson 35: The Law of God – Second Commandment

LORD'S DAY 35

Q.96. WHAT DOETH GOD REQUIRE IN THE SECOND COMMANDMENT?

ANSWER: THAT WE IN NO WISE REPRESENT GOD BY IMAGES (A), NOR WORSHIP HIM IN ANY OTHER WAY THAN HE HAS COMMANDED IN HIS WORD (B).

(A) ISAIAH 40:18, 19&25, DEUT. 4:15&16, ROMANS 1:23, ACTS 17:29;

(B) I SAMUEL 15:23, DEUT. 12:30, MATTHEW 15:9

God's service

The first commandment deals with the question who alone is to be served and honoured as God by us: it is only that God Who has revealed Himself in the Bible.

The second commandment concerns the manner in which God wants to be served. We cannot, nor have to, nor are allowed to serve God by complying with all kinds of commandments which people have made, no matter how pious they may be (or seem to be). Jesus reproached the Pharisees because of their self-willed religion, against which the Lord already warned in the Old Testament (Isaiah 29:13). *"But in vain they do worship Me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men"* (Matthew 15:9). We must serve God only in the way He commands us in His Word. That is to believingly read and hear His Word time and again, continually seeking communion with Him in Christ, through prayer and faith, and in all this to pray for the enlightening and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

No image worship

God desires to be served and worshipped directly, in Christ, and not by means of images. Heathens have made themselves images cut from wood or stone in order to have a representation of their god, or they have even imagined their gods to be animals, sometimes even trees. In this way, they continually paid divine honour to these images, by kneeling before them, kissing and worshipping them, and bringing offerings to them.

God does not want images to be made of Himself, or of anything which He has created, for the purpose of rendering divine honour to them. He is not a physical Being, but a spiritual One, and His glory and majesty are too great to have anything of Himself represented by an image, for He is an almighty, omniscient (all-knowing), and omni-present God. Any image of Him would degrade Him. Then it would seem to still be possible to make a visible representation of Him, which would take away His glory.

The use of images occurred often in the religion of the Babylonians (from whom Abraham was removed) and in the religion of the Egyptians, out of whom the Lord led the Israelites. Also, the inhabitants of Canaan made statues of their false gods, with which they committed gruesome sins, for example, during the feasts around the images of Ashtoreth, the goddess of fertility. When they had filled the measure of sin (Genesis 15:16), the inhabitants of Canaan had to be destroyed because of this idolatry. God wanted His people of Israel to live alone so that they would not be polluted with their abominations (Deuteronomy 20:16-18).

The histories of the golden calf during the journey through the wilderness (a young bull which was supposed to represent God's power) (Exodus 32) and the calves of gold at Dan and Bethel, which King Jeroboam made (I Kings 12:25-33) show us how frightful God's wrath is when His people yield to this sin.

Q.97. ARE IMAGES THEN NOT AT ALL TO BE MADE?

ANSWER: GOD NEITHER CAN, NOR MAY BE REPRESENTED BY ANY MEANS (A). BUT AS TO CREATURES, THOUGH THEY MAY BE REPRESENTED, YET GOD FORBIDS TO MAKE, OR HAVE ANY RESEMBLANCE OF THEM, EITHER IN ORDER TO WORSHIP THEM OR TO SERVE GOD BY THEM (B).

(A)ISAIAH 40:25; (B)EXODUS 34: 17, 23:24, 34:13, NUMBERS 33:52

Making images and representations

The words of the second commandment, "*or in the earth beneath, or in the water under the earth*", cause the question to arise whether it is entirely impermissible to make any representations. This cannot be the intention, because God Himself commanded the representation of angels (cherubim) on the ark and on the curtains of the tabernacle.

Also, in the temple of Solomon there were carved lions, oxen, palm trees, pomegranates, and lilies (I Kings 6:29, 7:19, 29-42). Thus, in no way may we make representations of God, who has not been created, but this is permitted of things which have been created.

But what do these quoted words then mean? Well, we must read these words in their context. They are followed by: "*Thou shalt not bow thyself to them, nor serve them*". We may make images of created things, but not with the purpose of worshipping them or of using them in worshipping God. God

desires a true spiritual religion. Our hearts, in our prayers and in our worshipping of the Lord, must be directed towards God who dwells in heaven, not to something visible. *“God is a Spirit: and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and truth”*, Jesus said to the Samaritan woman when she asked Him how God wanted to be worshipped (John 4:24).

Threat and promise

The second commandment says that God is a jealous God. This means that He is jealous for His honour; He alone wants to be honoured as God. For that reason such a serious threat follows in the second commandment: *“I, the Lord thy God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me.”* God will severely punish transgressors of that commandment. He will even punish their children to the third and fourth generation. Our sins almost always have consequences for our descendants; our bad example often also causes them to sin.

However, God reveals His goodness to an even greater extent towards them that serve Him in the way He commands and towards their descendants, *“And showing mercy unto thousands of them that love Me and keep My commandments.”* God will bless a Christian upbringing, and by it a good example can also bring about good results.

Q.98. BUT MAY NOT IMAGES BE TOLERATED IN THE CHURCHES AS BOOKS TO THE LAITY?

ANSWER: NO, FOR WE MUST NOT PRETEND TO BE WISER THAN GOD, WHO WILL HAVE HIS PEOPLE TAUGHT, NOT BY DUMB IMAGES (A), BUT BY THE LIVELY PREACHING OF HIS WORD (B).

(A) JEREMIAH 10:8, HABAKKUK 2:18&19; (B) ROMANS 10:14, 15&17, 2 PETER 1:19, 2 TIMOTHY 3:16&17

Images and representations in the church

God desires to instruct us by His Word. That is what we hear when it comes to us in the lively voice in His house, the church. However, we ourselves must also read the Word in our own home, that is, if we can read. Especially in the past, there were many people who did not know how to read. During the Middle Ages, this skill was taught only in monasteries. Therefore it was often only the priests and monks who could really read well, while the ordinary people, the so-called laity, could not. Thus the question arose whether it was not permissible to use images or icons in the church in order to teach the people something: images of the prophets, of Mary, of Christ, of the apostles and of the saints in later years; or icons with representations of them. In this way in the fourteen so-called ‘stations’ were the representations of where the Lord Jesus supposedly stood still or suffered on the way when He went from Pilate to Golgotha. Such images and representations would

then, as a sort of illustration or example, encourage and assist the thoughts to be directed to what the figures portrayed had said and done; especially the laity, who could not read the Bible for themselves, could learn much from them. There is little or no report of images in the early church in the first five centuries, but in later years there was. In the eighth century, it led to a fierce iconoclasm in the Eastern Church. Initially, the use of images in churches and homes was forbidden by a council (a general church assembly), but a later council again accepted them.

Devotion and worshipping of images

The devotion of images defies the clear prohibition that the use of images is forbidden in the service of God. That prohibition is stated in the law and in many places in the Bible. *“They have mouths, but they speak not: eyes have they, but they see not: they have ears, but they hear not: noses have they, but they smell not: they have hands, but they handle not: feet have they, but they walk now: neither do they speak through their throat. They that make them are like unto them; so is every one that trusteth in them” (Psalm 115:5-8).*

This is what God says about images of false gods, but He also does not want His service to resemble the worshipping of false gods in any way. Therefore, God’s wrath waxed hot against the golden calf of Aaron and the calves of gold of Jeroboam. They were meant to represent the power of God and by means of these images God was to be worshipped.

When we use images, we focus our attention on those images, whereas God requires that we lift our hearts and thoughts up to Him, who dwells in the heavens. Besides, God only wants to be called upon in the “image” that He Himself gave us: His Son Jesus Christ, who is the express Image of the invisible God.

The rejection of images

For this reason there was in the Reformation of the 16th century a radical rejection of images in churches and homes. God has commanded us to teach the people, also those who cannot read, through the preaching, the lively proclamation of His Word, and not by means of dumb images which cannot speak. We must not desire to be wiser than God.

Question:

Why are we not allowed to use images to serve God?

Evaluator: _____