

The Golden Calf: When God's People Sin

Last Sunday we considered Jesus' words about the Great Commandment, which summarizes the meaning of the Ten Commandments. Following the giving of the Decalogue, the people saw and heard a manifestation of God's power in thunder, lightning, a trumpet sound, and smoke covering Mt Sinai. Moses calmed their fears and then continued to receive additional instruction from the Lord, who confirmed his covenant with the people, who responded with a solemn declaration of obedience (24:1-3). Now we come to our text for today, regarding what took place at the foot of the mountain while Moses was receiving God's instructions. Hear this narrative of the golden calf, in Exodus 32:1-14:

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him."² Aaron said to them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me."³ So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. ⁴He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"⁵ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD."⁶ They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

⁷The LORD said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; ⁸they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'"⁹ The LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. ¹⁰Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation."

¹¹But Moses implored the LORD his God, and said, "O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? ¹²Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. ¹³Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'" ¹⁴And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

Moses had been gone from the people during his audience with the Lord God for nearly six weeks, and the people became restless, and asked Moses' brother Aaron to construct an idol, a golden calf, in direct violation of the Second Commandment against idol construction and worship (20:4; 32:1).

Some preachers seem to enjoy preaching about sin and God's judgment. But I'm too much of a sinner myself to find such enjoyment and confidence that I'm above God's judgment. During my Baptist upbringing, the big sins, which I largely managed to avoid, were smoking, drinking, dancing and cussing. But I have realized that anything I think, say, feel or do that displeases God and harms myself or others is sin.

This account of the worship of the golden calf is not about what happens when pagans sin, but rather what happened when God's people sin. These sinning believers were delivered through the Sea, given the covenant and the Ten Commandments, and had just reaffirmed their commitment to obey and follow the Lord God (24:3).

This passage is a critically important one for us today as God's people. We too continue to engage in spiritual warfare and moral temptation because, as long as we're on our present earthly pilgrimage, we must resist the downward pull of the old sinful, fallen nature that Paul describes in Romans 7. The apostle also wrote to the Corinthians, giving them warnings from Israel's history, and specifically from this event at Mt Sinai. Paul refers to this event of idol worship resulting in sexual immorality, resulting in God's judgment. He says that "These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us.... So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall" (1 Corinthians 10:11-12).

We need to carefully listen to what the Lord God is saying to us Baptists and Presbyterians about the subtle and sneaky prevalence of sin. The message of the golden calf shows us by way of warning, **the acts of our sinful nature**.

Amazingly, so soon after their miraculous deliverance and God's dramatic revelation, their awe-inspired worship and vow of obedience, the people of God engaged in egregious rebellion. They stooped to the level of the false religion and immoral practices of the Egyptians. Once again they demonstrated that it was easier to get the Israelites out of Egypt than to get Egypt out of the Israelites (Ryken).

In writing to the Galatians, Paul reminds us that we have a choice—to live by the Spirit a life that pleases God or to fall back into living according to the dictates of the sinful nature, and he gives a list of shameful behavior. I can manage to feel pretty good about myself regarding these shameful behavioral sins, but I can't dodge the more "respectful sins," such as strife, jealousy, anger and envy. When believers act in these ways, whether in sordid or subtle ways, we're acting like pure pagans, who have never received eternal life and a new nature.

When Moses had been gone a while, the awareness of God's presence and goodness began to fade; and questions and doubts began to arise. Unless we turn to the Lord and remain steadfast in waiting upon and trusting in him, in the bad times as well as the good times, our questions and doubts can settle into unbelief. The impatience of the Israelites waiting for Moses for nearly six weeks gave way to doubt, which became unbelief. They became disappointed with God, who wasn't living up to their expectations and meeting their timetable. Have you ever been disappointed with God? I have. And it's usually because I'm suffering from "spiritual amnesia" (Ryken). The Israelites forgot the God who saved them, who had done great things in Egypt, miracles in the land of Ham and awesome deeds by the Red Sea" (Psalm 106:21f). And I forget what God has done for me in Christ, in his death and resurrection and in his gracious rescue from sin, death and hell. Once we forget the saving grace of God and our commitment to follow Jesus as Lord, we lose the focus of our lives. When we fail to worship, trust and love God, we'll find a substitute, an idol, which is a "god" of our own making.

We can construct a false god we sing about and pray to on Sundays, one who is not the living, loving, and holy God of the Scriptures. This will be the god of our own making, who suits our expectations and is eager to bless our every endeavor. When we listen to his preachers, we're entertained and comforted in our assurance that all he wants to do is make life more comfortable, and he'll otherwise leave us alone.

The Israelites who fell into idolatry began to live like the devil himself. They began to act like the pagan Egyptians. Those who claim to be God's children and whose lifestyle shows no difference from the fallen world, need to give themselves a reality check. The rebellious Israelites found a way to be "religious" and also party, with a god that could condone their immoral behavior.

In my Baptist upbringing, we were good at avoiding certain "sins," at least the party-type sins. But God's desire is not to restrict our enjoyment of life. He's created us with certain appetites and desires for pleasure. God simply want us to gratify them in his way and time, in a way that maximizes pleasure and minimizes regret. Jesus knew how to have a good time, being accused of being "a glutton and a drunkard" (Matthew 11:19). Some overly strict prudes confuse sin with pleasure.

I heard of the daughter of a Presbyterian minister who, in his funeral eulogy, said that in his 90 years her father never committed a pleasure. That's not a life that pleases oneself or God, who created life to be enjoyed. Christians of all people should know how to party the right way! It's just important that we *invite God* to the party!

Sin is living apart from the will and presence of God. It's behavior that leaves God out of our lives. It's living as though God is absent or is making God less than he is. But God hates and judges sin, and not just sins of the flesh but of thought, speech and attitude. He hates sin because of what it does to us, bringing suffering, damage

to the image of God and to our relationship with him and with others. God hates sin because of what it did to his Son, who suffered for us the consequences of and the just punishment for our sins. God hates sin because it disrupts our fellowship with him.

RC Sproul says we confuse God's justice and mercy, and we wonder why God's so upset about sin! Sproul notes that instead of singing the popular "Amazing Grace," we would prefer to sing the song, "Amazing Justice." We're amazed by God's justice and think we deserve his grace, by which we mean leniency. Referring to Jesus' recounting the falling of the tower in Siloam as a warning for all us sinners to repent (Luke 13:4f), Sproul continues: "Our lyrics tend to go like this:

*Amazing Justice, cruel and sharp
That wounds a saint like me:
I'm so darn good it makes no sense—
The tower fell on me"* (Sproul, 167).

God's judgment fell that day. Some people were spared and others were destroyed. Moses' shattering the stone tablets seemed a ritual act that symbolized the breaking of God's covenant with the unrepentant. Amazingly, in response to Moses' intercession, "the Lord God changed his mind about the disaster he planned to bring on his people" (14). By grace through Moses' prayer, many were spared.

God revealed in Jesus hates sin just as much today. He's just as holy and righteous today as in his response to the sins of his people with the golden calf. God is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8). But now God acts differently because a perfect sacrifice, a perfect Mediator has made atonement for our sin and has satisfied the wrath of God and his demands for justice. Because of what Christ has done, God, the just one, can act differently toward us. The good news of the story of Christ Jesus is that God's response to our sin can be different than it was with the Israelites with the golden calf. The judgment in Exodus 32 doesn't apply to us today. It isn't that God has changed, but rather that a Mediator has come. One who knew no sin became sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21).

The episode of the golden calf has become good news for us because of the vital difference the cross of Christ and the empty tomb have made for us (1 Peter 3:18). We have, just like the people of the Old Covenant, failed to live up to the righteous requirements of the law and have failed to live a life that pleases God and that receives the full measure of his blessing. Like these Israelites, we've been caught in the act of our sin, and deserve God's judgment; but like Moses stood between these sinful Israelites and turned away God's judgment, so Christ, taking our guilt upon himself as he suffered and died on the cross, gives forgiveness and peace with God to those who turn to him in faith and repentance.

The golden calf shows us definitely how *not* to live. Disobedience and idolatry, living for someone or something other than God leads to self-destructive and Christ-

dishonoring behavior, which is sin. For a child of God, living in rebellion is a dangerous life. "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31). God loves us so much, he'll take sometimes drastic and painful measures to bring us back into his love and fellowship. A life outside of God's will that brings dishonor to his name is mortally dangerous, as we read from Paul (1 Corinthians 5:4f) and John (1 John 5:16). Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:11 that God's judgment on the rebellious Israelites is a serious example and warning to rebellious believers.

God hates sin but he loves us and yearns for us to return to him. Another great picture we have of the heart of God is that of the father of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11-32). This is the way God acts toward us today. Although the rebellious son went his own way toward self-destruction the father always yearned for him to return home. God yearns to forgive, restore and bless you with his love, eternal life, joy and fellowship. He wants you to have joy and peace in your life.

God loves us so much he'll take severe measures to bring us back into his love. We need to take inventory of our walk with Christ in the light of the golden calf, and as John admonished, be sure we are keeping our lives free from idols (1 John 5:21), that nothing and no one is more important in our lives than Christ and that he is Lord over everything we are and all that we have. I pray that we'll respond to God's gracious warning about what happens when we sin, and that we'll seek his mercy and grace. He yearns for us to come home!