

Sermon preached at Woodbury Community Church, Woodbury, MN on Sunday,  
February 5, 2012, by Rev. Brian D. Schulenburg

### **EXODUS 32:7-10**

7 And the LORD said to Moses, "Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. 8 They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden 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 And the LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. 10 Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you."

### **THE CHALLENGE #6** **AMERICAN IDOLS**

Let me tell you a quick story.

Once upon a time 2,000,000 Jewish men, women, boys and girls lived in slavery, undergoing brutal oppression at the hands of their Egyptian taskmasters. For years and years the people prayed, asking Jehovah to deliver them from their misery. Year after year it seemed as if God was not listening. But, God is never unaware. He was listening. He heard the cry of his people, and He called a man named Moses to deliver His people from bondage.

Moses was unsure of himself. "Why would God call someone like me?" he thought. Moses initially responded to God's call with five excuses as to why God should choose someone else for the task. But, when God calls us to do something, He isn't looking for anyone else. God wouldn't take Moses' excuses for an answer, and eventually Moses relented and obeyed God.

Moses, a Hebrew, who grew up in Egypt's palace, was uniquely qualified to lead the Children of Israel out of slavery. But he wasn't a good speaker. So, God used Moses and his brother Aaron to confront the Pharaoh. "Let my people go," was the message that God had for Pharaoh. But Pharaoh had a hard heart, and letting the people of God go was not part of his plans.

So stubborn was Pharaoh that God would bring ten plagues upon the Egyptian nation, each somewhat worse than the prior, until finally the first born male offspring of every animal and human in the Egyptian nation was killed. The people of God were let go. 2,000,000 of them exited Egypt's cruel environment.

It didn't take long for the stubborn Pharaoh to change his mind. He sent his army after the Israelites, but God had a plan that would confirm that the Jewish people were His chosen people. When they came upon the Red Sea, with the Egyptians in hot pursuit, God instructed Moses to raise his staff. As he did, the waters parted and the Israelites

walked across the sea on dry ground. When all had passed, and the Egyptian army was on the sea floor, God swallowed up the army, drowning Israel's oppressors on the bottom of the Red Sea.

This summer those who will be going to Israel from Woodbury Community Church will have an opportunity to go to the Red Sea. They will swim in the very sea where these events took place.

After crossing the Red Sea, the Jewish people saw God provide for them in a most unique way. God fed them. Day and night the people received a meal called Manna. Their breakfast and dinner appeared from the sky, prepared in the kitchen of heaven. In the small group that Cyndi and I are a part of, Brandon Lerch talked about the logistical challenges that Moses would have endured as the leader of 2,000,000 refugees. He said, "In our military operations in the Middle East since the tragic events of 9/11, about 1.3 million Americans have served in that land. We know how difficult it is to manage the war effort. It is a logistical nightmare. Now, picture adding 700,000 people, with none of today's technology – that was the task that Moses had!" That's amazing! God had done so much for the people. Deliverance from oppressors, ten plagues with the Jewish people spared from the judgment that the Egyptian people received, crossing the Red Sea on dry land, manna from heaven, and even a pillar of cloud and fire to lead them on their journey – God had taken care of the people! How could any of them doubt the existence, presence, and power of God?

Now, they come to Mount Sinai, and in Exodus 20, Moses receives the Ten Commandments and in the chapters that follow, additional instruction in the law. He was speaking with God and God was giving Moses the instructions for the Children of Israel to live as a covenant people unto God. It should have seemed to the people like God was finally answering all of their prayers. They should have felt so close to God in that moment.

I wonder if you can remember when you felt closest to God. How have you responded when God's hand has so clearly moved in your life? Many of you have taken a spiritual retreat at some point in your life. Our students will be taking a retreat in a couple of weeks. Retreats, mission trips, and service projects are times that many of us feel closer to God. We see His hand at work. We feel his presence in ways that are sometimes difficult in our day-to-day life. That's how the Children of Israel were feeling.

But then something happened. Moses was gone for forty days! He was gone much longer than the people expected him to be. Not every one of the 2,000,000 people who had left Egypt was at the same spiritual place. Some still doubted God's power. Some were glad to be out of Egypt, but not really thrilled about being in a desert. Some, I imagine, were just plain bored.

### **Idolatry's Slippery Slope – Exodus 32:1-6**

Listen to how Exodus 32 opens up:

1 When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, "Up, make us gods 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 So Aaron said to them, "Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." 3 So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. 4 And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden 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 a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD." 6 And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.

Notice that Aaron, who God had appointed as the High Priest of the people, the spiritual leader of the nation, led the idolatrous rebellion. Once the people come to him with the idea, Aaron gives them instructions to bring him gold. He creates an idol with the gold. He encourages the people to worship the idol. He proclaims a feast to the idol. He presides of their worship of this thing.

And in our 21<sup>st</sup> Century American sophistication, we wonder, "Why?" Why would anyone want to worship an inanimate object created by someone's hands, carved out of gold? Why would anyone, who had experienced the amazing blessings of God's own hand so quickly descend into idolatry?

Until we realize that we are guilty of the same thing.

There is not one of us here who has not been guilty of breaking God's first commandment. I find it ironic that while God was giving Moses the law, the Children of Israel were busy breaking the first and the second commandments. Look at Exodus 20:1-6.

1 And God spoke all these words, saying, 2 "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. 3 "You shall have no other gods before me. 4 "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 5 You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, 6 but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

Do you think God is passionate about us not having any other gods before Him?

Tim Keller, one of my favorite authors writes the following about idolatry in the Bible:

“When I first began reading through the Bible I looked for some unifying themes. I concluded that there are many and that if we make just one theme the theme (such as ‘covenant’ or ‘kingdom’) we run the danger of reductionism. However, one of the main ways to read the Bible is as the ages-long struggle between true faith and idolatry. In the beginning, human beings were made to worship and serve God, and to rule over all created things in God’s name (Gen 1:26–28). Paul understands humanity’s original sin as an act of idolatry: “They exchanged the glory of the immortal God...and worshipped and served created things rather than the creator”(Rom 1:21–25). Instead of living for God, we began to live for ourselves, or our work, or for material goods. We reversed the original intended order. And when we began to worship and serve created things, paradoxically, the created things came to rule over us. Instead of being God’s vice-regents, ruling over creation, now creation masters us. We are now subject to decay and disease and disaster. The final proof of this is death itself. We live for our own glory by toiling in the dust, but eventually we return to the dust—the dust “wins” (Gen 3:17–19). We live to make a name for ourselves but our names are forgotten. Here in the beginning of the Bible we learn that idolatry means slavery and death.

The Ten Commandments' first two and most basic laws (one-fifth of all God's law to humankind) are against idolatry.\* Exodus does not envision any third option between true faith and idolatry. We will either worship the uncreated God or we will worship some created thing (an idol). There is no possibility of our worshipping nothing. The classic New Testament text is Romans 1:18-25. This extensive passage on idolatry is often seen as only referring to the pagan Gentiles, but instead we should recognize it as an analysis of what sin is and how it works. Verse 21 tells us that the reason we turn to idols is because we want to control our lives, though we know that we owe God everything. “Though they knew God, they neither glorified God nor gave thanks to him.” Verse 25 tells us the strategy for control—taking created things and setting our hearts on them and building our lives around them. Since we need to worship something, because of how we are created, we cannot eliminate God without creating God-substitutes. Verses 21 and 25 tell us the two results of idolatry:

- 1) Deception—“their thinking became futile and their hearts were darkened,” and
- 2) Slavery—“they worshipped and served” created things.

Whatever we worship we will serve, for worship and service are always inextricably bound together. We are “covenantal” beings. We enter into covenant service with whatever most captures our imagination and heart. It ensnares us. So every human personality, community, thought-form, and culture will be based on some ultimate concern or some ultimate allegiance—either to God or to some God-substitute. Individually, we will ultimately look either to God or to success, romance, family, status, popularity, beauty or something else to make us feel personally significant and secure, and to guide our choices. Culturally we will ultimately look to either God or to the free market, the state, the elites, the will of the people, science and technology, military might, human reason, racial pride, or something else to make us corporately significant and secure, and to guide our choices.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.monergism.com/postmodernidols.html>

What fantastic insight into what idolatry is and looks like in contemporary culture. These are some of the common American idols.

Last night, I took some time to write down some of the things that have been idols in my life. I would define an idol as anything that I have placed a higher value upon than God in my life. Here is just a short sampling of things that have been idols at one time or another in my life:

- Entertainment
- Sports
- Food
- Girls
- Family
- Comfort
- Money
- Video Games
- Fun
- Fishing
- Friends
- Popularity
- Routine
- Politics
- Myself

I don't like that list. I don't like that there are so many things that I have allowed to have higher precedence than God in my life. Take a moment, if you will to write down what some of your idols either are, or have been.

When we allow ourselves to have idols, we break the first commandment, we break the heart of God, and we act like unbelievers.

John MacArthur has written, "Part of the unbeliever's bondage is to the worship of false gods, which even the atheist and agnostic have. They can no more keep from worshipping their sophisticated idols of various sorts than a primitive tribesman can keep from worshipping his carved fetish. Each is a slave to sin, led astray to the dumb idols, however he is led . . . No idol can respond to man's needs. By definition an idol is man-made and impersonal. No idol, primitive or sophisticated, can answer a person's questions, give him revelation, assure him of truth, forgive him of sin, or endow him with dignity, meaning and peace. Just as no unregenerate person can help being led into some form of idolatry, no idol can help being dumb. Whether or not a person or demon is behind it, an idol is totally helpless to benefit the one who worships it."<sup>2</sup>

So why are we so susceptible to love and trust in things more than in God?

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<sup>2</sup> John MacArthur, *First Corinthians: New Testament Commentary*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), p. 284.

Keller writes, “Sin isn’t only doing bad things, it is more fundamentally making good things into ultimate things. Sin is building your life and meaning on anything, even a very good thing, more than on God. Whatever we build our life on will drive us and enslave us. Sin is primarily idolatry.”<sup>3</sup>

We are susceptible to idolatry, because we are susceptible to sin. Paul writes that prior to our relationship with Christ, we are slaves to sin.

Saint Augustine wrote, “Idolatry is worshiping anything that ought to be used, or using anything that ought to be worshiped.”<sup>4</sup>

### **God’s Response to Idolatry – Exodus 32:7-20**

And, God hates it. Look what happened next in Exodus 32.

7 And the LORD said to Moses, “Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. 8 They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden 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 And the LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. 10 Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you.”

11 But Moses implored the LORD his God and said, “O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? 12 Why should the Egyptians say, ‘With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth’? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people. 13 Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, ‘I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.’” 14 And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people.

15 Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand, tablets that were written on both sides; on the front and on the back they were written. 16 The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets. 17 When Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, “There is a noise of war in the camp.” 18 But he said, “It is not the sound of shouting for victory, or the sound of the cry of defeat, but the sound of singing that I hear.” 19 And as soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses’ anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. 20 He took the calf that they had

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.monergism.com/postmodernidols.html>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/i/idolatry.htm>

made and burned it with fire and ground it to powder and scattered it on the water and made the people of Israel drink it.

God was furious with the Children of Israel, so much so that He almost wiped out the entire group and started a new line through Moses. God always has and always will hate idolatry. He is a jealous God. And that is a good thing. As the lover of our souls, we should expect no less.

In 1989, *Today in the Word*, a Christian periodical published the following words:

“Though we do not face a pantheon of false gods like the Israelites did, we face pressures from a pantheon of false values--materialism, love of leisure, sensuality, worship of self, security, and many others. The second commandment deals with idols. This may be something that most of us can't relate to--unless we include life goals that revolve around something other than God Himself. What is the object of our affections, our efforts, and our attention? Where does the majority of our time go? On what do we spend the greatest amount of our resources?”<sup>5</sup>

God has, for so many of us, been an add-on to our lives. I've shared John Piper's quote with you many times: “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him.” He wants to be first. Can you say that is true of you today?

The Children of Israel were quick to depart from law of God. When they became tired of waiting and uncertain of God's plan, they replaced God with a golden calf. Sometimes we're guilty of the same type of thing without even realizing it.

“In *The Wounded Healer*, Henri Nouwen retells a tale from ancient India: Four royal brothers decided each to master a special ability. Time went by, and the brothers met to reveal what they had learned.

‘I have mastered a science,’ said the first, “by which I can take but a bone of some creature and create the flesh that goes with it.”

‘I,’ said the second, ‘know how to grow that creature's skin and hair if there is flesh on its bones.’

The third said, ‘I am able to create its limbs if I have flesh, the skin, and the hair.’

‘And I,’ concluded the fourth, ‘know how to give life to that creature if its form is complete.’

Thereupon the brothers went into the jungle to find a bone so they could demonstrate their specialties. As fate would have it, the bone they found was a lion's. One added flesh to the bone, the second grew hide and hair, the third completed it with matching

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<sup>5</sup> [Today in the Word, June 14, 1989.](#)

limbs, and the fourth gave the lion life. Shaking its mane, the ferocious beast arose and jumped on his creators. He killed them all and vanished contentedly into the jungle.

We too have the capacity to create what can devour us. Goals and dreams can consume us. Possessions and property can turn and destroy us--unless we first seek God's kingdom and righteousness, and allow Him to breathe into what we make of life.”<sup>6</sup>

May you, like Moses, smash the idols that have been created in your life, clinging first to Jesus, His kingdom and His righteousness!

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/i/idolatry.htm>