

Sermon: The Golden Calf

Ex 32:1-14

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Introduction

We make many wrong choices in our lives; we do stupid things. We are so great at messing up. Will God never be done with us?

Last week we read here how God gave 10 commandments to Israel, as the summary of how Israel had to behave as part of its covenant with God. God told Israel he would be with them and bless them, if only they would abide by his rules.

The first and most important commandment is to love God above all other things. This includes to worship God alone, and to make no statues or images of him. He is so far beyond how we can imagine him!

But the first answer the people gave to the love of God for them, expressed in their exodus out of Egypt, and his care for them in the desert, and his self-revelation at Sinai, is the very grave sin of idolatry. This is exactly what the *first* commandment forbids.

1 Why create images?

How in the world was it possible that within days after their miraculous salvation from Egypt by JHWH, the God of Israel, Israel built its golden calf as a representation of God, and how come that they began to worship this golden statue.

The Israelites were even prepared to donate their own gold to create a god they could see and feel. But gods that can be touched and lifted up or dropped down are not real. They can be manipulated to do as we please. They are our creation.

The Creator of heaven and earth cannot be manipulated. He is not our puppet. We are his creation and He has might over us. And therefore He forbids us to make lifeless statues to represent him and to then worship those.

What was the excuse for the Israelites? Moses was gone. The people did not see Moses to lead them, so they needed gods that *could be seen* for leading them. For hundreds of years they had been whipped by the Egyptians to do their slave labour and now they were not able to lead their own life and to take personal responsibility.

And where did they look for new leadership? At the gods of Egypt. Ephrem, the most important of the Syrian church father and a great poet in the fourth century, said in one of his homilies (*Homily on our Lord*, 17.3-18.4):

They only saw that Moses was not near. And so, with this as a convenient excuse, they could draw near to the paganism of Egypt [...] so that they could worship openly what they had been worshipping in their hearts.

The calf they created from gold was no one else than the Egyptian bull god Apis. In the ancient Middle East the bull or the bull-calf was a symbol of the strength of the divinity. They wanted *that* god to lead them because the gods of Egypt were still in their hearts.

The people of Israel believed they were worshipping JHWH with this bull. But this was a very bad idea: what they did was idolatry. We cannot worship God except in the manner that he himself has prescribed.

I know, this is not a very popular idea in our postmodern time when we seem to be creating our own religions from the bottom up. But is it nonetheless true. God tells us what he wants from us.

We must not envision him in any other manner than what he has revealed. Jesus Christ is how we must envision God. Jesus is the exact and true image of God.

The people of God broke their covenant with God even before it began to operate. By worshipping the golden calf of Egypt, they undid the whole meaning of the exodus. Remember how God wanted to save them from Egypt and the gods of Egypt, and how God wanted to make them into a nation for himself?

Our Lord God freely gives his love, but man responds by disobeying the commands of God. This is strong proof that the commandments of God in themselves are weak to save because we ourselves are weak; we have a natural tendency to not do the will of God and to create us an image of god that is as we like him to be.

Our hearts are so easily drawn to idolatry; we must be very careful to not trespass outside the limits God has set in his own Word, the Bible.

2 Need of sacrificial leadership

We also need good Christian leadership that will not compromise in its preaching of that Word. You may demand from your priests that they walk and preach the straight path without compromise. The importance of this we see by looking at the difference between Moses and Aaron.

Moses was talking with God, listening to his Word, while Aaron followed his own wisdom and listened to the people. This form of democracy is bad; there are limits to democracy in the house of God; those limits are formed by our constitution, the Word as understood in the tradition of the Church.

We must always take account of the Word of God above human interests or advantages. Why did Aaron not just say no to the people? He knew it was wrong. Maybe he was afraid of the crowds? Did he not dare to contradict modernity or post-modernity? Was he afraid to be seen as old-fashioned?

God calls us to be fearless, uncompromising, all of us, when it comes to the truth and the practice of our Christian faith.

Did Aaron actually, in a subtle way, try to stop the people by asking for their gold? Did he want to make it expensive for them, to have this golden calf constructed? Or did he want the calf carved out of their gold to show them the folly of worshipping today with what yesterday was their nose ring, an earring, or their golden navel piercing?

Maybe this is how Aaron tried to stop them - but it did not work and by following the demands of the people, Aaron compromised in a bad way. And instead of serving his nation, he gravely endangered them.

While Moses was still on that mountain with God, God spoke to him about this idolatry of the people. **Read again Ex 32:7-10.**

Interesting that God, looking at the deeds and the intentions of the people of Israel, says that they are stiff-necked, or hard necked. This very same word stiff-necked was also used for the pharaoh of Egypt. This attitude led to the destruction of Pharaoh. Will it also lead to the end for the nation of Israel now?

It seems that God is distancing himself from the people of Israel. He says to Moses that they are Moses' people and that Moses brought them out of Egypt. This is because they had acted like all other nations, not in accordance with their holy vocation. So God concludes:

Read Ex 32:10. He wants to destroy the nation, and start all over again with Moses.

This was an important test for Moses. Aaron fell for the demands of people. Would Moses fall for this demand by God? That would not have been good.

That God tested Moses is clear from the words 'leave me alone' in Ex 32:10. They are an invitation to Moses for arguing. This is certainly how St Jerome, a Biblical scholar in antiquity (347-419), understood these words. In one of his sermons (*Homilies on the Psalms*, 26.) he preached:

What does God say to Moses? "Leave me alone; you are compelling me, your prayers, as it were, restrain me; your prayers hold back my hand. I shoot an arrow; I hurl a javelin; and your prayers are the shield of the people." [...] Along with this, consider the compassionate kindness of God. When he says, "Leave me alone", he shows that if Moses will continue to harass him, he will not strike. [...] In other words, what does he say? "Do not cease your persistent appeal, and I shall not strike."

3 Prayer of Moses

Moses was committed to doing what God had first told him: to take Gods people to the Promised Land. This was in accordance with the covenant of God with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. So Moses interceded for his own people, even at the expense of his own future.

This is what Moses prayed in Ex 32:11-13.

Read.

Moses uses three arguments to convince God:

1. Vs 11: it was you God, not me who brought the people out of Egypt. You started a good work.
2. Vs 12: Think of your image, God! The Egyptians will hear it when you destroy Israel. Your good name is at stake.
3. Vs. 13: You have sworn to Abraham and his family to give them the land forever. Are you now a God who's word can be trusted?

Everett Fox, a Jewish bible scholar, wrote this comment in his own translation of Exodus (*The Five Books of Moses*, p. 440). He says that we learn of Moses:

Faced with a dictator's dream, - the cloning of an entire nation from himself - he opts for staunchly defending the very people who have already caused him grief through their rebelling. [...] He knows that his task is to continue the foundation established by the patriarchs.

What a great statesman and church leader Moses proved to be by this love shown in his choice. He sacrificed his own future (remember, he did not even enter into the promised land), he sacrificed his own future for the welfare of his people. He sacrificially loved God and his neighbour.

God decided to destroy the nation and start again with Moses. But Moses rejected this and prayed for his people, and this made God forgive the stubborn idolatrous people. What a different style of life and leadership than that of Aaron.

Moses is truly a type of our Lord Jesus Christ here. He gave up his own glory for the sake of a nation of sinners. A deep biblical concept that we must not only praise but also follow in our life.

Let us not give up on any people, but pray for them. For our political leaders, our church leaders, our families, our friends, even those people who trouble us.

Let us not give up on others but follow the example of Moses, Jesus, yes God himself. And just looking at our own small and grave errors

and sins will surely make us milder about other people and their shortcomings.

Conclusion

God did forgive Israel in spite of their grave sin of idolatry because Moses sacrificially pleaded with God – based on God's own promises and his covenant. So forgiveness is, in the end, based in God himself.

He calls us to love him above all things and beyond anything else. And that is what we will do! But as we often fail, he awaits us with outstretched arms – the arms of Jesus Christ who paid a much higher price than Moses did, by his death on the cross.

Let us dedicate our life again to God and God alone. We will not follow other gods but live for serving him only in the manner that he has prescribed in his Word. And thank the Lord for forgiving us when we stumble. He forgives us, and he even helps us to extend our patience and forgiveness to others.

+ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.