

**Date:** June 21, 2009  
**Series:** Ten Stupid Things People Do to Mess Up Their Lives  
**Sermon:** Worshiping the Right God in the Wrong Way  
**Scripture:** Exodus 20:4-6  
**Speaker:** Pastor Josh Black

We live in a culture that is saturated by images. Actually most of our waking hours are spent in the presence of images. In 2006 the US Census Bureau projected that in 2007 Americans would spend on average around 4 hours a day in front of the television.<sup>i</sup> According to the Gallup Poll over half of Americans are on the Internet for about an hour a day.<sup>ii</sup> In addition we are surrounded by billboards and other forms of advertisements everywhere we go. And as our culture becomes more and more barraged by images I find it interesting that the amount of people who read continues to decrease. Could there be a connection between lives that are filled with images and the lack of reading?

In 1985 Neil Postman wrote a devastating critique of television called “Amusing Ourselves to Death.” His thesis was that different types of media encourage different ways of thinking. The printed word requires sustained attention, logical analysis, and an active imagination. But television, with its fast-moving images, cultivates a short attention span, disjointed thinking, and purely emotional responses.<sup>iii</sup> The more time you spend with the fast-moving images of television and the internet your ability to think and interact with the written word will decrease.

What is the problem with all of this? God has chosen to reveal himself to us through his Word, the Bible, not through media. And Christians are becoming more and more biblically illiterate. And this is all happening in a postmodern age where relativism runs rampant and our culture says “whatever is right for you is right.” So in a day when we’re barraged by images and we don’t know our Bibles we’re more prone than ever to break the Second Commandment. Turn with me in your Bibles to Exodus 20 as we seek to understand what God’s Word has to say about idolatry in the second commandment.

Exodus 20:4-11

*You shall not make for yourself an idol 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 fathers 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.*<sup>iv</sup>

The Second Commandment initially sounds like it is repeating the First, only using different words. These two commandments *are* very closely related, but they are distinct. From the time of Augustine, around the turn of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, until the present time, the Roman Catholic Church has combined the first two commandments into one. To maintain the ten they have split the commandment on coveting into two separate commandments. So their Ninth Commandment is “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife and their Tenth Commandment is “You shall not covet your neighbor’s stuff.” After the Reformation the Lutherans also adopted the Augustinian division while the Presbyterians went with the division that we are using in this series. Although it has been suggested that one reason for the Augustinian division was to minimize the

prohibition of images in worship, I suspect the obvious commonality between these two verses played a role in the decision as well.

The first commandment prohibits the worship of other gods while the second commandment prohibits the making of idols. Idolatry does involve the worship of other gods, but it also involves worshiping the God of the Bible in ways that are not acceptable to him, and Israel was guilty of doing this on a number of occasions. So even though this commandment does address many of the issues Mike covered in his treatment of the First Commandment I will spend most of my time in this sermon on the form of idolatry that worships the right God in the wrong way.

I would like to organize my time this morning the way the text does by looking first at *what* the second commandment prohibits and then secondly *why*. Let's start by looking at *what* the second commandment prohibits.

### **God's people are prohibited from the use of any images in worship. (vv. 4-5a)**

Look again at verse 4. It says, "*You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.*" This commandment alludes back to Genesis 1 where God created the heavens and the earth and the sea. People have been forming idols throughout history which attempt to describe or represent their gods by using images from creation. If they thought of their god as strong they may have made an idol in the form of an elephant. If they thought of their god as angry they may have made an idol in the form of a crocodile.<sup>v</sup> If they thought their God was wise maybe they would carve an owl. If they thought of their god as exhibiting many characteristics maybe they would carve a totem pole with many images represented. The main point though is this type of idol worship doesn't start by worshiping the image itself, but uses the image to draw their minds to a characteristic about God. This type of idolatry simply wants something tangible to aid in worship. We may think of this type of idol worship as primitive or savage, but the Israelites did something similar to this.

The most immediate example of idolatry found in Scripture following the Ten Commandments illustrates this. Right after Moses gave them these commandments he returned to the mountain. He was on the mountain for over a month receiving instructions related to Israel's *worship*. But the people grew impatient. Exodus 32:1-5 gives us the account of what followed:

*When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, "Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him." Aaron answered them, "Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me." So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt." When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, "Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD."*

I feel quite certain that this episode was an attempt by the Israelites to make something that would represent the God who brought them out of Egypt. They were not worshiping a false god.

And they were not worshiping the golden calf. They were using the golden calf in their worship of the true God. After all, Aaron announced that there would be a festival to the LORD (Yahweh), not to the golden calf. Wayne Grudem has conjectured that this may have been an attempt to see God as strong and full of life.<sup>vi</sup> But despite their intentions they were violating the Second Commandment and God was exceedingly angry about this. God was so angry that he threatened to wipe the entire Israelite nation out with the exception of Moses.

So what's wrong with trying to use an image of something in God's creation to draw your mind or heart to God? The problem is that although creation reflects something of God's character he stands outside of his creation. His existence is unlike anything seen in creation. Any attempt to portray God by using anything in his creation is misleading and dishonoring.<sup>vii</sup>

Turn to Deuteronomy 4:15-20. The reason I'm drawing your attention to this passage is that the language used is very similar to the language in Exodus 20. But there are some differences that clue us into the fuller meaning of the Second Commandment as we have it in Exodus. Listen for the differences and the similarities.

*“You saw no form of any kind the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb 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 formed like a man or a woman, or like any animal on earth or any bird that flies in the air, or like any creature that moves along the ground or any fish in the waters below. And when you look up to the sky and see the sun, the moon and the stars – all the heavenly array – do not be enticed into bowing down to them and worshiping things the LORD your God has apportioned to all the nations under heaven. But as for you, the LORD took you and brought you out of the iron-smelting furnace, out of Egypt, to be the people of his inheritance, as you now are.”*

What is the first reason for the prohibition against idolatry in this passage? Look in verse 15. *“You saw no form of any kind the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire.”* God doesn't reveal himself in any form and so God's people shouldn't try to represent him by using any form.

Rather God reveals himself by speaking to his people; he reveals himself by his Word. And when people seek to know God through his creation and not through his revealed Word they are prone to do what Romans 1:23, 25 says, *“exchange the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles...They exchange the truth of God for a lie, and worship and serve created things rather than the Creator – who is forever praised. Amen.”*

So if making images to represent God is prohibited then how can we see God? If it's wrong to exchange the glory of the immortal God for images made to represent God then how do we see the glory of God? Even Moses desired to see God and his glory after he gave these commandments to the people. Turn in your Bibles to Exodus 33:18-20. Pay close attention to how God reveals himself to Moses in this passage.

*Then Moses said, “Now show me your glory.” And the LORD said, “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But,” he said, “you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.”*

*Skip down to 34:5-7. Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.”*

When Moses asked to see God how did God reveal himself? Look in verse 5. It says that he *proclaimed his name*. And in verse 6, *he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming....* The LORD has chosen to reveal himself by his Word. And there is no image that can represent a God who is *the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin*.

In prohibiting the making of images for use in worship to the true God I think God is telling us something about himself that will help us to also fulfill the First Commandment to worship him exclusively. As John 4:23 says, *God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth*. He is spirit and can only be seen in the truth of his Word. Any use of an image in worship in place of the revelation we have of the LORD in his Word is a ridiculous attempt to see God. It would be like attempting to take the sun out of the sky and to replace it with a 15-watt light bulb.<sup>viii</sup>

So what about us? What about the images of Jesus that we have in our homes and even in this church? What about crucifixes and statuary in the Roman Catholic Church? What about the use of icons in the Eastern Orthodox Church? What about the Mel Gibson movie, the Passion, or any passion play for that matter? What about the visual Bible? What about that cross? Or any cross? Are these images that are being used in worship? And if so, then are they examples of idolatry?

I'm not prepared to say that these things in and of themselves are idolatrous, though there are many Evangelicals who do. But I'm also not prepared to say that any of the things I've mentioned are *not* idolatrous. And let me tell you why I'm not prepared to make a statement on this issue. If you would have asked me last week what I thought about icons I would have shown you some of the ones I own. For example I have an icon of Jesus washing the feet of the disciples that I've kept in my office. It has reminded me that the nature of my work is service found in the example of Christ. I also have paintings of Jesus. In one painting in my living room Jesus is hanging on the cross. I have another painting of Jesus praying, in the entry way to my home. But my work on this sermon has really made me question these images. For if these images of Jesus are not designed to draw my heart to worship then what are they intended to do? I wish I could tell you with conviction where I have landed on this issue, but I can't with integrity.

This topic has been debated in the Church for centuries. The Emperor Leo III put a ban on images in the Church that lasted from 726-843 A.D.<sup>ix</sup> Calvin and many of the reformers whitewashed the churches that had images in them, convicted that any images of Christ or the saints was a clear violation of the Second Commandment. Today the Greek Orthodox Church venerates icons. The Roman Catholic Church uses statuary, icons, and other things in their worship. Our church has images of Christ hanging in the foyer. While denominations like the Reformed Presbyterian Church prohibit the use of any images depicting any member of the Trinity.

They tell me in my preaching classes that “a mist in the pulpit is a fog in the pew;” meaning that if I’m not clear up here then you will be really confused. But there are some questions of application that flow out of this commandment that I’m simply not prepared to make a decision on after a week of study. But I don’t feel that I would be doing you a service by neglecting to mention the issues at hand. However, there are a number of applications that I am confident of, as they relate to this passage and I’d like to spend our time now considering those.

While I’m not prepared to say that the images I’ve mentioned above *are* idolatrous I know that they *can be* idolatrous if misused. For example I don’t see how bowing down to or kissing a crucifix or an icon is not idolatrous.<sup>x</sup> I also know that images have the potential to misrepresent God. A crucifix for example, which displays Jesus hanging on a cross, draws your attention to only certain aspects of Jesus. J.I. Packer says, “It displays His human weakness, but conceals His divine strength; it depicts the reality of His pain, but keeps out of our sight the reality of His joy and His power.”<sup>xi</sup>

Another observation is that images compete with God’s Word. God’s Word is the way God has chosen to reveal himself to his people. How many of you have ever read a book and then afterwards went to see the movie? What happens when you go back to read the book again? All of the images from the movie are playing in your head while you read. You can no longer let the book do what it was intended to do. The book has been limited by the movie’s images. Images that are used in worship can do the same thing. They can put God in a box. Idolatry in its various forms tries to domesticate God and it limits him. Images are powerful and they have the potential to limit God as he is revealed in Scripture. And if they do that then they are idolatrous and prohibited by the Second Commandment.<sup>xii</sup>

My guess is that there are very few of you here this morning who are using crucifixes, icons, or any images for that matter in your private or your public worship. But before one makes an image or forms an idol of something for use in worship that image has to first appear in their mind. I hear something like this from time to time: “I like to think of God as...” or “I don’t like to think of God as...” For example: “I don’t like to think of God as a Judge, I prefer to think of him as a loving Father.” The problem with this is that God is *both* a loving Father *and* a Judge and people who like to think of him as only one or the other fail to know God as he has revealed himself in all of Scripture. That is a form of mental idolatry.

Are you trying to piece together in your mind some picture of who you think God is through your experience? That is idolatry. Especially when people are neglecting the reading of God’s Word, or they’re not listening well to the preaching of God’s Word, or they’re not even

attempting to study God's Word, or they're not memorizing God's Word or meditating on God's Word. I'm convinced that the bottom line is the Church doesn't know God's Word the way it should. And if you don't know his Word then you don't know God as he is. And if you don't know him as he is then you only know God as you want him to be.

In a world where we value the individual so much, God starts to look less and less like the God of Scripture and more and more like we want him to look. This is idolatry. I think it was Chuck Colson who said, "Men were created in the image of God and they have returned the favor." If your view of God is not constantly informed by the Bible then you will be using images in your worship that are prohibited by the Second Commandment.

So here is the application point to prevent mental idolatry: Get to know your Bibles! Please get to know your Bibles! Turn the television off this week and read your Bible. If you need a suggestion read the book of Exodus. When you're finished with Exodus read the book of John. If you don't understand it ask somebody who is farther along than you to study it with you. Some of you are guilty of being lazy. But there are others of you who are simply intimidated by your Bibles or you find the Bible hard to understand. Maybe you don't think you're smart enough. If that is you, please come and talk to me or one of the staff members, elders, or lay leaders in the church. We would love to encourage you and help you. God has provided the Church with good Bible teachers and you should listen to them and learn from them, but his Word is accessible to all believers; it is accessible to you. You can read it, and understand it. If you want to see God, get to know your Bibles.

So we have seen that *what* the Second Commandment prohibits is the use of any images in worship and that the primary defense against this is saturating yourself in God's Word. Let's look now at the second part of verse 5 to find out *why* this commandment is so important.

*For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers 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.*

The reason why this commandment is so important is that...

### **God will not allow his people to misrepresent him. (vv. 5b-6)**

The phrase *I am the LORD your God* has been mentioned twice already in only five verses. In studying your Bible when you see any repetition it is significant. Every word is there for a reason. Another thing that is important in Bible study is to read your Bibles in the right order. So you have to read verse 2 before you get to verses 4-6. Look at verse 2. *I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.* What comes before law? Grace and redemption! The foundation for all of these commandments is found in the fact that God is the LORD and that these people are God's people whom he has redeemed. The commandments may apply to all of humanity, but they were given specifically for God's people and they were given so that God might be glorified in his people. So redemption comes before rules. But the question is still lingering, why the rules? Or more specifically why this Second Commandment?

When students use to ask me why God gave them so many rules to follow I would say, “It’s because God made you and he knows how you operate best. God doesn’t want you to self destruct and so he gives you an owner’s manual, so to speak, so that you will know how to live your life without breaking down.” But I think my answer, although not entirely untrue, may have missed another important purpose of these commandments. The commandments were also given for the sake of God’s glory. Let me explain.

Turn in your Bibles to Exodus 4:22-23. I think these verses will help us understand the significance of the phrase *I am the LORD your God*. Before God brought his people out of Egypt this is what Moses was told to say to Pharaoh:

*Then say to Pharaoh, ‘This is what the LORD says, Israel is my firstborn son, and I told you, “Let my son go, so he may worship me.”’*

Why did God bring his people out of Egypt? They were his firstborn son. And what was the purpose for God’s firstborn son being redeemed from Egypt? They were to worship him. So how does God’s firstborn son worship him?

The theme of sonship as it works itself out in the OT is functional, not biological. In the Ancient Near East a child’s function within the family was to carry on what the family did. If your father was a shepherd you would be a shepherd. If children represented their family well, in what they did, then they brought honor to their family. If they failed to do what the family did they would bring dishonor to their family.<sup>xiii</sup> God’s commandments are not just something that he pulled out of a hat and zapped onto some stone tablets. These commandments, and all of God’s Word, flow out of God’s character. And these commandments weren’t given to just anyone they were given to God’s people.

When the people of God observe his law and obey his commandments they bring glory and honor to God because they are doing something that reflects the very character of God. When God says, *do not make for yourselves an idol in the form of anything...you shall not bow down to them or worship them*, it is because he is spirit and he is not in the form of anything; therefore he doesn’t want us to worship him by the use of any kind of image. When God’s children use images in their worship of him they misrepresent God and they dishonor his reputation.

So how are they to worship the God who is revealed in his Word? By obeying the commandments that are given in his Word, not just the Ten Commandments, but all of God’s Word is to be obeyed! The commandments were not just given for our well being. They were given primarily for the sake of God’s glory! The theme of sonship supports this conclusion, but more immediate in the text, the next phrase in verse 5 does.

*For I the LORD your God am a jealous God*. When we think of jealousy we are prone to think of something very different than what is meant by the word ‘jealous’ as it is used in this passage. We think jealousy is a negative or hateful attitude towards someone who has something that you want, but doesn’t belong to you. But that’s not biblical jealousy, that’s more like covetousness. Biblical jealousy is when someone is competing with you for something that belongs to you and you alone. It is protecting at all costs that which belongs exclusively to you.

The one thing that belongs to God and to nobody else is his glory. God is committed to his glory and he will not share his glory with anyone or anything. When people misrepresent God through their disobedience and idolatry they are robbing him of the glory that belongs to him alone. Often times when people have created God in their own image and say things like, “I don’t like to think of God like that, my God is more like this...” what they are doing more times than not is trying to justify some behavior that is prohibited in the Bible. That is how idolatry leads to disobedience.<sup>xiv</sup> And God will not be misrepresented by people that claim to be his children. What does this commandment say God will do to those who misrepresent him by idolatry and disobedience? Verse 5 continues: *I the LORD your God am a jealous God punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me.*

Whoa! The grandchildren of idolaters will be punished? Idolaters are God haters? What does all of this mean? Let’s start by looking at what it means to hate God. I think we can see what it means to hate God by looking at what verse 6 says about loving God. Verse 6 says that God shows love *to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments*. Love for God throughout the Bible is equated with obedience. John 14:15 says, *If you love me you will obey what I command*. So if you don’t obey his commandments then you hate God. If you obey his commandments then you love God. Belonging to God is proven by obedience. If you belong to God you will love God. And in the context of this loving relationship you will be fulfilling the purpose for which you were created and redeemed: to worship God and to bring him glory.

But God haters cannot worship God and cannot bring God glory because they don’t obey his commandments and so they will be punished. Mike said last week that we all worship something and glorify something. But God won’t share his glory with another. If you are not worshipping God and glorifying him through your obedience then your life proves that you do not belong to God. And God will exclude from his glory all who rob him of the glory he requires. The punishment for disobedience and idolatry in this life is often times the natural consequences of whatever type of idolatry you are involved in (see Romans 1). But the eternal punishment for those whose lives are not directed towards bringing God glory will be eternal separation from God’s glory, in hell.

I don’t take this *third and fourth generation* phrase to be a mathematical equation. However, it does cause me to think. If you live a life of disobedience then you are not living a life of acceptable worship. And your example will generally be emulated by your children. Is it any wonder that the kings of Israel who were engaged in idolatry had sons that followed their idolatry from generation to generation? But on the other hand if you love God and obey his commandments then there will be a legacy of grace that extends in your family for 1000 generations. The wrath of God is real, but the grace of God is far greater. This phrase I think is intended to highlight especially the love and grace of God that knows no limits. And I think it is also intended to show the power parents have in the lives of their children. Parents get to know your Bibles and help your children do the same. And then commit your lives to worshipping the God of the Bible through obedience to what it commands.

At this point I think it is important to remind you once again that God redeemed Israel before he gave them the law. All of this talk of God loving those who obey him could lead you to think

that God saves people based off of their good works. But that is not the case. God redeems his people for the sake of his glory. He calls his children out of the slavery of sin so that they might glorify him. And the only way God's children can glorify God is if their lives reflect who God is through obedience to his commandments. But your *redemption* is not dependent on your obedience to commandments. Your redemption is solely dependent on grace and the work of God on your behalf. Salvation by grace alone through faith alone is found in the OT as well as in the NT. Turn in your Bibles to Deuteronomy 9:6.

*Understand, then, that it is not because of your righteousness that the LORD your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people.*

And flip over to Deuteronomy 7:7-8. *The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh King of Egypt.*

We are all sinners who deserve the jealous wrath of God. But God sent his Son Jesus; a Son who actually lived a life that represented the Father perfectly; a Son who brought glory and honor to his Father; a Son who not only obeyed all the commandments, but fulfilled the entire law. John 1:18 says that *no one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.* Jesus lived the life that we fail to live. And Jesus has paid the penalty that we deserve to pay. And although in our sin we fail to represent the Father well and deserve to be excluded from his glory John 1:12 says,

*All who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory the glory of the One and Only who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

Following commandments doesn't get you into the family of God, faith in Jesus does. But if you are a part of the family of God, you will worship him – as he is revealed in his Word, by obeying his Word.

God prohibits the use of images in worship because God is without form and can't be represented by any image. God has revealed himself to us in his Word and the worship that he requires is obedience to his Word.

We cannot save ourselves. Only God can save us through the work of his Son. And we cannot obey in our own strength, but if we are children born of God then the Spirit will enable us to obey the truth of God's Word for God's glory.

I want to reiterate a few application points as we close. Confess the sin of idolatry in your life where you have tried to limit God or make him fit the image you have of him. And commit yourself to knowing him through his Word and worshipping him by obedience to his Word.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/miscellaneous/007871.html>

The report here says 65 days a year. I simply multiplied 65 x 24 and divided by 365 to get the 4 hour number.

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.gallup.com/poll/20815/internet-catches-more-americans-time.aspx>

As with all statistics there are many nuances. For example 27% don't use the internet at all.

<sup>iii</sup> This paragraph was taken primarily from a sermon by Mike Andrus.

<sup>iv</sup> All scripture references are cited from the NIV, unless otherwise noted

<sup>v</sup> These thoughts come from Davidman

<sup>vi</sup> Grudem, 187

<sup>vii</sup> Grudem, 187; Packer, 40-41

<sup>viii</sup> Kalas, 34

<sup>ix</sup> Louth, in St John of Damascus' *On the Divine Images*, p. 7

<sup>x</sup> However, I can not articulate the reasons that the traditions who practice these things would give. I'm hesitant to speak out against something that I don't entirely understand.

<sup>xi</sup> Packer, 41

<sup>xii</sup> Some have criticized the architecture of the modern church and have said that it has borrowed from the theater. The very nature of auditoriums is to put the emphasis on who's on stage. I do think there is some validity in this criticism. However, what I like about the way Evangelicals have historically arranged their places of worship is that they have made the pulpit either front and center or they have elevated it. Now the pulpit can become idolatrous in the same way that images of Jesus can. And people can put too much stock in the person in the pulpit, but I think what Evangelicals have historically tried to communicate with this arrangement is that the Word of God is where God's people see God and worship God as he is revealed in his Word.

<sup>xiii</sup> From a lecture by Scott Howarer, TEDS, Oct, 13 2008.

<sup>xiv</sup> An example being divorce

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