
Mirroring God

Our mirrors today are so well-crafted that they reflect, almost without a flaw, whatever is before them. There are two things that can change the image that is reflected from a mirror: the mirror becomes distorted or broken in some way, or the image before the mirror changes.

In Genesis 1, we learn that when God created humankind, male and female, in his image. Of course, God is invisible, but when he created us, he created us to be an image of himself. In a sense, at creation humanity was a reflection of God. (*We could spend a lot of time reviewing all that has been said about the image of God and what it is that we reflect, but that goes far beyond the point of this blog.*) Again, God created human beings in such a way that we were meant to reflect his image. God meant himself to be seen in his image bearers.

We do not have to read much further into Genesis to discover that the image that we reflect has become distorted. A mirror that is smashed into hundreds of pieces still reflects that which is before it, but it does so improperly. Likewise, a mirror that has become warped will reflect an image, but the image will be distorted, often mocking that which it is meant to reflect. (*We think of curved mirrors in fun houses as an example.*) As image bearers of God, because of sin, we no longer faithfully reflect who God is. The images people see of God in us are broken and distorted, and although something of God may be seen in us, they can't see what God intended to be seen had sin not entered the world.

But what if we move the mirror so that it is no longer facing God? In the Old Testament, the people began to worship other gods, the gods of the nations around them. In effect what they were doing was point themselves at something other than the Lord, and they began to reflect that image to the world. They became image bearers, not of the God who had created all things but, rather, of the gods they themselves had created. Not only was the image that they reflected distorted and broken, but it also didn't reflect anything of our Creator God at all. What we might say, then, is that the god we worship becomes the image that others see in us. If we worship the Lord, then even though we reflect a broken image, it is still an image of the Lord. If we worship other gods, the image we project resembles the other gods.

In the second commandment, we are told that we may not make an image of any created thing for the intention of worshipping it. The commandment is broad enough to include not only images of other gods but also images of the Lord. There is good reason for this. In the Golden Calf narrative (Exodus 32ff.), the Israelites construct a statue of a calf and they proclaim that this image represented the gods (or, perhaps, God) who had brought them out of Egypt. At first it appears that they have switched gods, but in verse 5 of that same chapter, Aaron declares that there will be a "festival to the Lord," indicating that this golden calf was probably meant to represent the Lord.

We can understand why the people would have wanted such an image. The golden calf (picture a muscular yearling bull) depicted that their God (god) had power. Already he had displayed that power when he defeated the Egyptians and freed the Israelites, but the Israelites were unsure of the future, and they wanted to be assured that the God (god) they followed would lead them onward to the Promised Land

and provide them a home there after displacing those who already lived in the Land. A yearling bull (bulls were among the most powerful animals of the time) seemed to be a perfect image by which the Israelites could gain assurance. Who doesn't want a powerful God?

But there was one thing they didn't consider. When they made the golden calf, they were hoping to say that they would appear powerful to their enemies, that the image they reflected to the world was powerful because their God (god) was powerful. The nations would see them with their god, and they would be afraid. But the thing that they didn't consider was this: by making God into a statue, they had also made him unresponsive. It doesn't matter how much they prayed, sacrificed, pleaded, threatened, cajoled or otherwise tried to convince the golden calf to respond, it would remain unmoving and unresponsive. And that is not who God is.

It is because the Israelites made this image, that God begins to use a term that sticks with them through the centuries: they are stiff-necked. Stiff-necked is not stubborn, although it can be that; it is better thought of as being unresponsive. The covenant God had made with his people involved their response of service and obedience, but they were doing nothing of that. They had become like the statue of the calf, unresponsive and uncaring, refusing to be thankful to the Lord for what he had done for them. Most of the times that the phrase, "stiff-necked," is used in the Bible, it is used in reference to the casting of the golden calf. It becomes a way for God (or his spokespeople, the prophets) to say that the people are not responding to God's covenant as they had promised to.

As we know, the Golden Calf narrative follows upon God's covenant with Israel in which he promised to provide for his people, as long as they heeded his voice. In building the calf, they had decided to ignore God (be stiff-necked). In not responding to God, they neglected to love God or their neighbour. They had become unresponsive to the covenant, thus rendering it null and void. It was only because our gracious God decided to keep the covenant in spite of their being stiff-necked that he did not abandon them. It is because of sin, in fact, that God the Father sent a new image-bearer to be his reflection in this world. Jesus, who is the exact image of God, became what we could not be, making God known to this broken world.

The God we worship is not unresponsive as was the golden calf. Our God not only responds to our needs when we ask him for help, but more often than not he anticipates our needs and provides for us long before we even think of asking. When it comes to our salvation, God's, "I will save you," came long before our "Save us." And when it comes to daily needs, if God didn't provide for us even before we asked, we would be a worse situation that we could imagine.

Because we worship a God who is responsive to our needs, we begin to reflect that responsiveness in the way we treat others as well. Thus, the apostles would agree that it is somewhat ludicrous for us to say that we love God while at the same time doing nothing to care for our neighbours. God's responsiveness causes us to become responsive as well as we worship him.

Perhaps one way to determine if it is truly God that we worship is to ask this question: is the image I am presenting an image of grace, love, and provision? Or am I uncaring about the needs of others? If the latter is the case, perhaps it is not the God of the Bible that we are worshipping.

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