

What Is Your Golden Calf?

The Second Commandment

Exodus 20:1-17

Today we continue in our series on the Ten Commandments and come to the second commandment which teaches us: "You shall not make for yourself an idol." We are not to bow down to wood or stone. We learn that God is jealous for us against other false gods who seek us and that the consequences of worshiping false idols can be felt for a long period of time. It can not only hurt us, but our children as well.

Presbyterian author Fred Buechner writes: "Idolatry is the practice of ascribing absolute value to things of relative worth. Under certain circumstances money--patriotism--sexual freedom--moral principles --family loyalty--physical health--social or intellectual preeminence--and so on are fine things to have around, but to make them your masters, to look to them to justify your life--and save your soul, is sheerest folly. They just aren't up to it."

So, the question today is, **What is your golden calf?** You see, anything that shifts our attention--and our affection or allegiance from God to something else is an idol. The word "EGO" stands for Edging God Out. Anything that edges God out of the center of our lives is an idol. It is a mistake.

Last week we learned through the first commandment that we are to worship the one and true God who is not created by man. The second commandment teaches us that our worship of God must not be a lie. We claim we worship God but so often give our ultimate loyalty to someone or something else. And when we do, that's a lie.

It's like the movie, *Honey, I Shrunk The Kids*. Too many people shrink God by making an image of God from created matter and actually worship that image as if it was God. To worship is to ascribe value to an object, and no object can ever take the place of God.

Now let me go mention this. **God is not against art or symbols.** As a matter of fact, we have symbols in front of us each Sunday. The cross that hangs in our sanctuary, the baptismal font that is always present, the table in the Cancel on which are the bread and the cup, the Bible this pulpit.

All are symbols that point to God. All are aids in our worship of God. But they are not God. They help us to keep the story alive in ways beyond words, but they are not the story. God is the story! There is no created matter that can ever come close to represent our great and awesome God. Our God is reachable, not reducible.

Look at the phrase "I, the Lord your God am a jealous God." The insights of Dr. R. Maurice Boyd on this phrase have been helpful to me: "When we read that God is jealous, it is the zeal of His love that makes Him so. Anything less than our highest good is offensive to Him.

He is jealous of anything that menaces our well-being, not for His sake but for ours. He is jealous of other gods, not because they threaten Him... but because they threaten us. When Israel was guilty of idolatry it was Israel who suffered, and God's jealousy was His distress at her folly and His sorrow at her suffering.

His desire was to have her worship only the highest and the noblest. He was jealous of the false gods she went after because they were not worthy of her. He thought more highly of His people than they did of themselves. They were too easily pleased.

It was only in Him, their Creator and Savior, that they could know their chief end and greatest good. They had no good beyond Him. What He wished to give them, and what He wanted them to want, was Himself."

When we turn to idols, we're saying - we're declaring - that "Our God is not able." Just ask Pharaoh and the Egyptians if our God was able.

Look at the phrase "punishing the children for the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generations." What's being talked about here are the results of our sinful behavior of following false gods and flimsy idols. They have an effect on our behavior and conduct. Our behavior and conduct are the result of something we call "character."

We see this so painfully now in our own culture. Many of our young children belong to the first generation of parents who never went to Sunday School and church and as a result we see the moral confusion and anarchy in the ethical dimensions of everyday living. Americans spend twice as much money on beer than they do on books. It's no wonder that our bellies are twice the size of our brain.

Sow a thought, reap an act.

Sow an act, reap a habit.

Sow a habit, reap a character.

Sow a character, reap a destiny.

We know how easy it is for alcoholism to repeat its painful pattern of destructive behavior in family after family. We know people who are child abusers were once abused themselves. We see it in third or fourth generations of families living on public assistance. To break out of these destructive patterns, it takes a mighty faith in God and adherence to his eternal purpose.

I grew up in the shadow of Patterson, New Jersey and a principle by the name of Joe Clark. His story was made into a movie titled *Lean on Me*. There's a memorable scene in the movie where Eastside High School Principal Joe Clark, played by Morgan Freeman, takes a teenager to the roof of the school and challenges him to jump off.

"Go ahead, kill yourself," Clark rants. "You use drugs, don't you, boy? They're killing you. Why [fool] around and kill yourself slowly? Jump and get it over with." The boy repents on the spot.

Clark has struck a chord--the teenager doesn't want to die quickly or slowly. But it was the strategic intervention of one who cared that gave him a sense of life. This is why God intervenes when we're enticed by idols and false gods. He knows these forces will only produce death in our soul and spirit and control our physical nature in a destructive way.

To help us in our journey of faith God gives us a holy meal, communion, which we celebrated last Sunday. When we participate in a communion meal, we receive the bread of life and the cleansing cup of salvation. At that time we are nurtured in our faith and nudged to lay aside all things that prevent us from giving ourselves completely to the living God.