

“The Golden Calf”
Exodus 32:1-6
(Preached at Trinity, April 5, 2009)

I’m supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord’s Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I’ll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. We now come to a section of Exodus that is well known. It deals with the sad account of God’s people falling into gross idolatry. The chapter opens suddenly. It is almost like a scene change in a movie.
Remember, the entire account of the directions concerning the Tabernacle took place upon Mount Sinai. Moses and the elders had ascended the mount and then Moses alone went to the summit.
Exodus 24:1-2 – “And he said unto Moses, Come up unto the LORD, thou, and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel; and worship ye afar off. ² And Moses alone shall come near the LORD: but they shall not come nigh; neither shall the people go up with him.”
2. Moses communed with God for many days and Israel began to be impatient. What’s taking so long. What could he possibly be doing upon the mountain? Perhaps he’s abandoned us. How do we even know if he’s still alive?
Exodus 32:1 – “we wot not what is become of him.”
3. How quickly they were ready to forget God. How quickly they had forgotten their pledge.
Exodus 19:8 – “And all the people answered together, and said, All that the LORD hath spoken we will do. And Moses returned the words of the people unto the LORD.”
Exodus 24:3 – “And Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD, and all the judgments: and all the people answered with one voice, and said, All the words which the LORD hath said will we do.”
4. They were about to set aside the first two commandments. It may have begun with a one or two outspoken people making comments of discontent. Seeds of discord spread quickly. This is why God sees it as so vile.
Proverbs 6:16-19 – “These six *things* doth the LORD hate: yea, seven *are* an abomination unto him: ¹⁷ A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, ¹⁸ An heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief, ¹⁹ A false witness *that* speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren.”
5. There were no strong leaders to quickly intervene and put an end to the murmuring and it soon grew to a feverish pitch.

6. They began to confront Aaron with their demands. **Verse 1** tells us they gathered “unto” Aaron. The NAS does a much better job in translating the preposition – “the people gathered about Aaron.” The NIV translates it, “they gathered around Aaron.” The grammatical construction usually conveys a sinister intent. We see it even stronger in the Book of Numbers:
Numbers 16:3 – “And they gathered themselves together against Moses and against Aaron, and said unto them, *Ye take* too much upon you, seeing all the congregation *are* holy, every one of them, and the LORD *is* among them: wherefore then lift ye up yourselves above the congregation of the LORD?”
7. Aaron was the second in command but rather than rebuke them for their sin of murmuring and treason he gave them his ear. He should have ended it there. Effective leadership means sometimes going against popular opinion. Sometimes it means you have to say no.
8. The people came making demands.
 “Up, make us gods” – The word means, “arise, stand up” – it’s in the imperative. They were making demands.
9. It would take a strong leader to resist them. Aaron was not that leader.
- A. Aaron ordered them to tear off their golden earrings and fashioned for them a golden calf – an idol in the form of a young bull.
- B. He probably got the idea of the golden calf from his experience in Egypt. There were many Egyptian cults dedicated to the bull.
 We know the Israelites had been guilty of idolatry in Egypt.
Joshua 24:14 – “Now therefore fear the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in truth: and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood, and in Egypt; and serve ye the LORD.”
- C. The word “gods” in **Verse 1** is plural – “make us gods.” The verb “go” is also third person plural. The KJV and ESV accurately translate it as plural.
 This is also consistent with the Egyptian worship of many gods.
 Again in **Verse 4** – “These *be* thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt.”
10. Israel was guilty of what is known as syncretism.
- A. Definition – “the attempted reconciliation or union of different or opposing principles, practices, or parties, as in philosophy or religion.”
- B. The Golden Calf episode is nothing but a wicked and vain attempt to serve false gods along side the one true God.
 Listen to Aaron –
Exodus 32:4-5 – “These *be* thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt. ⁵ And when Aaron saw *it*, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation, and said, To morrow *is* a feast to the LORD.”

- C. Israel would do this continually throughout their history. They infused the sinful customs and worship of the pagan people that surrounded them with the worship of God.
2 Kings 17:9-11 – “And the children of Israel did secretly *those things that were not right against the LORD their God, and they built them high places in all their cities, from the tower of the watchmen to the fenced city.*
¹⁰ And they set them up images and groves in every high hill, and under every green tree: ¹¹ And there they burnt incense in all the high places, as *did the heathen whom the LORD carried away before them; and wrought wicked things to provoke the LORD to anger:”*
11. It wasn't that they denied God outright. They simply combined His worship with the practices of the surrounding cultures.
- a. Of the Samaritans we read.
NAS **2 Kings 17:33** – “They feared the LORD and served their own gods according to the custom of the nations from among whom they had been carried away into exile.”
- b. On Mount Carmel Elijah confronted the sinful idolatry of Israel:
1 Kings 18:21 – “And Elijah came unto all the people, and said, How long halt ye between two opinions? if the LORD *be* God, follow him: but if Baal, *then* follow him. And the people answered him not a word.”
12. Christianity has often been plagued by Syncretism - the blending Christianity with the customs and practices of the surrounding culture. For example in Haiti Roman Catholicism has been combined with Voodoo – Voodoo drums and melodies are incorporated in Catholic church services.
13. The early church was not immune to the effects of culture upon them.
- A. Corinth was a large port city. It was a prosperous city and individuals gave themselves to every sensual fulfillment imaginable knowing no law but self-desire. Every sexual perversion was practiced.
 The Church of Corinth was beginning to mirror many of the sins of their culture.
- B. Laodicea was also a prosperous city. The Church of Laodicea became corrupted by their wealth.
Revelation 3:17 – “Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked:”
14. Tonight I want us to look at syncretism on a much more personal level – not as it affects others but how it is affecting churches in our own nation. Syncretism is very much a reality in the United States. In this country Christianity has been wed with modern culture to form a new religion – a cultural Christianity. It is a blending of humanistic secularism with Christianity.
- I. What are the marks of Syncretism in the United States
- A. We can see it in the shift of clarity in the Gospel message
1. The nature of saving faith - Saving faith demands trusting in the merits of Christ's life and death upon the cross as full satisfaction for our sin
- a. This has been changed today to the level of feelings – people are brought to trust in their feelings
- b. People trust in their decision, in their prayer

2. Repentance is not presented as essential to the Gospel
 - a. An understanding of one's sin is essential. No one will turn to Christ if they don't see their guilt.
 - b. People today are often brought to Christianity without being confronted by their sin. They "come" to Christ to meet their "felt" needs, solve their problems.
 - c. Children are being baptized today before the perfect work of the Holy Spirit is allowed to work – conviction, sorrow
 3. Regeneration has lost all meaning
The miracle of God's transforming grace is lost
 4. The result is multitudes of people following a religion based on feel good traditions that are void of Christ. Church is all about activities and fellowship. It has little to do with Christ.
 5. It would appear that today many have become ashamed of the Gospel
Romans 1:16 – "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek."
- B. We can see it in the absence of theological truth
1. In what has been defined as the "Post Modern" world truth is being seen as something that is relative. There are no more absolutes.
Christianity is a religion that rests upon a Book – the writings of the Apostles and Prophets.
Ephesians 2:19-20 – "Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; ²⁰ And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner *stone*;"
 2. Listen to the testimony concerning the early church
Acts 2:42 – "And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine"
 3. Few professing Christians know what the Bible teaches, and they will not tolerate someone who tells them the truth. They don't understand the essential doctrines of the faith. And they turn they eyes away from the demands the Bible places upon our lives.
 4. Perhaps there was no greater indication of the cultural shift of Christianity than during the 2008 presidential election.
 - a. Barak Obama attends church, professes Christianity – yet promotes abortion and gay marriage.
 - b. Such inconsistencies come to light over and over among our leaders. Most of the House of Representatives and the Senate profess Christianity, yet most do not hold to even the basics of Biblical morality
 - c. The sad thing is the majority of Americans profess Christianity yet are completely blind to the demands of genuine Christianity
- C. We can see it in how the modern church operates – pragmatism is the rule
The modern church is undergoing the greatest transformation since the Reformation - But whereas the Reformation was founded upon Biblical truth the modern movement is being founded upon pragmatism

1. This translates simply into trusting Egypt instead of God
“These *be* thy gods, O Israel”
 2. It seems that the modern church is being restructured in order to appeal to the lost man
 - a. Anonymity without accountability
 - b. Entertaining a congregation is more important than feeding them
 - c. Tolerance instead of holiness
 3. Church growth is more important than Biblical doctrine
- D. We can see it in the downgrade of worship today
1. It seems that anything is allowed in the worship of God
 2. The Second Commandment is a confirmation that God rules how He will be worshipped.
Spurgeon’s Catechism
Question 46: What is forbidden in the second commandment?
Answer: The second commandment forbids the worshipping of God by images, or any other way not appointed in His word.
 3. This was the issue with the golden calf.
They used the calf in the worship of God.
Exodus 32:5-6 – “And when Aaron saw *it*, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation, and said, To morrow *is* a feast to the LORD. ⁶ And they rose up early on the morrow, and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play.”
 4. Worship is to be simple – this has always been the case.
 - a. This is why God gives us the elements of worship.
When we touch it with our own imaginations and creativity we destroy it.
Exodus 20:25 – “And if thou wilt make me an altar of stone, thou shalt not build it of hewn stone: for if thou lift up thy tool upon it, thou hast polluted it.”
 - b. The simplicity of worship styles of most of the evangelical traditions including Baptists and Presbyterians is the result of the application of the regulative principle.
 5. The problem with the golden calf is Israel failed to see God with a holy reverence. In spite of the Sinai experience they thought that the worship of God could be combined with the idolatry of Egypt.
- II. What is the cure and preventative of Christian Syncretism?
- A. We must be governed by the Word of God – alone
 1. In our Cultural Christian culture beliefs and practices are received from many different sources – most are based on tradition and word of mouth. I call it “hearsay religion.”
 2. We must be governed by the Bible
 - B. We must have a vital relationship with Christ
 1. The problem with Cultural Christianity is it is a religion void of Christ
2 Timothy 3:5 – “Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof”

2. Genuine Christianity is Christ, period
1 Corinthians 2:2 – “For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.”
- C. We must have a high and holy reverence of God
 1. Israel’s sin was serving another god
Cultural Christianity is serving another god
 2. Israel was rejecting the God of the covenant
 - a. After Aaron made the calf they declared:
Exodus 32:4 – “These *be* thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt.”
 - b. It was a rejection of God’s claim:
Exodus 20:2 – “I *am* the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.”
 3. Cultural Christianity is a rejection of the Biblical Christ – it is another Christ.
 4. We must come before Him with holy reverence. He is glorious to behold. He rules and reigns over all. We must bow before His sovereign majesty.
- D. We must remember that God has a plan and purpose for His church.
 1. Israel became impatient. They thought Moses was gone and that God had abandoned them. In reality, God was working out His purpose perfectly the whole time as He was giving Moses directions for the Tabernacle.
 2. The modern church has forgotten that God is God. They have turned evangelism into a man-centered work, worship into a man-centered activity, the church into a man-controlled institution.
 3. We must remember that God is working out His purpose

Conclusion:

1. This means God expects His people to trust Him. To love Him - ALONE
Deuteronomy 6:4-5 – “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God *is* one LORD: ⁵ And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.”
2. His church must follow Him alone