

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, February 4, 2018**

**TROUBLE IN THE CAMP (2)**

**Exodus 32:21-35**

Last Sunday we began to explore the debacle of the golden calf as it is described for us in Exodus 32. While Moses was up on the mountain with God, some of the Israelite people came to Aaron, Moses' brother and second-in-command, demanding that he make an idol, a visual, tangible deity for them to worship. They applied pressure to which Aaron seems to have given in without any resistance. It was not one of the high points of Aaron's life and witness. Aaron fashioned the gold earrings the people brought to him into the only kind of "god" he knew how to make – a golden idol shaped like a young bull. As soon as Aaron had made this "unholy cow," the people "started to worship it, and by the next day the camp of Israel had degenerated into pagan debauchery" (Philip Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God's Glory*, 919-920).

Seeing this, the Lord – who had given the people of Israel the Ten Commandments and other laws for their life as "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6) – threatened to destroy the whole nation of Israel and start again with Moses. But Moses, as we see in verses 11-13, "sought the favor of the LORD His God" (32:11), and pleaded with God on Israel's behalf, with the result, as it says in verse 14, that "the LORD relented and did not bring on His people the disaster He had threatened."

This, however, did not mean that God was not angry with Israel, or that Moses, as God's representative, was not angry with Israel. Moses, as we read last Sunday, went down the mountain, carrying the two stone tablets of the Law in his hands. When he and Joshua (who was waiting for him part way up the mountain) returned to the camp of Israel at the foot of the mountain, and Moses saw what was going on, he was so angry that he smashed the Ten Commandments into a thousand pieces.

We may ask whether Moses' anger was righteous or not? I believe it was, in part because of the simple fact that God did not rebuke him for his rage. It appears that Moses' anger here was rooted in his concern for the proper recognition of and response to the righteousness, holiness, majesty, sovereignty, and grace of God.

After breaking the stone tablets on which God Himself had inscribed the Ten Commandments (32:16), an act that symbolized the breaking of the covenant by the people of Israel, Moses proceeded to destroy the golden calf. He "burned it, pulverized it" into dust, mixed it with water, "and then made the people drink it" (Ryken, 947). He wanted it to be a lesson the people would never forget.

This brings us to verse 21, where we pick up the story today. May we give our full and reverent attention now to the reading of God's holy Word, beginning in Exodus 32:21.

(Read Exodus 32:21-35.)

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It should go without saying, you would think, that idolatry – the elevation and worship of false gods of any kind in any way, whether it involves the use of any images or objects or not – is flat out wrong. But it does not go without saying. Which is why God Himself said it in the first two of the Ten Commandments He gave to the people of Israel (Exodus 20:3-6). Which is why it is also necessary for us to come to terms with both the seriousness and the danger of idolatry in our own lives. It was not just the people of Israel at the foot of Mount Sinai who were liable to the temptation to commit idolatry. It is a danger in every generation. And in every heart.

In his commentary on Exodus, A. W. Pink defines an idol as “anything which displaces God in my heart. It may be something which is quite harmless in itself, yet if it absorbs me, if it be given first place in my affections and thoughts, it becomes an ‘idol.’ It may be my business, a loved one, or my service for Christ. Any one or any thing which comes into competition with the Lord’s (sovereign rule in my life) in a practical way, is an idol” (Pink, *Gleanings in Exodus*, 327).

Which begs the question: Is there anything that displaces God in your heart? In my heart? In our hearts? Most of us aren’t tempted to bow down and worship a golden cow. But this does not mean we are immune to the temptation of idol worship.

Today, as everybody knows, is Super Bowl Sunday. Later today the New England Patriots and the Philadelphia Eagles will meet in tropical Minneapolis, MN – where else would you rather be the first weekend in February? – to decide the NFL championship. Super Bowl Sunday has become an unofficial American holiday celebrated with gatherings and festivities across the land that in many places may resemble worship.

For some Americans, football is their religion. It is not true of everyone, of course. You can like football and root for your favorite team without worshiping at its altar. The same applies to every sport. I say this as a lifelong sports fan who loved playing sports until I couldn’t any more. And who continues to root enthusiastically for my favorite teams. Because I am an enthusiastic sports fan, I recognize our human penchant for making a particular game or team our highest value or ultimate concern in life. In other words, an idol.

A number of years ago, pro football hall of famer Lawrence Taylor was featured in a TV commercial for a violent video game called *Blitz the League II*. As players deliver crushing blows to each other, Taylor says: “Every Sunday, when America goes to church, we go to war. While they pray for salvation, we play for survival.”

As scenes of a football stadium are shown, Taylor says: “This is our cathedral.”

As an image of a football is shown, he says: “This game is our religion.”

Then Taylor delivers the closing line of the commercial: “And every religion has its judgment day.”

One of my pastoral colleagues in the Presbytery of the East, Glenn Marshall, pastors a church in one of the New Jersey suburbs of Philadelphia, where there is, as you can imagine, a lot of excitement about the Eagles playing in the Super Bowl. Several weeks ago, about mid-way through the NFL season, Glenn wrote a pastoral message about what he once experienced at an Eagles' game. He entitled his message "Worship at the 'Line'" ("Line" being the nickname for Lincoln Financial Field, the Eagles' home stadium). Let me share with you a bit of what he wrote:

"The earliest confession of the church is this: Jesus Christ is Lord! Jesus calls us to live under His authority. Discipleship, then, is a firm commitment of the heart to follow Jesus by learning to live under His authority. Discipleship calls us to live in a subordinate relationship to our Risen Lord and to learn to live our lives under His training and discipline. By discipleship we offer our ultimate loyalty to Jesus the Messiah. That is, we learn to live by faith in Christ. By making this commitment to live under the Lordship of Jesus, we learn to say 'No' to other competing allegiances that seek to dominate our lives, and we learn to say 'Yes' to the way of life to which Jesus calls us.

"It is the 'competing allegiances' issue," he says, "that gives (him) pause. For the Eagles, as well as any other sports team" – be it the Redskins, Steelers, Patriots, or Cowboys; D. C. United, Manchester United, Chelsea, FC Barcelona, or Real Madrid or any other team in any other sport – "seek our allegiance and loyalty. If (Augustine) is correct, that we are what we love, then our allegiance to any sports team ... needs to be challenged by our allegiance to the Lord Jesus."

At an Eagles' game he attended, Glenn says that what impressed him the most was that "what the fans in the stands were engaged in was worship. There was the community of worship displayed as people gathered to tailgate before the game. That sense of community was carried into the stadium as people dressed in Eagles green took their seats. There was a certain liturgy of worship present as the team took to the field. There was even a hymn to sing – 'Fly, Eagles, Fly.'" (Not unlike "Hail to the Redskins.")

Looking around the stadium, he saw "people slathered in green paint or wearing a host of Eagles paraphernalia. These people," he says, "weren't just watching a sporting event. They were engaged in worship."

I don't think Glenn means that everyone at the game was engaged in worship, but that *some* were. *Some*, at least, had crossed the line from enjoying the game and rooting for their team to idolatry. Which can serve as a warning to all of us who are sports fans. We must not allow any sport or any sports team or any athlete to become an idol and take the place of God in our lives. We must not allow our fervor for any game or team or player to exceed or even come close to the intensity of our fervor for God and our allegiance to Him.

Here is how Glenn concludes his message: "If I am to continue to watch my favorite football team, I must do so with a kind of dissociation. I must not allow my heart to be so fully engaged that I lose sight of my highest love. I must love the Lord with all of my heart. I need

to watch football Christianly, recognizing that this is one of the good gifts that God has given to be enjoyed with thanksgiving.”

And then he offers this final exhortation from 1 John 5:21: “Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.”

Love of football, or allegiance to your favorite team, is not the only potential form of idolatry, of course. I hope you don’t hear this as a rant against football or football fans. That is not what I mean at all. It is simply a reminder to all of us who like football, or soccer, or hockey, or tennis, or any other sport under the sun, that it is a potential form of idolatry we must vigilantly guard against.

There are other idols we may be tempted to worship as well. Our nation’s flag deserves our utmost respect because of the values, ideals, and sacrifices it represents, but we must never allow it to become an object of worship. We must also reject the temptation of many in our nation’s capital, whatever their political persuasion, to make an idol of political power or of government itself. Whenever we allow anything other than God and His glory to be our ultimate concern (as many in politics appear to do), we are idolaters in the sight of God.

Our culture has made an idol of sexual freedom. Some make an idol of romantic love, hoping it will fulfill their deepest needs. In their song “You’re My Everything,” The Temptations used to sing:

Gonna build my whole world around you  
... You’re all that matters.

In his song “Sacred Love,” Sting says:

You’re my religion, you’re my church,  
You’re the holy grail at the end of my search.

Irish musician Hozier has a song called “Take Me to Church,” which includes these lyrics:

She tells me, “Worship in the bedroom.”  
The only heaven I’ll be sent  
Is when I’m alone with you.

(Source: Thaddeus J. Williams, *Reflect*, 10-11)

Technology can be an idol, too. New York *Times* columnist Ross Douthat (DOO-tet) warns that it is “the real threat to the human future.” He writes: “You know it to be true: You are enslaved to the internet. Definitely if you’re young, increasingly if you’re old, your day-to-day, minute-to-minute existence is dominated by a compulsion to check email and Twitter and Facebook and Instagram with a frequency that bears no relationship to any communicative need. Compulsions,” he continues, “are rarely harmless. The internet is not the opioid crisis; it is not likely to kill you (unless you’re hit by a distracted driver) or leave

you ravaged or destitute.” But it leaves you, at best, “in a state of perpetual distraction. Used within limits, of course, (our) devices also offer us new graces. But we are not using them within reasonable limits. They are the masters; we are not. They are built to addict us” (Ross Douthat, “Resist the Internet”, *The New York Times*, 3-11-17).

Addiction is a form of worship. And whatever we are addicted to is an idol in our lives.

“Dear children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21). Unlike the people of Israel at the foot of Mount Sinai, do not let any thing or any one displace God in your heart. Not even things that remind you of God.

As followers of the Lord Jesus, we must not ever make an idol of the cross, though it is a central symbol of our faith. Our worship is reserved for Jesus, the Christ of the cross, who suffered and died on the cross to save us from our sins. We must not make the empty tomb of Easter morning an idol. Our worship is reserved for the true and living God who demonstrated His power by raising Jesus His Son from the dead and exalting Him to the place of highest honor in the kingdom of heaven. We must not make an idol of the Bible. Our worship is reserved for the God who has spoken in the Bible; the God whose Word it is; the God who has revealed Himself, His will, His ways, His mighty acts, His love and grace for a world full of sinners, and the gospel of salvation in the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of His Son Jesus Christ our Lord in the Bible. We must never allow the church as an organization or as a spiritual entity to become an idol, for it must never displace the Lord of the church in our hearts. Nor can we ever allow this or any church building to become an idol that becomes more important to us than God Himself.

We can shake our heads at the people of Israel and wonder: What in the world was wrong with them? But the truth is that idolatry, in one form or another, is always a clear and present danger.

One thing we can learn from the Israelites and from human experience down through the ages is that idols can never save us. About the golden calf, R. C. Sproul wrote: “(It) gave no law and demanded no obedience. It had no wrath or justice or holiness to be feared. It was deaf, dumb, and impotent. But at least it could not intrude on their fun and call them to judgment. This was a religion designed by men, practiced by men, and ultimately useless for men” (Sproul, *Grace Unknown*, 19-20).

Christopher Wright puts it this way; “The worst thing about idols, as the Hebrew scriptures so tirelessly point out, is that they are utterly useless when you need them most” (Wright, “All Our Gods Have failed,” *Themelios* 18, No. 3).

It was true of Israel’s “unholy cow.” It is just as true of the idols we worship, or are tempted to worship, today.

We are not finished with Exodus 32 yet. There is more for us to glean from this defining moment in the life of Israel at the foot of the mountain.

The question we must ask ourselves today is this: Is there anything that has displaced or threatens to displace God in my heart? Enjoy the game today, if you plan to watch. But do not allow it or anything else to occupy the place that is reserved for God and God alone. "Dear children, keep yourselves from idols."

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.