

Exodus: What We Mean When We Say God
Part 15: The Golden Calf and the Broken Covenant
Exodus 32-33:6

By Pastor David Fields

I. Breaking

The golden calf episode is “the Fall reloaded” – it’s sometimes called “the fall of Israel.” In just six verses in Genesis 3, Adam and Eve believe this terrible lie, drink the poison of distrusting God’s word – of turning toward doing life on their own terms, of turning from God’s goodness.

And now, in just six verses the actions of God’s people making this golden calf, and this threatens to undo all that God has done to make them his special possession.

“Aaron answered them, “Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me. So, all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron.” – Exodus 32:2-3

The people want a “god” who will work in their timing. A “god” they can manipulate; that will affirm all their wishes and do it now.

“Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.” – 1 John 5:21

II. Making Counterfeit-gods

“You shall have no other gods before me.” – Exodus 20:3

And this is the only one that is repeated...afterwards:

“Do not make any gods to be alongside me; do not make for yourselves gods of silver or gods of gold.” – Exodus 20:23

“This is akin to adultery on one’s wedding night.” – R.W.L. Moberly

“The golden calf story becomes a parable of the human condition apart from the gospel, a condition of self-destructive idolatry.” – Richard Hays

“Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt *have become corrupt* [*Heb: shachat*].” – Exodus 32:7

What’s broken here was already broken *by the people who worship the golden calf*.

III. Breaking Free

How do we follow that instruction from 1 John 5 – to “keep yourself free from idols”?

1) Recognize

“All sort of things are potential idols.... As soon as our loyalty to anything leads us to disobey God, we are in danger of making it an idol.... An idol can be a physical object, a property, a person, an activity, a role, an institution, a hope, an image, an idea, a pleasure, a hero...”

“Work, a command of God, can become an idol if it is pursued so exclusively that responsibilities to one’s family are ignored.

Family, an institution of God himself, can become an idol if one is so preoccupied with the family that no one outside one’s own family is cared for.

Being well-liked, a perfectly legitimate hope, becomes an idol if the attachment to it means that one never risks disapproval.” – Richard Keys, *The Idol Factory*

Four Questions for discerning your idols (Borrowed from Tim Keller, The Gospel in Life)

1. What is my greatest nightmare? What do I worry about most?
2. What do I rely on for comfort myself with when things go badly or become difficult?
3. What makes me feel the most self-worth? What am I proudest of?
4. What do I really want and expect out of life? What would really make me happy?

2) Repent

It means to turn, to shift, to make a new commitment to a different way of life. To give our allegiance to the true King.

God’s “kindness is intended to lead us to repentance.” – Romans 2:4b

3) Rejoice in Christ

“Thank you, Jesus, for being my ultimate source of security. Forgive me for seeking my sense of worth in success. I recognize that when I make “winning” my ultimate, I will feel puffed up for a moment, but then deflated at any sense of loss – I feel superior at one moment, and then like dirt the next. Thank you that my worth is located in who you say I am. Be the first in my heart once again.”

IV. Breaking to Remember

“At Horeb [Mt. Sinai] they made a calf and worshiped an idol cast from metal. They exchanged their glorious God for an image of a bull, which eats grass. *They forgot about the God who saved them...*” – 106:19

We come to the Table, and break bread, to remember Jesus (Luke 22:19)

“So, he [the Lord] said he would destroy them – had not Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him to keep his wrath from destroying them.” – Psalm 106:23

Moses “stood in the breach” – for others. He asked God to be consistent, and God seems to have taken that seriously.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” – John 3:16-17

Jesus came to be the ultimate intercessor. He is the one who stood in the gap for us. And more. He is the one who “breaks” to mend us. He is the one who dies so that we could walk free – free from enslavement to false-gods – so that he can be our True God forever. That’s his desire – not to condemn, but to save. So, the question is: will we trust him? Love him?

Life Group Discussion and Reflection Questions:

Open Up

Describe a time when someone kept a promise to you. What did it feel like? How did it impact your future relationship?

Dig In

1. Read **Exodus 32:1-10**. What stands out to you about this scene and God’s response to his people? What does that tell you about idolatry and about God?
2. In 1 John 5:21 we read: “Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.” Why might it still be important to consider?
3. Read the following quote and discuss the question below:

“All sort of things are potential idols.... As soon as our loyalty to anything leads us to disobey God, we are in danger of making it an idol.... An idol can be a physical object, a property, a person, an activity, a role, an institution, a hope, an image, an idea, a pleasure, a hero...”

- Richard Keys

- a. In the message, we saw how at some level we all need to: **1) recognize the idols we may have**, and then both **2) repent** of them, to disavow them, and then **3) rejoice** in what God has done for us through Jesus. Why do you think it might be important to do all three?

Look at these four questions for discerning your idols, and just consider them for yourself for a few moments (Borrowed from Tim Keller, *The Gospel in Life*):

1. What is my greatest nightmare? What do I worry about most? (If you seek power/success it is often humiliation; if you seek approval, it is often rejection; if you seek comfort, it is often stress/demands; if you seek control, it is often uncertainty/loss).
2. What do I rely on for comfort myself with when things go badly or become difficult? (Consider ways we might 'numb' or avoid the pain or concerns).
3. What makes me feel the most self-worth? What am I proudest of? (Our potential idols may be linked to the pride in our success growing out of proportion in our hearts).
4. What do I really want and expect out of life? What would really make me happy? (We may be willing to disobey God to gain a person, relationship, status, or thing. What might that be for you?).

For those who are comfortable, share some of your thoughts with your group. If no one wants to share their personal answers, take some time to discuss why these would be important for you to reflect on.

Prayer

As you feel led, take some time in prayer – laying down those potential idols, and rejoicing in the way Jesus forgives and frees us. Give him praise for the freedom and life he gives us.