

Smashing Idols

Exodus 32:15-29 (EHV)

¹⁵ Moses turned and went down the mountain, with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hand—tablets that were written on both sides, written on one side and on the other. 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 the noise of war in the camp.” ¹⁸ Moses said, “It is not the sound of people who shout for victory; neither is it the sound of people who cry because of defeat. But I do hear the sound of people who are celebrating.” ¹⁹ As soon as Moses came near the camp, he saw the calf and the dancing, and Moses’ anger burned. So 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 made, burned it with fire, ground it to powder, and scattered it on the water. Then he made the people of Israel drink it. ²¹ Moses said to Aaron, “What did these people do to you, that you have brought such a great sin on them?” ²² Aaron said, “Do not let the anger of my lord burn. You know these people. They are set on evil,” ²³ so they said to me, ‘Make a god for us, who will go ahead of us, because this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’ ²⁴ So I said to them, ‘Whoever has any gold, pull it off.’ So they gave it to me. I threw it into the fire and out came this calf.” ²⁵ When Moses saw that the people were out of control (for Aaron had let them get so out of control that they were disgraced among their enemies), ²⁶ Moses stood in the gate of the camp and said, “Whoever is on the LORD’s side, come to me!” All the descendants of Levi gathered themselves together to Moses. ²⁷ He said to them, “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says, ‘Every man is to strap his sword on his thigh and go back and forth throughout the camp, from one gate of the camp to the other, and every man is to kill his brother, and every man his friend, and every man his neighbor.’” ²⁸ The Levites did what Moses said, and that day about three thousand men from among the people fell. ²⁹ Moses said, “Begin your service of the LORD today. Yes, because every man among you took a stand against his son and against his brother, the LORD is bestowing a blessing on you today.”

All of Mount Sinai was covered with smoke; the LORD had descended on it in fire. The whole mountain trembled violently. God spoke, his voice booming like thunder. “You shall have no other gods beside me... You shall not make gods of silver or gods of gold and place them beside me.” (Exodus 20:3, 23) God gave the Ten Commandments to the Israelites, and the Israelites declared that they would obey. The covenant was sealed with blood, and Moses went back up the mountain to receive the stone tablets.

One week went by; no Moses. Then two. Then three. Then four. Maybe it was in the fifth week that the Israelites gathered around Aaron, Moses’s brother, and demanded, “Make a god for us, who will go ahead of us, because this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.” (verse 23) Aaron did it. He fashioned a calf from the people’s gold and then declared a festival to the LORD. The people bowed down and worshiped this golden calf saying that it was the God who brought them out of Egypt. They feasted. They celebrated wildly. They went “out of control.” (verse 25) They abandoned the LORD for a god of their own making. In just over a month’s time, God’s people broke their covenant with him. They were idolaters.

I’m thinking many of you like me learned what an idol was through this story of the golden calf. An idol is some sort of golden or wooden image of some kind of deity that you bow down to and pray to. Well, I haven’t done that. So, I guess that I’m a better person than these stupid, fickle Israelites. But does the definition of an idol stop at some golden image that you bow down to and pray to? Truly an idol is anything in life that is more important than the one true God, whatever takes priority in your life, that when push comes to shove this is what you chose to spend your time with and do. When the hard times come, you turn to it to get through. When the good times are rolling, your god is where your loyalty, your service, and your delight are.

So, what’s your idol? Is it something that you are addicted to, something that you spend each day striving towards getting and are pretty sure that you won’t be happy without it? And you keep going back to these things, filling your life with them more and more but at the same time feeling emptier and emptier. This could be alcohol, pornography, cigarettes, video games, etc. Is it success at work, that your life is about getting things accomplished, putting all your time and energy there, neglecting other responsibilities while you comfort yourself saying that the work has to be done, people are counting on me, that this is what is most important? Is it family, that you’re the person who says without hesitation that family is the most important thing in life, that when it comes down to spending time with your family you put it ahead of spending time with God, that you actually oppose spending time with God for the sake spending time with family - as if these two things cannot go together? “I’m sorry, Pastor. I won’t be in church next week. I have family in town,” as if family is the reason to not come to church. Or if my family doesn’t want to go to church or it’s hard to get them up and going in the morning, do I just silently concede defeat basically announcing, “If my family is not just into you, God, neither am I”? What does that say to about you? About your family? Who is the priority? Who is your God?

Anything can be an idol, taking the top spot in your life over and above God. In general, these things I just listed give us something that we enjoy. Alcohol quiets the stresses and problems of life for a little while. Pornography gives a rush of endorphins. Video games help create an escape from the world around me. Work makes me feel accomplished and essential. Family makes me feel important and loved. And so we feed these things, chasing these sensations, making them our gods, our idols.

Now take what these idols do for us and compare it to what God does for us. Remember what the LORD had done for the Israelites. He made them, made them prosperous and numerous. When they were suffering in slavery in Egypt, he used his mighty hand to rescue them. As they had begun to travel to the land the LORD had promised for them, he provided food and water for them every day. All these things the LORD did for them all purely out of his goodness, not because they had earned or deserved them.

The LORD does the same for us. God made each and every single one of us – specially, uniquely, specifically. He gave you life, and he has preserved that life for all the days that you have been on this earth. He has gotten you through bad times and he has prospered you through good times. He has poured out on you blessing after blessing, giving you things to enjoy in their proper place like family and work and video games. Even more than that, he gave up his good things in order to live for us, to spend every second of every day for 33 years doing the things we could not: keeping all 10 of God's commandments for us, resisting every temptation thrown his way including everything that tried to be a god in his life, and then actively bleeding for us whether we love him or not. He did this in order to clothe us with perfection, to make us a new creation, to give us the perfect gift of eternal life in heaven with him.

How have we responded to the LORD's goodness to us? The Israelites, they abandoned the LORD for that golden calf, effectively breaking all God's commandments as Moses symbolized as he threw them down and broke them at the foot of the mountain. Are we any better? From the day of our confirmation when we promised that we would dedicate our lives to God and faithfully conform our living to his Word, how long did it take us before we let something else be our top priority? How long after we repented to the LORD for neglecting him did we go right back and do it again? God gives us all these good things, and we basically treat him like that Christmas gift that when we unwrapped it we said, "Oh, that's nice," but then tossed it in a drawer, forgot about it, and eventually gave it away to Goodwill. What if you did the unpolite thing and actually threw it back at the giver instead of silently stashing it away and getting rid of it? When we worship the good things God has given us and make them our priorities in life over God, it's like we take that good and perfect gift of the blood that Jesus bled for us and throw it back in his face as we serve our idols.

The LORD should unleash his wrath and consume us just like he wanted to with these out of control Israelites dancing around this golden calf, celebrating wildly, casting aside what he had done for them as if none of it mattered. But he relented. Why? Because Moses interceded for them, entreating God's promises, that God would still bring them to fulfillment despite their blatant rejection of him. The LORD had mercy on them, preserved them, and made good on all his promises out of his infinite love and compassion.

Like the Israelites, we too have a mediator who has stepped in for us, even though we have broken the first commandment and made idols in our lives. Jesus stepped in for us. He stands before his Father and shows the nail marks on his hands and feet to recall the fact that he shed the blood and paid the price of our rebellion, of our idol worship. "I lived for them. I died for them. Judge them not as they should be judged. Judge them based on my perfection, on my sacrifice. Forgive them. Save them." And the LORD does.

We have a new identity because of Christ – made perfect and holy, no longer an idolater. As such, let's smash some idols.

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai and saw the Israelites' idol worship, "he took the calf that they had made, burned it with fire, ground it to powder, and scattered it on the water. Then he made the people of Israel drink it." (verse 20) He smashed their idol. He scattered it on their water supply not to make them sick, but to show them what this "god" really was – something that can't save itself, something that you will drink and it will pass through your body and be expelled. Then Moses confronted Aaron, who allowed this to happen, encouraged it. Finally, he called everyone to smash their idols. The men from the tribe of Levi rallied to Moses, strapped on swords, and killed brothers, friends, and neighbors. They killed the idolaters. This is how serious their sin was, that if they allowed it to continue, these people would have allowed the idolatry to spread like an infectious disease, one that would have killed them in body and soul, condemning them to eternal suffering in hell. Extreme measures had to be taken.

We too have to take extreme measures and rally together as Christians to smash the idols in our lives. We start smashing our idols by first confessing that we have them. We confess these idols to God and to a fellow Christian – to your spouse, your parents, your best friend, your pastor. You lay it on the table and expose it for what it is – something trying to rip you away from God and all his care and comfort and love and blessings, something wanting to rule your life. Then we purge it. We dump the alcohol down the drain. We delete all those saved pornographic websites and pictures you downloaded. We set limits on our video game time and on our work schedule. We make purposeful time with our family, but we do it having in mind that we are fulfilling our God-given role with them as father, mother, son, daughter, etc. Finally, to keep those idols smashed, we have to be held accountable and have people support us in not rebuilding or refashioning them. We call to our side someone who will hold us to account, someone who will help us fight the good fight of faith and keep these idols smashed into pieces. This is why we have the Lutheran Recovery Group that meets on Tuesday nights. This is where accountability software such as Covenant Eyes and an accountability partner make all

the difference in smashing the idol of pornography. Have someone hold you accountable to not working too much, who helps you keep your family priorities in line with God's desire for your life.

We know that we have broken God's commandments, that we have idols in our lives. But Christ, out of his infinite love and mercy for us, has fixed all God's commandments, covering them with his perfect life and his blood shed for us. Because of Christ, we are no longer idolaters; we are a new creation. So, let's smash our idols with the help of God and the help of our brothers and sisters in Christ. Amen.

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Pastor Jonathan Klein

pastorklein@lotvlayton.org