

Exposing The Golden Calf

Exodus 20:1-17

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God commands us to worship Him alone, so who or what are you really worshipping?

You may not know these verses word for word in Exodus 20, but I'd be willing to bet that this passage is familiar to most if not all of you.

Exodus 20:1-17, "And God spoke all these words: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments. You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name. Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."

Whether or not you've a background in church or not, I'll bet that you've at least heard of the Ten Commandments.

If you're around my age or a little younger, there's a chance you may even remember these hanging up in a classroom at school. In fact, there's even talk about bringing them back into the classroom.

As much as our government has tried to push God out of the picture, these words can be found in some of the most interesting places in Washington, DC.

The Supreme Court Building in Washington D.C. has an engraving of Moses holding the Ten Commandments on the eastern pediment.

Then, as you walk into the building, on the lower portions of the two main doors, there are two tablets bearing the Roman numerals I through V and VI through X, which is interpreted by many as meaning the Ten Commandments.

Lastly, in the chamber where the justices sit, on the South Wall there is a frieze depicting a procession of 18 great lawgivers, with one being Moses who's carrying a tablet with commandments 6-10 in Hebrew.

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Martin Luther stressed the importance of the first two by saying: *"Don't have any other gods before me and don't make carved images of other gods and worship them and serve them, the rest of the commands are only broken if you break one of the first two."*

Luther's saying that, in the moment we break any of the last eight commands, we're making something else of greater importance than God.

Something or someone else, in that moment, is sitting on the throne in your heart.

The Bible argues, and Luther argues, that the root issue is idolatry. That's why I'm going to talk about idolatry over the next few messages.

I'm doing this because it's so easy for us to mentally separate ourselves from idolatry, especially in our culture.

Many of us think that idolatry is reserved for these uncontacted and uneducated tribes who carve statues out of stone and worship them, or something like that.

Or it's something that people used to do a long time ago, but it's not an issue today. We've adopted this mindset of "*Well, I don't worship idols,*" because they're portrayed as fantasy in our culture.

But in reality, and this is the crazy thing, the danger isn't that we're faced with bowing down to a golden statue but rather it's the subtlety of our idols that makes it possible for them to infiltrate our lives, often before we even realize it.

Before we can discuss idolatry, we first need to define what it is. In its simplest definition, idolatry is valuing something more than you value God.

In fact, John Calvin wrote, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, that "*The human heart is a perpetual idol factory.*" In other words, we just keep on cranking out idol after idol.

What makes them so harmful and deceitful is that they're often good things which we've elevated in our hearts, thus taking the place of God.

When they dethrone God in our hearts, it's often without us even realizing it; without us even knowing that it's happening. It's like, all of a sudden one day – boom, there they are.

Timothy Keller in his book, *Counterfeit Gods*, said it like this, “*We think that idols are bad things, but that is almost never the case. The greater the good, the more likely we’re to expect that it can satisfy our deepest needs and hopes. Anything can serve as a counterfeit god, especially the very best things in life.*”

It's a shame when we worship the gifts rather than the Giver. When we start to worship the good things that God has provided, Satan can use that to slither onto the throne in our hearts where God should be.

Throughout this series we're going to talk about idols in two different ways: surface idols and root idols.

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Surface Idols are those that are on the surface of our lives. They're the outward expression of a root idol. For example: Life only has meaning, or I only have worth if:

1. I have a particular kind of look or body image. (Image Idolatry)
It's not bad to care about your body. There's nothing wrong with wanting to be in shape, to be healthy, but it makes a lousy god.
2. I'm highly productive and get a lot done. (Work Idolatry) Again, there's a ton of verses in scripture that discuss the value and importance of being productive and working hard.

Scripture isn't against being productive, but the issue is when your identity is found in being able to get things done. When that becomes the ultimate part of your life, you're worshiping at the wrong altar.

3. People are dependent on me and need me. (Helping Idolatry)
4. I have a certain level of wealth, financial freedom, and very nice possessions. (Materialism Idolatry)

5. My children and/or my parents are happy and happy with me. (Family Idolatry)

6. I'm being recognized for my accomplishments, and I'm excelling in my work. (Achievement Idolatry)

7. I'm hurting or in a problem. (Suffering Idolatry) Only then do I feel worthy, only then do I feel like I'm able to deal with guilt.

I think that the chances are pretty good that you may be able to relate to at least one of these and I could stand here all-day giving examples, but then you'd just leave me here talking to an empty room.

That's why I want to illustrate how these things slip into our lives. But see, none of us actively sit and think, "*My life only has meaning, and I only have worth or value if _____*" (Fill in the blank).

Instead, the focus should be on the way that we live because it's the way we live our lives that reveals who's on the throne of our heart.

We don't purposely think, "*My life only has meaning and value if I have that new car or that new phone or dressed like so and so.*"

Instead, we just drive ourselves into debt over stuff that doesn't ultimately matter and, in doing so, we reveal who's really on the throne of our heart.

But here's the thing, everything I listed is a surface idol, and this is important because they're not the problem. They're a problem, yes, but not the problem.

When we deal with our idols, when we deal with our sin in the manner of the surface idols I just listed, it's like mowing over weeds without pulling them out at the root.

To deal with surface idols, we need to deal with root idols. So, let's look at the root idols from which these surface idols stem.

There's four that we're going to examine. Some of us may find ourselves in at least one, and God help us, maybe even in two or three.

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The first root idol is Comfort - *"My life only has meaning or value if I have this kind of pleasure experience, or a particular quality of life."*

Now if you're someone who has a comfort idol, here's what you want - comfort. Go figure! You want privacy. You want to lack stress. You want freedom.

This often just comes across as being laidback and easygoing, but at the cost of being productive, because your greatest nightmare is encountering stress or demands.

Now maybe you're thinking, *"Well, that's not me. I strive under pressure!"* I'll get to you in a second.

For the person who worships comfort, stress and demands are the greatest nightmare. But here's the drawback, it causes others to feel hurt or neglected. Why is this?

Because when we're lazy above all else, when we pay the price of productivity for comfort, someone always gets hurt.

Why? Because they feel like they don't matter. *"I'll get that done sometime. When? Sometime."*

The biggest "problem-emotion" they experience is boredom. Why? Because we're not designed to just sit around doing nothing all day, every day. That's why Satan loves idle hands.

Colossians 3:23-24, *"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving."*

As believers, we glorify God by living our lives for Him, not allowing the enemy to take a foothold through boredom. This is why relationships suffer.

Why do they suffer? Because relationships take what? Work. They take getting in conversations, being exposed and vulnerable.

A person with comfort idolatry will bounce from person to person never getting into a relationship deeper than just surface level. It's ironic because the comfort idol never delivers what it promises.

For all the comfort you seek by neglecting relationships and being bored, you just become more uncomfortable by the same amount.

So, while comfort isn't a bad thing, to worship comfort counterfeits the peace we find in Christ. The peace we find in Christ fulfills what's promised. Comfort makes a terrible god.

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The next two root idols are Power and Approval.

The person who has a root idol of Power thinks - *"My life only has meaning or value if I have power and influence over others."* In other words, worshipping success, winning, or gaining influence over others.

They are often willing to pay the burden of responsibility. They subconsciously think, *"I'll handle it, if I can get more success for doing it."*

You're willing to pay the price of bearing the weight of responsibility, to the point that a major fear is humiliation.

When one worships success, it's not just about winning; it goes further than that. It's about not losing, and this, more times than not, results in others feeling used or manipulated.

Worshipping success makes others feel like their relationship with you is just so they can help you get to where you need to go.

Needless to say, the power worshipper is awfully competitive. And again, here's the thing, competitiveness isn't wrong. The desire in and of itself to win isn't wrong. The Bible doesn't forbid competition.

It's just that our competitiveness or drive for success often results in anger. A desire to be successful is great, but it's also a terrible god.

The person who has a root idol of Approval, those who worship approval, they're seeking endorsement, love, affirmation, and relationships.

"My life only has worth or value if I am loved and respected by ____. (Fill in the blank). But at what cost? - Independence. They depend on others and their approval to find their worth in life.

Their greatest fear is rejection. As such, they'll make others feel smothered because they can't humanly love you like God can.

Here's the tough thing, the biggest "problem-emotion" for those that worship approval is cowardice. Dealing with the lack of a spine. It also takes the shape of people-pleasing.

Maybe with one group at work you say something like, *"That's a great idea! Yeah, we should do that."* Then, over here with this group, it's, *"I can't believe they wanted to do that, your idea is way better."*

At the end of the day, you have to sleep with thoughts like, *"I disagree with so-and-so, but if I voice that opinion then what if I lose their approval? What if they don't like me anymore?"*

Now, it's not a bad thing to want people to like you. It's not a bad thing to want others to approve of you.

Some people, almost by nature, are more prone to people-pleasing by gauging their words and choices to avoid negative feedback.

But here's the irony in this idol. Ultimately, at the end of the day, when a desire for approval is so great that it results in chronic people-pleasing traits, you won't end up pleasing anyone.

While Jesus loved, gave to, and served people, He wasn't afraid to say what needed to be said, even when people got angry.

He spoke exactly what needed to be said, even when it led to His death, but it was that death that led to our salvation.

So, the desire to feel loved, the desire to feel affirmed is normal, and isn't, in and of itself, sinful. The problem arises when that fulfillment comes from the world rather than from God.

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The last root idol we're going to look at today is Control - *"My life only has worth or value if I am able to get mastery over my life in the area of _____."* (Fill in the blank) Those who worship control seek - control.

More specifically, you may find yourself seeking self-discipline, certainty, or standards, but this comes at the price of loneliness and spontaneity.

You think, *"I've prepared everything for the trip. I know the weather for every day of the week down to the hour and I have everything I need."*

Or, *"I've read all of the articles I could find about going to the beach and found that someone died at the same beach we're going to so I'm not getting in the water, in fact no one should."*

This idol also takes the form of helicopter parenting, someone who's always hovering their children.

"No one will ever be in any danger because danger won't exist in this family." It's an all-consuming desire, thinking you can control everything.

The greatest nightmare for those who worship control is uncertainty. Others often feel condemned, judged, or offended which results in loneliness.

People don't want to spend time with you because of the way you make them feel.

A phrase so commonly found coming from the mouth of a control worshipper is this: *"If you would only just..."*, or *"If you would only get your act together, then you would have been more prepared,"* or *"If you had been better organized, then that wouldn't have happened."*

But, at the heart of the matter they worry, and it doesn't stop just with worrying. It becomes a vicious cycle:

Worry --> leads to seeking to control things -->
but ultimately, we realize that we can't -->
which causes us to worry about it ->
which leads us to want to control it -->
but you realize that you can't control everything -->
so, you worry about it!

Do you see the cycle? Anxiety, worry, and fear well up inside, which leads to clamping down on control to mitigate those feelings.

It's this condemnation of others that results in loneliness. It's a vicious, enslaving cycle. When we think, *"If I want something done right, I'll just have to do it myself,"* that's control idolatry.

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Conclusion

As we've walked through these idols, maybe you're thinking, *"That's me!"* or, *"I'm not really sure..."* or, *"I'm worried that I might have all four!"*

When it comes to these idols, surface and root, there's a lot of messy stuff with which you must deal, because sin is messy and complicated.

Here's the good news... the solution isn't. It's one word: Repent. What so few tend to do is to own up to their idol(s). Repenting of our sins, repenting of our idols, and looking to Christ is the gateway to joy.

When we own up to all that we do, we can then see so much better and fuller all that Christ has done and is doing for us.

Luke tells a beautiful story in Luke 7 of a prostitute who came into Simon the Pharisee's house and fell at Jesus' feet. She's weeping, and washing His feet with her tears and her hair.

Simon the Pharisee thinks to himself, *"If only Jesus knew what kind of woman this was, He wouldn't let her be doing what she's doing right now. He wouldn't let her touch His feet."*

Jesus answered Simon's thought and said, *"Two men owed a debt to a lender. One man owed a whole bunch and the other just a little. Both debts were forgiven of their debt. Who was more grateful?"*

Simon knows he's busted and says, *"Well, hmm. I guess it would be the one that owed a lot. You've answered correctly. Since I came into your home you didn't greet me, you didn't give me water. You didn't show me hospitality. You didn't show me that I was wanted or desired here. But this woman, from the second she walked in the door washed my feet with her tears. Although her sins are many, they are forgiven fully."*

What Jesus' point was then, as well as today, is that when we own up to our sin, when we dig down beyond the surface to the root of our sins and grasp the heaviness of it all, it magnifies what Christ did for us that much more.

I thank God that there's a three-letter word Paul uses all throughout the New Testament after pointing out sins - "but."

But thank God we're fully accepted. Thank God there's a Savior that's rich in mercy and abounding in steadfast love that can bring us back from all of that.

But thank God that no matter our sins, we have a Savior with Whom we can walk in joy.