

The Evil of Idolatry (Exodus 32:15-20)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Exodus

I. Review and Background

- a. After being on Mount Sinai for 40 days with the Lord, Moses is given the two stone tablets with the 10 Commandments written on them, “written with the finger of God”.
- b. The people, growing impatient with the long time of Moses’ departure without returning, ask Aaron to make “gods” to go before them. He has a golden calf fashioned from the gold of the earrings of the women, builds an altar and offers sacrifices, and calls for a feast the next day.
- c. The Lord makes Moses aware of what the people have been doing and is very angry. He says He plans to wipe them all out and make a new nation out of Moses.
- d. Moses prays and reasons with God, and persuades Him to show mercy and not wipe out the people.
- e. The Lord directs Moses to immediately go down the mountain.
- f. In the previous lesson, we noted the many parallels between the delay of Moses’ return and the delay of Jesus’ return (at His Second Coming, associated with the Day of Judgment).

II. A Few More Comments about the Golden Calf (Exodus 32:1-14)

- a. **Question:** Is this story referenced (even quoted) anywhere in the New Testament?
 - i. In **Acts 7**, Stephen recalls this story of the golden calf in his speech to the Sanhedrin recounting the history of Israel.
 1. Read **Acts 7:38-43**.
 2. Stephen addresses the idolatry of their forefathers in the Wilderness by saying, “in their hearts they went back to Egypt”.
 - a. They learned the sin of idolatry while they were in Egypt and *returned there in their hearts* when facing a challenge at Mount Sinai.
 3. Point made by Stephen:

- a. Your forefathers rejected Joseph, who was sent by God.
 - b. Your forefathers rejected Moses, who also was sent by God.
 - c. You are *just like your forefathers*: you have just rejected and killed the Christ, the Righteous One!
- ii. Paul also quotes from this story in **1 Corinthians 10**.
1. Read **1 Corinthians 9:24-10:7**.
 - a. The statement in **1 Corinthians 10:7**, “they sat down to eat and drink and rose to play” is an exact quote from **Exodus 32:6** in the LXX text.
 2. Paul gives a warning, admonishing the Christians to persevere in the faith, to learn from the lesson of the Israelite nation in the Wilderness (map of the Christian life).
 - a. They all were “baptized”, ate the spiritual food and drank the spiritual drink. They drank from Christ. Yet, most did not make it to the Promised Land.
 - b. The four sins that led to death:
 - i. Idolatry
 - ii. Sexual immorality
 - iii. Tempting/testing Christ
 - iv. Complaining/ grumbling
 - c. A warning for us Christians to *not be complacent!*
 3. However, Paul’s primary takeaway in this discussion is a warning to the Christians against returning to the sin of idolatry.
 - a. Read Paul’s *conclusion*, in **1 Corinthians 10:14-22**.
 - b. One *can’t* partake in the Lord’s supper and *also* be at the pagan “table of demons”.
 - c. Paul associates the demons (which are *real*) with *pagan idolatry*.
- b. **Question:** What is it referring to when it says, “they rose up to play”?

- i. The Greek word that is generally translated “to play” here (in both the NT and the LXX) can have a rather broad meaning (similar to our English word ‘play’), so the meaning generally has to be determined from the *context* in which the word is used.
- ii. **Question:** When it says “they rose to play”, from the context here, do you think it means they got up to *play* things like an ancient form of something like duck-duck-goose, softball, ultimate frisbee or volleyball?
 1. Similarly, when it says they “sat down to *drink*”, from the context, do you think they were *drinking* something like water or fruit juice?
 2. Tertullian didn’t think this was innocent, wholesome *play*. The fact that this was mentioned in connection with their sinful act of worshiping the golden calf suggested to him another type of “play”.
 - a. “‘The people ate and drank, and they arose to play.’ Understand the modest language of Holy Scripture: ‘play,’ unless it had been immodest, it would not have reprehended [= *reproved, found fault with*].
 - b. “On the other hand, how many are there who are mindful of religion, when the seats of the memory are occupied, the limbs of wisdom impeded? No one will suitably, fitly, usefully, remember God at that time when it is customary for a man to forget his own self. All discipline food either slays or else wounds. I am a liar, if the LORD Himself, when upbraiding Israel with forgetfulness, does not impute the cause to ‘fulness:’ ‘(My) beloved grew thick and fat and wide, and has quite forsaken God, who made him, and has gone away from the Lord his Savior.’ (**Deuteronomy 32:15**)”
 - c. “In short, in the self-same **Deuteronomy**, when bidding precaution to be taken against the self-same cause, He says: ‘Lest, when you have eaten, and drank, and built excellent houses, your sheep and oxen being multiplied, and (your) silver and gold, your heart be elated, and you be forgetful of the LORD your God. (**Deuteronomy 8:11-14**)’”.
 - d. (Source: Tertullian, *On Fasting, in Opposition to the Psychics*, chapter 6; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 4, p. 105)

3. There is at least one place in the LXX where this same Greek word “to play” refers to amorous play. Read **Genesis 26:7-11**.
 - a. From the King James version: “And it came to pass, when he had been there a long time, that Abimelech king of the Philistines looked out at a window, and saw, and, behold, Isaac was sporting with Rebekah his wife.” (**Genesis 26:8**, KJV 1900)
 - b. Clearly, from context, this reference to Isaac “playing with” or “sporting with” his wife refers to something that they were doing with each other that a man would do with his wife, but not with his sister!
 - c. From this example, we can see clearly that at least one of the meanings of this Greek word “to play” can refer to the amorous or romantic type of play.
4. Let us observe the classic connections throughout history between the inter-related sins of idolatry, drunkenness and sexual immorality!

III. Another Look at the Sin of Idolatry

- a. Read **Exodus 32:15-20**.
 - i. Note the passion and courage of Moses, standing alone against a vast crowd of hundreds of thousands of people in sin.
- b. Read **Deuteronomy 9:15-21**.
 - i. Near the end of his life, Moses again recounts the story of the golden calf.
- c. The storyline, putting together the details from the two accounts:
 - i. Moses descends, carrying the two stone tablets in his hands.
 - ii. Joshua hears all the noise from the camp, and to him it sounds like the shouting of war.
 - iii. Moses replies that rather, this is the sound of a drunken mob partying.
 - iv. Moses sees the calf and the dancing, becomes very angry, and smashes the two stone tablets.
 - v. He then takes the golden calf, burns it in the fire, grinds it to powder, casts the powder into the brook coming down from the mountain, and forces the people to drink it.

- d. **Question:** What do we learn about Moses from this account?
- i. He fears God.
 - ii. He has righteous anger, yet he *also* has compassion for the people.
 1. “Therefore, consider the *goodness* and *severity* of God...”
(Romans 11:22)
 - iii. He is a man of prayer (praying and fasting for 40 days). He intercedes for the people and for his brother Aaron.
 1. It appears (to me) that the order of the accounts is different in the **Exodus 32** account than in the **Deuteronomy 9** account, regarding when Moses interceded in prayer.
 - a. Perhaps the **Deuteronomy** account is the one where the events are listed in their chronological order.
 2. Read **Psalm 106:19-23** (designated **Psalm 105:19-23** in the LXX)
 - a. If not for Moses interceding, the Lord would have destroyed the people.
 - b. “Therefore He said that He would destroy them, *had not Moses His chosen one stood before Him* in the breach, to turn away His wrath, lest He destroy them.” (**Psalm 106:23**, NKJV)
 - c. Here we see Moses, like Jesus, a mediator between God and the people.
 3. This is a wonderful testimony to the power of the intercessory prayer of *one righteous man*! May this encourage us to pray more faithfully and fervently to the Lord.
 - a. It certainly appears that we are in the midst of an especially critical time to pray for the church, and for the future of our own nation.
 - b. “Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (**1 Timothy 2:1-4**, NKJV)

- c. Let us not underestimate the power of one Christian man or woman praying to almighty God!
- e. **Question:** Why this unusual fate for the golden calf?
 - i. In the **Deuteronomy 9** passage we read, the calf is referred to as *the sin of the people*.
 - ii. It is smashed and cast into the brook that comes down from the mountain. It seems to me this is another foreshadowing of God's plan to cast all our sins into the water (Christian baptism).
 - 1. "He will again have compassion on us, And will subdue our iniquities. *You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.*" (**Micah 7:19**, NKJV)
 - 2. This treatment of the golden calf, the sin of the people, may well be *one more foreshadowing of Christian baptism*, where our sins are (in effect) cast into the water.
- f. **Question:** Why were the Lord and Moses *so angry*?
 - i. The sin of idolatry: a constant plague for the people of this world.
 - ii. Paul points to idolatry as the root of all kinds of sin.
 - 1. Read **Romans 1:18-31**.
 - 2. Although Paul wrote this about 2,000 years ago, it is a clear indictment of *our own* society as well.
 - 3. The first step of the spiritual descent of mankind, made in the image of God, was *refusing to acknowledge the invisible Creator*, whose nature is evident from the creation all around us.
 - 4. Next, *idolatry* darkened the hearts of men and was the gateway to foolishness, sexual immorality and all kinds of depravity.
 - 5. Idolatry = worshiping and serving *created things, rather than the Creator*.
 - a. We worship God only (Father, Son and Spirit), who *created* all things.
 - b. We do not worship nor serve any created thing.
 - iii. On the foolishness of idolatry
 - 1. Read **Psalm 115:4-8** (designated **Psalm 113:12-16** in the LXX)

- a. Those who make and worship their idols will become like them (dead, dumb, etc.).
 - b. We who worship the all-mighty God, the Creator of the universe, will tend to become more like *Him* (wise, compassionate, etc.)
2. Read **Wisdom of Solomon 13:10-19** and **14:22-31**.
- iv. Clement of Alexandria, teacher of the church in Alexandria, Egypt, writing c. 195 AD, in *Exhortation to the Heathen*, had some rather colorful things to say regarding the idolatry he saw in his own culture.
1. “...hear at least your own philosopher, the Ephesian Heraclitus, upbraiding images with their senselessness: ‘And to these images they pray, with the same result as if one were to talk to the walls of his house.’ For are they not to be wondered at who worship stones, and place them before the doors, as if capable of activity?
 2. “...For Dionysius the tyrant, the younger, having stripped off the golden mantle from the statue of Jupiter in Sicily, ordered him to be clothed in a woolen one, remarking facetiously that the latter was better than the golden one, being lighter in summer and warmer in winter.
 3. “And Antiochus of Cyzicus, being in difficulties for money, ordered the golden statue of Zeus, fifteen cubits in height, to be melted; and one like it, of less valuable material, plated with gold, to be erected in place of it.
 4. “And the swallows and most birds fly to these statues, and void their excrement on them, paying no respect either to Olympian Zeus, or Epidaurian Asclepius, or even to Athene Polias, or the Egyptian Serapis; but not even from them have you learned the senselessness of images.”
 - a. (Source: Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Heathen*, chapter 4; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 2, p. 186)
 5. “Why, I pray you, have you assigned the prerogatives of God to what are no gods? Why, let me ask, have you forsaken heaven to pay divine honor to earth? What else is gold, or silver, or steel, or iron, or brass, or ivory, or precious stones? Are they not earth, and of the earth? Are not all these things which you look on the progeny of one mother—the earth?

6. “Why, then, foolish and silly men (for I will repeat it), have you, defaming the super-celestial region, dragged religion to the ground, by fashioning to yourselves gods of earth, and by going after those created objects, instead of the uncreated Deity, have sunk into deepest darkness?
7. “The Parian stone is beautiful, but it is not yet Poseidon. The ivory is beautiful, but it is not yet the Olympian Zeus. Matter always needs art to fashion it, but the deity needs nothing. Art has come forward to do its work, and the matter is clothed with its shape; and while the preciousness of the material makes it capable of being turned to profitable account, it is only on account of its form that it comes to be deemed worthy of veneration. Your image, if considered as to its origin, is gold, it is wood, it is stone, it is earth, which has received shape from the artist’s hand. *But I have been in the habit of walking on the earth, not of worshiping it.*
 - a. (Source: Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Heathen*, chapter 4; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 2, p. 188)
8. “Human art, moreover, produces houses, and ships, and cities, and pictures. But how shall I tell what God makes? Behold the whole universe; it is His work: and the heaven, and the sun, and angels, and men, are the works of His fingers. How great is the power of God! His bare volition was the creation of the universe. For God alone made it, because He alone is truly God. By the bare exercise of volition He creates; His mere willing was followed by the springing into being of what He willed. Consequently the choir of philosophers are in error, who indeed most nobly confess that man was made for the contemplation of the heavens, but who worship the objects that appear in the heavens and are apprehended by sight. For if the heavenly bodies are not the works of men, they were certainly created for man.
9. “Let none of you worship the sun, but set his desires on the Maker of the sun; nor deify the universe, but seek after the Creator of the universe. The only refuge, then, which remains for him who would reach the portals of salvation is divine wisdom. From this, as from a sacred asylum, the man who presses after salvation, can be dragged by no demon.”

- a. (Source: Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Heathen*, chapter 4; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 2, pp. 189-190)
- v. We see in the Old Testament that idolatry *remained a problem for the Jews* up until the time of the Babylonian Captivity.
- vi. Tertullian, a Christian writer in Carthage, North Africa, wrote *On Idolatry* c. 200 AD.
 1. In that work, Tertullian directly addressed those Christians who no longer personally worship idols, yet still *made a living by making idols*. He insisted that Christians must have *nothing whatsoever* to do with idolatry! He insisted that those who made idols were *servicing demons*.
 2. Apparently, some Christians even pointed to the example of Moses making the *bronze serpent* in **Numbers 21** as a justification for making idols. (This is the same bronze serpent that Jesus referred to in **John 3:14-15**.) Tertullian's response was that the bronze serpent was a special case, foreshadowing the crucifixion and the defeat of Satan's forces.
 - a. "But some one says, in opposition to our proposition of 'similitude being interdicted,' 'Why, then, did Moses in the desert make a likeness of a serpent out of bronze?'"
 - b. "The figures, which used to be laid as a groundwork for some secret future dispensation, not with a view to the repeal of the law, but as a type of their own final cause, stand in a class by themselves. Otherwise, if we should interpret these things as the adversaries of the law do, do we, too, as the Marcionites do, ascribe inconsistency to the Almighty, whom they in this manner destroy as being mutable, while in one place He forbids, in another commands?"
 - c. "But if any feigns ignorance of the fact that that effigy of the serpent of bronze, after the manner of one uphung, denoted the shape of the Lord's cross, which was to free us from serpents—that is, from the devil's angels—while, through itself, it hanged up the devil slain; or whatever other exposition of that figure has been revealed to worthier men no matter, provided we remember the apostle affirms that all things happened at that time to the people figuratively."

- d. “It is enough that the same God, as by law He forbade the making of similitude, did, by the extraordinary precept in the case of the serpent, interdict similitude. If you reverence the same God, you have His law, ‘You shalt make no similitude (**Deuteronomy 4:16**)’
- e. “If you look back, too, to the precept enjoining the subsequently made similitude, do you, too, imitate Moses: make not any likeness in opposition to the law, *unless to you, too, God have bidden it.*”
 - i. (Source: Tertullian, *On Idolatry*, chapter 5; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 3, pp. 63–64)
- vii. The bronze serpent incident from **Numbers 21** that Tertullian discussed also points to another lesson on idolatry. Later in Israel’s history, that bronze snake became a snare for them when the people started venerating it and burning incense to it. Since the people had turned this thing (which originally was good and authorized by God) into an idol, Hezekiah destroyed it.
 - 1. “Now it came to pass in the third year of Hoshea the son of Elah, king of Israel, that *Hezekiah* the son of Ahaz, king of Judah, began to reign. He was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned twenty-nine years in Jerusalem. His mother’s name was Abi the daughter of Zechariah. And he did what was right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his father David had done. He removed the high places and broke the sacred pillars, cut down the wooden image and *broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made; for until those days the children of Israel burned incense to it, and called it Nehushtan.*” (**2 Kings 18:1–4**, NKJV)
 - 2. Even something that was good, and used by God to accomplish wonderful things in the beginning, can become an idol. This makes me think of how some have taken *Mary*, the mother of Jesus.
 - a. The angel Gabriel said to her, “Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; *blessed are you among women!*” (**Luke 1:28**, NKJV)
 - b. She herself later proclaimed, “...behold, henceforth all *generations will call me blessed.*” (**Luke 1:48**, NKJV)
 - c. Nevertheless, in some groups and especially in certain parts of the world, today Mary is prayed to and

venerated to a degree that some would consider approaching *idolatry*.

3. There has been a longstanding tendency in human nature to want to worship and venerate created things. Consider the problems this continued to cause in Israel's history, after the golden calf incident.
 - a. Before entering Canaan, the Lord *repeatedly warned* His people against picking up the idolatrous practices of the pagans who lived there. (**Deuteronomy 4:15-31, 7:25-26, 12:1-4, 12:29-32, 13:1-18, 27:14-15 and 29:14-29**)
 - b. Solomon became ensnared in the idolatry of his pagan wives. The Lord said *this was the reason* that most of the kingdom would be torn away from King Solomon's house, after he died (**1 Kings 1:1-13**)
 - c. When the kingdom was split in two Jeroboam, the first king of the northern kingdom of Israel, made two gold calves and had them set up in Bethel and Dan. (**1 Kings 12:25-33**)
 - d. From the time that the kingdom divided until the Babylonian Captivity, throughout **1 & 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles**, we see all the kings of Israel and several of the kings of Judah involved in the sin of idolatry.
 - e. It appears that it took the 70 years of captivity in Babylon to finally extinguish the sin of pagan idolatry from the Jewish nation.
4. In the New Testament, when the gospel goes out to the pagan world, we see the influence of idolatry almost everywhere.
 - a. While waiting in Athens, it says that Paul was provoked in his spirit "when he saw that the city was given over to idols" (**Acts 17:16**). In the sermon he preached at the Areopagus, Paul came down hard on their idolatry:
 - i. "Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising. Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but *now commands all men everywhere to repent...*" (**Acts 17:29-30, NKJV**)

- b. So many people today are simply living for comfort, pleasure and wealth.
 - c. Repent if you are anywhere near close to this sin that can disqualify you from your eternal inheritance!
- ix. Modern 'New Age' pantheism (worshiping the earth and the physical universe instead of the Creator)
 - 1. This has been experiencing a resurgence within my own lifetime, here in the West.
 - 2. I am an environmental engineer by profession. I went into this field out of a concern for the environment, specifically water pollution. Most people would consider me "an environmentalist" in the sense that I try to recycle, reduce my pollution impact, etc.
 - 3. However, I have noticed that many modern environmentalists are actually pantheists (they worship and venerate the earth).
 - 4. God created the world and put us on it to take good care of it. We should be good stewards, respect the animals and natural habitats, and try to leave the world in good shape for those who follow.
 - a. The beauty and complexity of the natural world is a wonderful testimony to the brilliance and goodness of God, who created all of this.
 - b. However, we need to make sure that we are worshiping *only the Creator*, not the world He created!
- x. Idolatry in modern American entertainment and sports
 - 1. Think about it: the rock music concert culture reminds me of the scene with the golden calf in **Exodus 32**: darkness, drinking, pleasure-seeking, worldliness, pagan revelry and immorality. It involves venerating something that God detests.
 - 2. There is a popular television show in the US, "American Idol". Since rock stars are referred to as idols, the contestants are competing to become an 'idol' themselves!
 - 3. Likewise, there is an enormous focus on professional and college sports that approaches idolatry in our culture.

- a. One of the few positive side-effects of COVID-19 epidemic has been shutting down much of professional sports. Consider the vast amount of time and energy wasted, especially by men, watching sports games for entertainment!
4. Tertullian made a point in *On Idolatry* that Jesus expanded the definition of several sins from what had been presented in the Old Testament, specifically from the Law of Moses.
 - a. He expanded the prohibition on *murder* to prohibit even hating someone else;
 - b. He expanded the prohibition on *adultery* to prohibit even lusting after someone else; and
 - c. Jesus expanded the prohibition on *idolatry* as well!
 - i. “He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses this life for My sake will find it.” (**Matthew 10:37-39**, NKJV)
 - ii. With that in mind, let us *reject all the idols* of this world, in all forms. That includes money, wealth, fame, and even the natural world around us.
 - iii. Even children and grandchildren, which are wonderful things given to us by God, must not become ‘idols’ in our lives.
 - iv. Let’s remember the heroes Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who were willing to face death rather than bow down to the great idol that others were worshiping. (**Daniel 3**)
 - v. Let us worship and serve *only the Creator* and give thanks for every wonderful thing He has created.