

Sermon 110, The Mediator's Work, Exodus 32:25-35

Proposition: Our text shows both sides of the Mediator's calling, as Moses both attacks sinners and seeks forgiveness for them.

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 - A. People Can Get Out of Control, v. 25
 - B. God Is Against Chaos, v. 26
 - C. To Be For the Calf Is to Be Against the LORD, v. 26
 - D. God Says Sin Deserves Death, v. 27
- II. The Mediator Wields the Power of Life, Death, and Ordination, vv. 27-29
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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we have been looking for the past two weeks at the mediator and his work. We saw the way that Moses interceded for the people after their sin with the golden calf. We also saw how he put a stop to their sin and made them drink the product of their wickedness. The mediator does both things. He stops sin, and he asks God to forgive sin. We generally like to emphasize one or the other. Some of us are naturally pro-law, while others are pro-grace. But the Biblical account is perfectly balanced. The mediator is pro-law and pro-grace at the same time. We will see that once again in this evening's text, where Moses stands against sin and even kills sinners, but then goes to intercede for sinners too.

I. The Mediator Attacks Sin and Slays Sinners, vv. 25-27

This part of the golden calf incident is guaranteed to get our attention. Allegedly based on the bitter fruits of Reformation-era religious wars, we decided centuries ago that we would relegate religious views and acts of worship to the "doesn't really matter" column. Theological disputes are all fine and dandy, and you can argue about whatever you want as long as the battle remains

verbal only. But once people start hurting each other, we have to intervene and say “No religious view is wrong enough to deserve death. You can’t kill anyone for blasphemy or false worship.”

Moses, being from the Bronze Age, hadn’t gotten that message. More importantly, Yahweh hadn’t gotten it either. God doesn’t believe that no act of worship is important enough to deserve death. Neither should you.

Let me be clear: I’m not advocating the death penalty for idolatry, not in our current regime. Our state is not equipped to tell the difference between true and false worship. But I do reject the Enlightenment paradigm and its insistence that worship and doctrine don’t matter. It rejects religious wars not because it’s truly against all violence and compulsion (no doctrine is), but because it believes religion is a trivial part of life and frankly not important enough to bother about.

Moses disagrees with that. The LORD disagrees with that. More broadly, the LORD believes that sin deserves death, and He reserves the right to inflict that penalty. Let’s look at this portion of the text in a bit more detail.

A. People Can Get Out of Control, v. 25

After rebuking Aaron, Moses saw that the people were out of control. They had broken loose.

The point I want to make about this is simple: People can get out of control. I’ve gotten out of control. You have too. But the worst is when a whole group of people gets out of control at the same time. You see, none of us is as dumb as all of us. Put a whole crowd together, then get them out of control. They quickly become, not a crowd, but a mob, howling for the cause they believe in and prepared to do any wicked thing to get what they want.

In earlier times, physical mobs lynched innocent black boys who were accused of looking at white women wrong. Before that, they rioted in the streets against cuts to the grain dole, or to support their favorite chariot team. The mob brought about the French Revolution; today, it gathers on Twitter to doxx and shame and cancel anyone who dares to speak against the rainbow reich. Yes, brothers and sisters, people can get out of control. God’s people can get out of control. A whole church can get out of control. I still remember telling one of the ruling elders in Merrimack about some action of the presbytery there. His response: “That board is outta control.”

Presbyteries can get out of control! And that includes being out of control in running after sin.

B. God Is Against Chaos, v. 26

Well, God is against chaos. He divided the waters from the waters. He took the formless world and formed it. The ones who are on Yahweh’s side must stand against the mob, must exert self-control over against the out-of-control actions of their peers.

God is not a God of confusion, but of peace. He stands against every form of evil. He wants all things done decently and in order. That is in our Presbyterian DNA, of course. If ever there was a church that was opposed to the mob, it is us. But the fact that we disapprove means nothing if we do not seek the Spirit and the self-control which is His fruit. To disapprove of chaos in theory is not enough. We must actually control ourselves in practice. That means

standing against the idolatrous craze of the day, whether in the church or outside it. Whoever is for the Lord is against idolatry.

C. To Be For the Calf Is to Be Against the LORD, v. 26

Said the other way, of course, that means that to be for the calf is to be against the LORD. If you like your idol, you can kiss your Heavenly Father goodbye. Let me be clear: The calf is not some legitimate or half-legitimate way of worshiping God. The calf is an utterly illegitimate way of worshiping, and to eat and drink to it is to stick your finger in the Almighty's eye.

This is true across the board, with every idol. Don't say "Pleasure is a good thing created by God, so if I live for pleasure I'm at least half right. I'm doing something that at least kind of pleases the Lord."

Don't say "Money is a good thing from God's hand, and it does so much good for my family and my church. So if I live for money, that's a decent proxy for the God of the Bible."

You may not be tempted by a golden bull, at least not in that form. But I guarantee that some idol or other tempts you. There are things in this world — sexual intercourse, freedom, adventure, a spouse, a child, a job — for which you are tempted to give your all. They are not ways of approaching the divine. Make God ultimate and use these things to serve Him, and you will find them good things. Make any one of these things ultimate, and try to serve God by serving them, and you will find that you are not serving God at all, but fighting Him.

D. God Says Sin Deserves Death, v. 27

In fact, God says that sin deserves death. The LORD commanded that the Levites, those loyal exclusively to Him, crisscross the camp and slaughter even their close relatives. Now, readers from the early rabbis onward have wondered who exactly the Levites were supposed to kill. We know from the census in Numbers that there were way more than 3000 Levites. Yes, that passage explicitly says that the Levites were not numbered, because they belonged to the LORD and He did not need someone else to count them. But the smallest of the 11 other tribes was Manasseh, with 32,200 men. Even if we posit that Levi was only half the size of the second-smallest tribe, thus making it a major outlier — more than two standard deviations from the mean of 50,295 — it would still have over 16,000 men. What that means is that less than a fifth of the Levites ended up killing anyone.

So why is the story told the way that it is? The narration, rather than saying "The powdered idol produced very bad effects on the worst of the idolaters, marking them out for destruction" (the traditional approach of rabbinic exegesis), highlights the random and aggressive nature of the killings. The point is that sin deserves death. Sin is not something kind of bad, but also kind of okay. Sin is really bad. It is colossally bad. It is bad enough to deserve the death squads walking through the camp slaying idolaters.

That is the first lesson to take away from this story of how the Levites walked through the camp killing. Sin deserves death. This was not a mob action or a random paroxysm. This was a well-planned, well-deserved judicial punishment.

II. The Mediator Wields the Power of Life, Death, and Ordination, vv. 27-29

The second section of our text then highlights the power of the Mediator. We saw that he stands against sin and punishes sinners.

A. The Mediator Inflicts the Death Penalty in a Tiny Number of Cases, vv. 27-28

That theme continues in this section. But I want to remind you that objectively speaking, the number of deaths is not particularly large — less than half of one percent of the Israelite men, or less than a quarter of one percent of the entire adult population. The Mediator does not hand out the death penalty willy-nilly. But He does reserve the right to exercise it. Jesus has the right to strike you down, by His own hand or by a human intermediary. The reason the Levites went out slaying was to put a stop to the idolatry. Smashing and burning the calf probably did little to impede those whose hearts were set on having a god they could control. Slaughtering them in their tracks was more effective.

Folks, hear me well: Jesus will not stand for your sin. He will insist on you stopping. He won't put up with sin forever. He exercises discipline, up to and including the death penalty, to turn His people from their wickedness.

B. The Mediator Exercises the Power of Ordination, v. 29

The Mediator also exercises the power of ordination. Being set apart to serve God is the Levites' reward for their faithfulness. From God's point of view this makes perfect sense. Who better to serve Him than those who have demonstrated their total faithfulness? From our point of view it can seem a little twisted: the Levites kill their own family members, then waltz forward to become priests? Does God really want to be served by the kind of people who would commit parricide, fratricide, and friendcide? The answer is that no, He rejects those people when they kill because they want to. But when they kill because they are ready and willing to serve Him, when they value obedience to God more than they value human ties, that is the kind of people He wants as His servants.

1. The LORD Demands Exclusive Loyalty

To put it another way, Yahweh demands exclusive loyalty. He doesn't want divided loyalty, where you say "God, I will do what you ask of me so long as my mother approves." "God, I will do what you want so long as it doesn't conflict with what my friends are doing." No. That's not how it works. God wants you to be loyal to Him and only to Him.

2. "He Who Loves Father or Mother More than Me is Not Worthy of Me"

I can't say it better than Jesus in Matthew 10: "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 his life for My sake will find it."

3. To Choose God Over Family Brings God's Blessing

God chooses as His servants the Levites who were willing to execute the death penalty for idolatry that was mandated in Israel's civil code. Many people who are willing to serve the state and execute the laws balk at enforcing the death penalty. There is a psychological and ethical toll

on everyone who takes lives. But God rewards these Levites with ordination to His service because they chose Him over family.

Today you will meet Christians who were strongly opposed to the LGBT movement until their child came out as gay. Then suddenly the LGBT movement is OK. Same goes for parents who don't accept premarital sex, until their son moves in with his girlfriend. Then it's OK. Brothers and sisters, the situation may very well arise in which you have to decide between following God and having the approval of a member of your immediate family. Everything in you will want to keep the loving, close relationship with your child.

God very rarely asks His people to kill in the line of duty. It occasionally happens for soldiers, cops, and executioners. But this was a one-off command that He gave in the aftermath of the golden calf, not an ongoing command. The overarching command is not "kill idolaters," but "Love God more than anything and anyone else." If you don't love Him more than anyone, if you value your relationship with your mistress or your grandson more than you value your relationship with God, your priorities are out of whack.

The Mediator understands this. He rewards those who value and love Him more than anything. He blessed the Levites with ordination for their extraordinary commitment. He does not promise specific rewards to those who lose family members for His sake, other than to say that whoever loses a family member for His sake and the gospel's will receive that family member back:

Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel's sake, but that he shall receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life." (Mar 10:29-30 NAS)

You will have persecutions, but you will also reap a hundred times as much now, in the present age. That's who our Jesus is.

III. The Mediator Seeks Forgiveness for Sinners, vv. 30-34

The final thing we see the mediator doing here is seeking forgiveness for sinners, even at the potential cost of his own life.

A. The Mediator Confesses his People's Sin, v. 31

Again, as hard a time as you may have reconciling these two things with each other, the Mediator both stops his people's sin with harsh rebukes and intercedes with God to forgive them. He confesses the sins of his people.

The Biblical approach is always to deal with something. Don't sweep it under the rug. Don't pretend it never happened. Admit what's going on and ask forgiveness for what you've done wrong. That is the right approach. Moses goes before God and straightforwardly says, "This people has committed a great sin." He doesn't stop there, either. Many of us don't mind confessing by saying "I did something wrong," or even "I did something really wrong." But to actually specify what wrong thing you did, to say "Yeah, I actually made a god of gold. I actually

ogled a pretty woman. I actually took a wireless charger from the shelf at Walmart and slipped it into my pocket” — that’s different. That’s harder.

The Westminster Confession says this about confessing our sins: “Men ought not to content themselves with a general repentance, but it is every man's duty to endeavour to repent of his particular sins particularly” (WCF 15.5). In fact, it adds, the Ninth Commandment forbids “hiding, excusing, or extenuating of sins, when called to a free confession” (WLC 145). Hiding, excusing, and extenuating sins. Brothers and sisters, I admit it. I am an expert at all three of those. I daresay most of you are too. We have an acronym for it in the business world. We call it CYA. That is a self-protective maneuver that consists entirely of hiding your sins, extenuating your sins, and excusing your sins. My sin was not very bad; in fact, it was practically non-existent compared to so-and-so’s!

You’ve done it. I’ve done it. Aaron did it with his ridiculous attempt to cover his rear by saying “Out came this calf.”

But Moses didn’t do it. *The Mediator doesn’t do it.* You may try to cover yourself with a tissue paper of lies. But Jesus never will. Like Moses, He boldly goes before God and says “Yes, Father, your child just stole the charging pad. He just yelled at his kids. Your daughter just entertained thoughts of how injured and abused she is to have do it her husband’s way.”

Jesus doesn’t hide your sin, extenuate your sin falsely, excuse your sin with lame and inappropriate foolishness. He openly and accurately states your sin and says what you did wrong. You need that, don’t you? I do. We all do. And thank God, we have it. In the movie *Amazing Grace*, John Newton the slave trader and author of the hymn “Amazing Grace” says “I’m not strong enough to hear my own confession.” I often don’t feel strong enough to make my own confession. If you’ll notice, the people don’t even attempt to confess their sin anywhere in these chapters. But the Mediator does it for them.

Now, I’m not suggesting that because Jesus is the perfect Mediator you can stop confessing your sin. If you stop confessing your sin and hope that Jesus will do it for you, you might as well abandon the faith now. The Christian way, as I just said, is to get these things out and deal with them. Based on the rest of Scripture, we can say with certainty that those who never privately dealt with God over their worship of the golden calf never found forgiveness or reconciliation. Reconciliation is impossible without confession, repentance, and forgiveness. The Mediator assists you in confession and repentance, and He intercedes with the Father for His forgiveness. But though He helps, you personally must continue to confess your sin as well as you possibly can. “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins.” And if we don’t confess our sins, all bets are off.

B. The Mediator Offers his own Life in the People’s Place, vv. 30-32

But the Mediator does more than confess the people’s sins. He also offers his own life in the people’s place. The commentators are divided on what Moses means when he says “If you won’t forgive their sins, please blot me out of your book.” Many commentators believe that he is saying “If you won’t save them, don’t save me either.” In other words, it is an expression of solidarity with the people, a statement that “I am willing to accept whatever fate you are pleased

to give to Israel.” The problem with this view is that it trades on God’s personal attachment to Moses. “God, you really can’t bear to damn me, so you won’t damn them either.” That’s the definition of manipulation. On this view, Moses attempts to get God to do something He doesn’t want to do just so that He won’t hurt Moses.

I’m sorry, but that’s absurd. Based on the whole plotline of Scripture, it is far more likely that Moses is saying “Take me instead. If you have to punish someone for the sin with the golden calf, let it be me, not them.” Moses offers his life to save the people. He takes the ultimate step of mediation.

This is why it’s tough to play mediator. You get caught in the middle, between the two sides’ opposing demands. And what often happens is that you have to give your life to make peace between the two sides. That’s what Moses offers to do here. That’s what Jesus offered to do.

C. The LORD Refuses to Accept Moses’ Life, v. 33

Yahweh did not accept Moses’ offer. God says only that He will blot out of the book of life everyone who sins. That is, in strict justice Moses the sinner cannot give his life for someone else’s sin. The one who sins will die; that is the law, and without the intervention of a more perfect mediator than Moses, who can assume the sins of others and transfer His righteousness to them, that is what the law will remain.

D. The LORD Reiterates the Relationship, v. 34

But then God reiterates the relationship. This verse seems rather odd, because it tells only what we already knew. We will see that God’s promise of entry to the land, led by Moses and Yahweh’s Angel, is just what He already said back in ch. 23.

What is the meaning of this? Essentially, that Israel’s sin with the calf has not changed the relationship. Despite the immediate threat to destroy Israel and make a new nation from Moses, God’s promises have not changed. His work for Israel has not changed.

1. His Mediator Will Lead Israel into the Land

Thus, God says “Go, lead the people where I told you.” God had told Moses to lead the people into the Promised Land; now He tells Moses to get going. The promise of entering God’s rest still stood, despite the sin of the calf.

Brothers and sisters, the message is clear: Your sin will not stop God’s promise to lead you to Heaven — not unless you let it. If Israel had preferred to stay at Sinai with their beloved calf, or had chosen to have the calf rather than the LORD lead them into the land, then no, they would never have entered the promised land. But even though they had sinned, God’s promise to bring them into the land still stood. Though you have sinned before, and will sin this week, God’s promises to you still stand as well. He will still get you to Heaven.

2. His Angel Will Go Before Israel, Ex. 23:20

Here in Ex. 32, God repeats that His angel will go before Israel as well. That is a repeat of His promise at the end of the Book of the Covenant: “Behold, I am going to send an angel before you to guard you along the way, and to bring you into the place which I have prepared” (Exo 23:20).

The Mediator, the Angel of Yahweh, will accompany them after all. “I will never leave you nor forsake you” is not a promise given to perfect people, but to sinners. Israel’s sin has not driven Yahweh away. He knew they were going to sin. He knew that they were not going to be perfect. And He planned on it, and forgave them, and accompanied them to the promised land.

Do you believe this? Do you understand how serious your sin is, and how perfectly God forgives you through the Mediator’s work?

3. He Reserves the Right to Visit Israel, Ex. 4:31

Yet that said, God reserves the right to visit. This word “visit” means what it says: God reserves the right to drop by and do what needs doing. Thus, in this verse it is unmistakably a threat: “nevertheless in the day when I visit I will visit their sin upon them” (Exo 32:34 KJV). But earlier in Exodus, when Moses comes and announces what he heard at the burning bush, “The people believed; and when they heard that the LORD had visited the children of Israel and that He had looked on their affliction, then they bowed their heads and worshiped” (Exo 4:31 NKJ). The verb also appears in Zechariah’s prophecy at the beginning of Luke: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people” (Luk 1:68 KJV).

God visits Israel, rather like the inspector general. And when He visits, if He finds all well, we are rewarded. If He finds things that are not right, He visits our sins on us. The nearness of God is our good — but His nearness will also expose our sin. Traveling to the promised land with the angel of Yahweh is not good news for those who desire to keep on hiding, excusing, and extenuating their sins.

IV. The Lord Strikes the People, v. 35

Indeed, the chapter’s final word is a word of judgment: God smote the people. When? How? Where? The text doesn’t say. You should never sin calculating that the judgment will be something you can endure. Don’t say, “Well, the maximum penalty for this sin is x, but the pleasure of the sin is y, and the pleasure outweighs the penalty.” With God, all bets are off. He punishes justly, of course, but He punishes incalculably. Three thousand were killed for their idolatry; the rest only had to drink the calf. Why? The text simply does not say, because God does not want us to try to guess how angry He might be over our various sins, and how soon He will visit.

The bottom line is that the punishment is not something you can endure. Without the mediator’s intervention, the lightest sin is heavy enough to sink you down to the bottom of Hell.

The Lord smote the people for their sin. He does not change, brothers and sisters. The Mediator confessed; the Mediator offered his own life in Israel’s place; God announced that this sin would not prevent Him from bringing His people to the promised land in the company of His angel; and yet the LORD still struck the people because they made the calf.

Beware! Do NOT take sin lightly. Your God doesn’t. You mustn’t either. If you do, you will die. Flee to the Mediator for life instead. Amen.