

## FOLLOWING JESUS IN WORSHIPING ONLY ONE GOD

Exodus 32:1-14

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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Imagine that your father packs a big lunch, fills a cooler with soda and sets off across the Mohave Desert with your siblings and you. You're enjoying the scenery so much dad doesn't see the sign, "Last gas station for 300 miles." You travel several hours until you run out of gas. You're stranded in the desert. Your dad puts you in charge and says, "I'm walking back to the gas station. Wait here and, whatever you do, don't get in some stranger's car." He puts several soda cans in a plastic grocery bag with a sandwich and starts walking back 150 miles to the last gas station. Your brothers and sisters and you wait. You eat all your sandwiches the first day. You drain all the sodas. Days go by and your father hasn't return. You trap rabbits and catch snakes for food and get water from cacti. After a week you wonder if your dad will ever return. Then a car appears, only it's not your father, it's a stranger. The car slows down and stops. The driver beckons you over and asks, "Do you want a piece of candy?" You *should* warn your brothers and sisters not to go near the car. You *should* remind them of your father's warning, "Thou shalt not get in a stranger's car." That's what you should do. But that's not what you do. The stranger offers a ride and your brothers and sisters jump up and down with joy and all of you climb in.

Something like that happened to the Children of Israel in the Sinai desert. Moses had gone to the top of Mt. Sinai. He told the Israelites to wait for his return. He warned them not to turn to <sup>strange</sup> other gods. But Moses stayed on the mountain forty days. The Children of Israel thought he'd never return. So they did something really stupid. They asked Aaron to make them gods. Now that's like being out there in the desert and making a pretend car out of rocks and when you finish you tell your brothers and sisters, "Climb in and we'll go for a ride." But that kind of car won't get you anywhere. And the Golden Calf Aaron fashioned couldn't save them either. Why didn't Aaron resist their demands? *Maybe because he was afraid*

When I was in Guatemala in 1984 I visited the rural village of Chichicastenango. In the center of town was the Christian church dating back hundreds of years. The entrance to the church reminded me of the entrance to a Mayan temple - high, steep stairs going up to the sanctuary. On the steps was a colorfully dressed

Central American Indian. He had built a fire and was burning incense. I asked what he was doing. "He's practicing the old Mayan religion and then, to hedge his bets, he'll go inside and worship the Lord." I asked why the priest didn't stop this pagan practice. "If he evicts the witch doctor he'd lose most of his congregation, and he might even earn martyrdom."

I'm glad we don't mix the worship of pagan gods with our worship of the Lord. And we would *never* worship gods made of gold. *a god of gold?* What would make people worship a Golden Calf? About ten years ago there was a movie, *Indecent Proposal*. Longtime sweethearts, David and Diana, find themselves on hard times when financial troubles bring them to the verge of losing their house. They take their last \$5,000 and go to Vegas in hopes of winning big. Their luck fails. But there's a way out. A billionaire, John Gage, spots Diana in the casino and offers David \$1,000,000 to spend the night with her. What kind of man would want his wife to commit adultery even if were for all the gold in Fort Knox? The God we worship is a jealous God who loves us so much that he doesn't want us sleeping with other gods. *The kind of man who would worship a God of Gold* Up on the mountain Moses encountered a God who said, in effect, "If you want to worship me, you shall not worship other gods because I'm jealous for you."

Therefore, you will not steal, you will not have sex with other people's spouses, you will not kill, you will not say untrue things about your neighbor."

The church is often tempted by indecent proposals. We often prefer Golden Calf versions of the Gospel that promise wealth with heaven thrown in but without the ethical demands of the cross. H. Richard Niebuhr described this Golden Calf *religion* <sup>as</sup> this way: "A god *without wrath*, <sup>who</sup> brings men and women *without sin*, to a kingdom *without judgment*, by the ministrations of a Christ *without a cross*."

*The god of gold* The God of Mount Sinai makes ethical demands on us that the Golden Calf doesn't. The Golden Calf just wants us to have a good time. I have nothing against eating, drinking and revels but the God Jesus worshipped is a God who also makes ethical demands on us. When Moses came back down the mountain and found the people having a great time dancing around the golden calf he was angry. When Aaron saw how angry Moses was he said (I think), "But Moses, they're having such a good time. They're really feeling good about themselves. And we've finally gotten the teenagers involved."

The great test for our worship here on Sunday is not, "Do I like this hymn?" or "Did I find the sermon easy to understand?" or "Do I feel better?" but "Does this service praise the God who spoke through prophets and makes ethical demands on our life?" Jesus said, "Not every one who cries, 'Lord, Lord,' will be with him at the end. When we worship God something more than just having a good time is required.

As a parent I have sometimes gotten really angry with Kay's sons. Sometimes you want to kill them. That's what God wanted to do with his children. He said to Moses, "Your people have acted perversely. Step aside! I'm going down there and consume them." The reason he was so angry was because he loved them so much. William Sloan Coffin's son was killed in an automobile accident. His son was going too fast, he had had too much to drink, and hadn't fixed his bad brakes. After his death Coffin was seething with anger – not with God but with his son. In his grief he would shout angrily at his son, "How could you be so stupid? How could you do this to your mother and me? I could kill you." The God we worship is a jealous God who makes ethical demands on us and <sup>loves us so much that he</sup> gets angry when we disobey, angry enough to kill us.

But he doesn't. God has too much invested in us. God would be the laughing stock of the universe if he delivered us from slavery only to let us die in the desert. God condemns sin, yet never judges apart from grace. In giving Jesus Christ to die for us, God took the burden of our sin into God's own self to remove it once and for all. The cross in all its severity reveals an abyss of sin swallowed up by the suffering of divine love. In his life, death, and his resurrection, we see how vast is God's love for the world -- a love that is ready to suffer for our sakes, yet so strong that nothing will prevail against it. There is no sorrow he has not known, no grief he has not borne, and no price he was unwilling to pay in order to reconcile us to God.

Deliver us, O God, from the tyranny of idols; they cannot give happiness or life; they bind us to the ways of death. Claim us as your own and lead us in the way, the truth, and the life, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.