

Unholy Cow

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- [0 : 00] When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered!
- So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. He took what they handed him and made it into an idol, cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool.
- Then they said, These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt. When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord.
- So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterwards they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.
- Then the Lord said to Moses, Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf.
- [1 : 17] They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt. I have seen these people, the Lord said to Moses, and they are a stiff-necked people.
- Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation. But Moses sought the favor of the Lord his God.
- Lord, he said, Why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say it was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth?
- Turn from your fierce anger, relent, and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self.
- I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. And I will give your descendants all this land, I promise them, and it will be their inheritance forever. Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.
- [2 : 20] Thank you, Nicola. And let me add my welcome. It's great to see you all this evening.
- And if you're here for Tri-Church, or even if you're just new to our evening services, then we've been walking through the book of Exodus. And Exodus tells the story of God rescuing his people from Egyptian slavery, making himself known to them in the process and bringing them into relationship with him.
- And it is the big picture in the Old Testament of God's rescue plan for humanity. The big picture.
- The Exodus shows us what it looks like for God to rescue us from slavery. What's involved in our being rescued by God.
- It is the big picture of God rescuing us. So Moses rescued the people of Israel from Egypt. Jesus rescues us from our great enemies, sin and death.

[3 : 33] And what we've discovered as we've gone through Exodus, we've found that freedom from slavery means freedom for relationship with God.

It means freedom to worship God. Now what we're thinking about this evening, we're thinking about does it matter who we worship?

Does it matter how we worship? Does it really matter? So if you are here this evening and you're exploring the Christian faith, you've maybe heard the line that every religion, every worldview, every philosophy, they're just different paths up the same mountain.

And in the end, they all lead to the same spiritual destination. Well, Exodus chapter 32 kicks that into touch. Exodus 32 tells us it does matter who we worship.

It does matter how we worship God. So I'm going to pray for us and then we're going to dive in and look at it a little bit more closely. So let's bow our heads and pray.

[4 : 44] Lord God, we thank you that your word, you tell us, is living and active, sharper than a double-edged sword. It penetrates to our very hearts and souls, judging our thoughts and attitudes.

So we pray, therefore, that the Holy Spirit would open the eyes of our hearts, helping us to listen carefully to what you are saying to us. We pray that your word would challenge and correct us and awaken those of us here who are spiritually asleep, Lord.

For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Right, well, in the city of Ventspils in Latvia, my wife Alice's hometown, dotted around the city, are dozens of statues of cows, each designed by different artists, each with a different theme.

So there's the sea cow, there's the hippie cow, there's the cow dressed as a woman, and so on. And for tourists, it's a bit like a treasure hunt. You can go around ticking them off.

And as far as I'm aware, nobody is actually worshipping these cows in Ventspils. But back in Exodus chapter 32, it was a cow that was sculpted out of gold that was completely disastrous for the people.

[6 : 07] Spiritually disastrous. A spiritual equivalent of shooting yourself in the foot, or worse. So what exactly is so bad about this calf?

Or to put it another way, what's wrong with worshipping the wrong way? So let's take a look at what it says. Let's just look at the beginning of the reading again.

When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, come, make us gods who will go before us.

As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what's happened to him. And so Aaron, Aaron's the man in charge while Moses is away. Aaron does a crowd funder.

He collects their gold. He melts it down and he fashions it with a graving tool into this golden calf. And they begin to worship it. They said, these are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.

[7 : 14] And notice this is happening. This is happening at the exact same time that God is speaking to Moses up on Mount Sinai. So at the top of the mountain, God is giving Moses the Ten Commandments.

He's giving Moses the instructions for the tabernacle we looked at last week. And meanwhile, at the bottom of the mountain, they're saying they're making a golden calf out of repurposed earrings.

And it's kind of like a carnival mirror version of what should be happening. A carnival mirror, a distortion. Their offerings and sacrifices, a sort of warped distortion, a warped parody of what they're supposed to be doing.

A carnival mirror image. And we can see why it's so wrong when we compare and contrast what they're doing with what God's saying to Moses on the mountain.

So in chapter 20 of Exodus, in chapter 20, God gives the Ten Commandments. So chapter 20, verse 1, and God spoke, Whereas in Exodus chapter 32, verse 4, they're saying, So you see the difference.

[8 : 46] At the top of the mountain, God is saying, I rescued you from slavery. At the bottom of the mountain, they're saying, This calf brought you out of Egypt.

On the top of the mountain, God is saying, You shall have no other gods. At the bottom of the mountain, they make a golden calf god.

So it looks like they're breaking the first commandment. But actually, it's even more so the second commandment that they're breaking. 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. Don't make idols.

Don't worship idols. Now that's different from the first commandment. The first commandment is, Don't worship other gods.

[9 : 58] The second commandment is, Don't represent the true God in the way you choose. I think that's what they're doing here in Exodus 32.

Not so much worshipping other gods, but making for themselves a tangible form of the true God, the Lord. Something they can see, something they can admire, something shiny and impressive as a kind of an aid to worship.

So they're not swapping their God for other gods, but fashioning an object to represent the true God. I think this makes best sense of verse 5.

So just look at verse 5. When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, Tomorrow there will be a festival to, to who? To the calf gods?

And that's not what it says. Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord, the true God, who we have represented in the form of this golden calf.

[11 : 05] You might think, you might be thinking, well what's the big deal? If they're just making something like this to aid them in the worship of the true God, something that expresses what they think about how God is and what he's about, then what's the problem with that?

But the problem with breaking the second commandment is you end up representing God the way you decide. Redefining God in whatever way you choose, whatever way you think best.

All the way through Exodus, in rescuing his people, God has been making himself known to them as he really is. That's what he's saying on top of Mount Sinai. I am the Lord, your God, who rescued you, who brought you out of slavery.

This is who I am and this is what I'm all about. He's revealing himself and revealing his character. And, you know, in relationships that's useful.

It's useful to know things about the other person. If you want to know someone, you need to understand what they're all about. Early on in my relationship with Alice, as we were still dating, I learned that Alice loves wildflowers.

[12 : 24] Alice loves seagulls, bizarrely, and Alice loves sheep, which is kind of okay except for the fact that it means I don't get to eat lamb very often. But I also learned that Alice hates, she hates, she passionately hates onions.

And onions are one of the staple foods in Latvia and I think that she was probably force-fed them as she was growing up. And by the way, her dad told her when she was growing up that if she didn't start eating onions, she would never, she would never find a husband.

And her dad was right. In all of Latvia, she could not find a husband who would tolerate her intolerance of onions. Now those are useful things to know.

The first time Alice visited my parents, my mom had gone to great lengths to prepare, wait for it, she'd only gone and prepared French onion soup. Couldn't make it up. Knowing something about someone, knowing their likes and dislikes helps you relate to them properly.

In giving Moses the Ten Commandments, God is saying this is who I am, this is what I like, this is what I dislike, this is how you relate to me.

[13 : 43] God is defining who he is, his likes and dislikes. They're moral things like he loves truthfulness, and he hates murder and violence.

He's saying, you want to get along with me? Well this is what I'm like. But down at the bottom of the mountain, the people are reshaping what God is like, redefining how to relate to him.

When you stop and think about it, that's just a really offensive way to behave. And I remember the very first day of the school term way back in primary seven, we had a new teacher who's a bit wacky and during that first roll call the very first morning we got to my name, Jonathan Middleton, and he goes, do you prefer Jonathan or Johnny or John?

And being quite shy, I said, well, I don't mind, whatever you prefer. So the teacher goes, right, in that case, I'm going to call you Fred. Fred. And the whole class erupted in laughter.

I walked into that one and I guess looking back on it, it was kind of funny in a way, but at the time it felt offensive. It felt deeply offensive. Or imagine my mum had known that Alice hates onions and in spite of that I'd gone ahead and made French onion soup followed by caramelized onion tart.

[15 : 13] Well, that would have communicated to Alice that maybe my mum doesn't like her after all. It would have been seriously offensive. But that's what the people are doing to God at the bottom of a mountain.

God is saying, let me tell you about myself and first of all I don't want you to worship other gods and second of all I don't want you to represent me any other way but they are saying let's make a cow.

Let's make it out of gold. God will be pleased surely if it's made out of gold. And let's represent the Lord God like that. Carnival mirror worship. You know, the benefit of making up your own god is that you get to make up your own morality.

So at the top of a mountain God says you shall not commit adultery. The seventh commandment. But down at the bottom the calf god doesn't seem all that bothered words.

Because we're told in chapter 32 verse 6 they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry. Now that's a euphemism if ever there was one.

[16 : 24] Another translation has it like this they rose up to play. And you don't need me to spell it out for you we're talking mass orgy here accompanying the worship.

So you see what's going on. Do you see what's going on. It's not that they've ditched their faith altogether they're not changing their religion no it's more subtle and much more dangerous than that.

What they've done is they've reshaped God to fit the way they want to live. They've reshaped him to fit the way that suits them. And that can be let me suggest a temptation for us too.

In the culture that surrounds us as far as sexual ethics are concerned it's more or less anything goes isn't it. Our culture tells us if two people love each other then what's the matter if two people find each other hot then what's the harm.

And you know it can be very tempting to just go along with that. Tempting to say God won't mind as long as we're happy as long as we love each other.

[17 : 36] What's the harm? And so if we're not careful we adjust what God's like and what God likes and dislikes to suit what we want him to be like what we want him to like and dislike.

Now my guess is that there's nobody here tempted to jump on the next flight to Latvia and go and worship these colorful cows and vent spills. And my guess is too that not many of you even if you're a Christian here this evening are tempted to throw in the towel altogether.

Not many of you are tempted to ditch Jesus and go off and follow Buddha or some other religion. But I'd guess that for some of us there is a temptation to compromise.

There is a temptation to pick and choose the bits of the Bible that we like. To redefine God. To allow you to live your life the way you want to live your life.

Especially when what God is saying is hard to stomach. Or makes you feel awkward. Or means that you have some difficult decisions to make.

[19 : 02] Well Exodus chapter 32 tells us that redesigning God ourselves makes God angry. Makes God really angry.

And so secondly this chapter tells us why we all need a good agent. Someone to represent us before our holy God. And it's actually quite a scary and sobering chapter when you think about it.

So just look at verse 7. Then the Lord said to Moses go down because your people whom you brought out of Egypt have become corrupt. They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them.

But the people can't believe how long it's taking Moses to come down from the mountain. But God can't believe how quickly the people have turned and fallen away.

And God is here distancing himself. He's practically disowning them with the language. See how he's throwing their own words from verse 1 back in their faces. Your people Moses whom you brought out of Egypt.

[20 : 08] And we get a sense of just how angry God is in verse 9. I have seen these people the Lord said to Moses and they are a stiff-necked people.

They're stubborn. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you Moses a great nation.

God is so angry with his people that his anger burns against them. He wants to destroy them and start all over again. And so what we're seeing here is that the very purpose of Exodus is at stake.

The whole goal of Exodus is at stake and the whole thing is up in the air. God rescued these people for relationship with him. And now it looks like they've blown it before they've even begun.

So where do we go from here? How is this going to be salvaged? How can God be in relationship with a rebellious people?

[21 : 17] And what we're going to see in this chapter and next chapter is that three different times Moses speaks to God, pleads to God on behalf of the people, stands in between God and the people.

And so in our remaining time this evening, we're going to take a look at just the first of these times. So first Moses seeks God's favour and he says verse 11, why should your anger burn against your people whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand?

Well you see how he puts the ball back in God's court. Your people God, who you brought out of slavery. So Moses is putting the people back onto God.

He's reminding God that he is the one who rescued them and that the people's reputation and identity is now bound up with God's reputation and identity which is the point he makes in the next verse.

So verse 12, Moses says, why should the Egyptians say it was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them and to wipe them off the face of the earth? So that's Moses' first argument.

[22 : 36] Turn from your anger. You gods, you don't want a bad rep because of them for the sake of your own reputation, God.

Don't bring disaster on your people. So that's his first plea to God for mercy. But then he goes on and makes another argument in verse 13.

Remember your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self and made your promises. Here, Moses is appealing not so much to God's reputation as he is to God's promises, the promises God made way back in the very first book of the Bible.

He's saying, please, God, please be true to your word and fulfill your promises. Not on account of the people's righteousness, but on account of God's faithfulness to God's promises, to God's faithfulness to God's word.

So then in verse 14, the Lord relents and did not bring the disaster on his people that he had threatened. There's still going to be problems.

[23 : 49] There's still going to be consequences for the people's sin. We're going to see that over the next couple of weeks. Moses is going to have to step in again and again and again.

But what we're seeing here is we're seeing an important pattern, an important pattern. because God's people are stubborn and sinful, they themselves can't come before a holy God.

They can't come into God's presence. They don't have a leg to stand on. And what they need is someone to represent them before God, to plead on their behalf for mercy.

And we know that it's a pattern that's fulfilled in Christ. Moses did that job for the people of Israel, standing between the people and God, representing them before God.

But the Bible shows us that if we're trusting in him, Jesus does that job for God's people today, representing us before the throne of God.

[24 : 55] Every moment of every day representing us before God. And so I don't want there to be anyone sitting in church here this evening thinking, I've completely blown it.

I'm a lost cause. I've messed up so bad. I don't want anyone here to think that. I want to be very clear. There is forgiveness available to you if, if you place your trust in Jesus, if you turn to Jesus and put your trust in him.

there is forgiveness available. On the cross, Jesus took your place. He stood between you and God's anger at your sin and your spiritual adultery.

And so if we appeal to God, to his promises, he is a forgiving God and he is faithful to forgive. This chapter in Exodus, it tells us that it does matter.

It really does matter who we worship and how we worship. God does mind. It warns us that it is very serious.

[26 : 15] And so in writing to a group of Christians in a church in Corinth, the New Testament writer Paul says, these things in Exodus occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did.

Do not be idolaters as some of them were. As it is written, the people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.

That's a quote from Exodus 32. We should not commit sexual immorality as some of them did. These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us.

So if you think you are standing firm, be careful. that you do not fall. Be careful, says Exodus.

God really minds. He hates it when we don't listen to him defining himself and instead we redefine him. That's carnival mirror Christianity.

[27 : 20] We don't want to go there. Amen. and let's pray. Lord God, we come before your throne again confident not in ourselves but in our sinless saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, the one who rescued us from our sins.

we ask you, living God, that you would bind our wayward and stubborn hearts to you. We thank you that there is grace available, that you are merciful and compassionate, that you are faithful to your promises and that you are indeed faithful to forgive.

and so we pray, living God, that if there is anyone here this evening who's been running from you, would you draw them back?

Would you invite them to return to you? Would you draw them into your loving embrace? And would you impress on us all our needs for Jesus?

We thank you that he is our perfect representative, our great high priest. Help us to remember the grace you've shown us.

[28 : 49] In Jesus' name. Amen.