

I. Introduction

A. Over the next few weeks, I am hoping to be Toto – the little dog from Kansas who travels with Dorothy and her companions down the Yellow Brick Road.

B. This is not because I want to be kidnapped by a wicked neighbor or carried away by flying monkeys. It's because I think Toto did a wonderful thing when he pulled back the curtain and exposed the wizard.

1. As most of you no doubt remember, the Wizard of Oz appeared to be an all-powerful and benevolent dictator. A force beyond reproach. He inspired fear and awe and demanded reverence. When in reality, he was basically a well-intentioned bumbling circus con man hiding behind a few magic tricks.

C. Toto exposed him for what he really was, allowing Dorothy and her friends to stop placing so much faith in something that wasn't as advertised.

D. That is my hope. I aspire to pull back the curtain on some cultural idols – gods with a small “g” – in the hope that once we see things more clearly we can refocus on the one who is Truth.

II. This study emerges out of our ongoing work in Exodus. We have come to chapter 32, which involves the golden calf. And we are going to park here for six weeks.

A. If you are just joining us, we've been in Exodus since August and this is the 25th message in the series. And we started things off by noting that Exodus – which is the second book in the Bible – is having a moment. In the last 18 months all kinds of prominent people have come out with books or podcast series on Exodus. And I argued that this is because Exodus explores the biggest and most relevant questions of the moment: What does it mean to be free? How are we to understand the Law? How do you create a country that lasts?

B. The first half of the book – which is mostly about getting the Jews out of Egypt, introduces us to Moses and God, and also to God's name. We get the burning bush, ten plagues, the Passover, parting of the red sea, mana from heaven and more. Lots of action

C. The second half of the book – which focuses on getting Egypt out of the Jews – has a lot to do with the Ten Commandments, worship and the building of the Tabernacle.

D. Today's passage, Exodus 32, brings up the topic of idols. In this case, a golden calf. I will be making the argument that while we have moved past idols that look like, well, idols – golden calves, jade statues or totem poles around - in other ways we have not. We have our idols – most of which are good things we are trying to make ultimate things. Good things we promote beyond their station.

E. Idolatry is a big topic in the Bible. Some would say the biggest in the Old Testament. It is present any time we give the honor due to God alone to someone or something else. When we elevate some aspect of the created order to the central place that the Creator alone is to occupy.¹

III. The first few verses of Exodus 32 were just read to us.

A. Moses has been on the mountain getting instructions on how to build the Tabernacle. He's been gone a long time – 40 days, which is the period of testing in the Bible. The people grow impatient and demand that Aaron (who has been left in charge) make them gods. The famous line is: “Up. Make us gods (plural). We don't know what happened to this fellow Moses. It's time to move on.”

B. And Aaron complies. He tells them to take off their gold earrings (which they have made out of the gold the Egyptians had given them as they left Egypt. And which was for the tabernacle). And he made them a cow – which was very Egyptian of him.² The Egyptians had lots of cow gods. All of which suggests that getting the Jews out of Egypt was easier than getting Egypt out of the Jews.

C. There is some debate about exactly what is happening:

1. Do they see the golden calf as a new god, or just a manifestation of the God who brought them out of Egypt.
2. Are they violating the first commandment – which says we are to have no other gods before me. Or the second – which is, do not make any images to represent me. (The first commandment calls on us to worship the right God. The second calls on us to worship the right God in the right way).³

D. It's a bit unclear exactly how they understand the golden calf. What is not unclear is what they do - they throw a big party in its honor, and the term that is used for party has some sexual connotations with it,⁴ suggesting just how much of Egypt they still have in them.

E. God then alerts Moses to what is going on. And says He is going to wipe them out and start over with just Moses, who He will turn into a great nation. Moses intercedes for the people and then races down the mountain. A few things happen in quick succession:

1. He breaks the two tablets of the law that he has with them;
2. He trashes the golden calf – melts it down, grinds it to powder and makes them drink it. Which I think is really funny.
3. He then confronts Aaron – who has proven to be worthless. Aaron blames everyone else and claims the gold turned itself into an idol.
4. Moses then mobilizes the Levites to punish the people, before racing back up the mountain to meet with God and plead on behalf of the people.

5. There is a lot about what Moses does here that is quite extraordinary. He has really grown as a leader. In Exodus 32: 30 we even read:

- a) The next day Moses said to the people, “You have committed a great sin. But now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.”
- b) So Moses went back to the Lord and said, “Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. ³²But now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written.”
- c) Moses is offering to lay down his life for them. Which of course points ahead to the leader who will.
 - (1) All of this points to Jesus. There is no greater life than to lay down your life for someone else.
- d) Paul will build on that and say – occasionally someone might be willing to lay down their life for a good person.
- e) And then pivot to Jesus laying his life down for us while we were ungodly.

F. Now, you may be thinking, little of that looks like my last week. In fact, I have never worshipped a gold calf. OK, well, yes but no. The challenge is determining what our golden calf is?

- 1. We need to figure out who or what we are trusting instead of God?
- 2. Who or what we have elevated beyond its station. Or, to frame this more broadly – who or what we (as a society) are elevating.

G. In Acts 17, the Apostle Paul - who is in Athens - ends up in a conversation with the Athenians over their false gods. The passage says that:

- 1. Paul stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god.
- 2. He then proceeds to tell them about the true God.

H. I’ve also wondered what would Paul say to us if – instead of showing up in Athens in the first century, he showed up at Union Station today. What false gods would he see when he looked around? What would he identify as the idols of our age? That is the question we want to go after over the next six weeks.

IV. Let me lay the foundation for these sermons by making four points.

V. First: We were created to worship God.

A. We were created by God, in His image and in a relationship with Him in which the most natural and right thing we could do was to worship Him - to declare His worth, to proclaim His supreme value.

B. But, in a desire to become more like Him, we rebelled and became less like Him. And among the fall outs of the fall – in which sin entered the world and death through sin - is that we started to worship other things.

C. You have to understand, you are going to worship something. It cannot be helped. It is who we are. This is one of the ways we are different from the animals.

1. We have heroes and lovers and we give our heart away to people and places and things. If you know what to listen for, you hear worship all the time:

- a) He is the greatest quarterback ever to play the game.
- b) She's awesome in that role.
- c) This car is the most gorgeous machine on the planet.
- d) I couldn't live without my iPhone.

2. You hear people ascribing worth – declaring the glory of things – all the time.

3. You also need to understand that worship is the natural response to God. It is not something we need to be told to do or learn how to do. To draw into the presence of God is to worship.

4. Once we understand who God is we have no choice but to worship.

- a) In Isaiah 6 we read that the angels in His presence do nothing but declare his holiness 24 hours a day – not b/c that's their job, but because they are in His presence and He is awesome, majestic, holy and righteous. And to see Him is to be overwhelmed.

5. I ran an NT Wright quote in this Friday's Update that makes this point.

- a) When we begin to glimpse the reality of God, the natural reaction is to worship him. Not to have that reaction is a fairly sure sign that we haven't yet really understood who he is or what he's done."

D. So, point one: we were made to worship God.

VI. Point number two: We were created to worship God, but we end up worshipping other things.

- A. Not only do we not worship God. But we end up ascribing glory and honor to lesser things. Generally to good things. But not to God.
- B. This is called idolatry – and it happens all the time. Lots and lots of people get trapped in some lesser orbit – and their lives begin to revolve around something or someone other than God. And it’s tragic.
- C. This is what we see in the Old Testament.
1. It starts early in Genesis.⁵ It’s what we see in Exodus 32 with the Golden Calf.
 2. In Psalm 115 the psalmist will mock those who pray to idols of stone that, “have eyes but cannot see, feet but cannot walk & ears but cannot hear.”
 3. In Isaiah 46, Isaiah will mock those who carve a god out of the same piece of wood they use to cook dinner.⁶
- D. We see more of the same in the New Testament.
1. Paul instructs the Corinthians to flee from idolatry and then tells us not to even eat with idolaters.⁷ He warns the Colossians not to worship angels⁸
 2. John closes his first letter pleading with them to stay away from idols.
- E. We also see this on display in the history books, where people end up ascribing power and glory to all kinds of manmade objects.
- F. It’s astonishing really, that anyone would do such a thing. In *The City of God* Augustine asks how smart it is to adopt the gods of the people you have conquered. Pointing out that if they failed to protect the people you just overran, what makes you think they can protect you?
- G. Idolatry does not make much sense – but the history books make it clear that every culture has idols. That man really is – as John Calvin claims – a perpetual idol making factory.⁹ Which sets up the third point:
- VII. Idolatry damages us.
- A. We were created to enjoy a relationship with God. That relationship was severed by sin, leaving us w/ what Blaise Pascal rather famously referred to as a “god-shaped vacuum” in our heart.
 - B. We spend our lives trying to fill that hole. And whatever we put in there – whatever we look to to provide meaning or ultimate comfort – be it money, sex, power, pleasure, good works or something else – is an idol.

C. Some people look to evil things. After all, evil has a great PR department. It's seen as glamorous or dangerous in a sexy and rebellious kind of way.

1. And goodness is seen as being boring. In reality, just the opposite is true. Evil is repulsive and monotonous. It's broken good that delivers nothing and becomes a cruel master. And real goodness is delightful and original and engaging in profound ways.

D. Some people look to the dark side for meaning. But not many. Virtually all of the idols we face are good things in their place – and they are only troublesome when they are promoted beyond their merit.¹⁰

E. But the problem is, we often don't see them for what they are. And, what is even more frightening is that some of them do a pretty good job of filling the hole for a while – a long while.

F. This is why the God who loves us – the God who loves us so much that He sent His Son to pay off our moral debt. The God who invites us back into His family – to be reborn today to a new start with a promise of a wonderful ever after – this is why this God prohibits idolatry.

1. It is not that He needs our praise – He doesn't. He is complete.
2. But, like a loving parent who warns their children to avoid the things that could harm them. To steer clear of things that could derail them or damage them – all the more so things that could damage them without them knowing it or become addicting – our Heavenly Father clearly instructs us to not let a second-best option take first place in our heart.

G. Idols are poor substitutes, unworthy of our worship. Therefore, God seeks to save us from the pain of centering our life and our love, of organizing our values and our thoughts around something other than Him.

H. Which is why Scripture warns against it. The Bible spends remarkably little time trying to get us to believe in God. But a lot of time trying to get us to worship the one true God.

1. This is perhaps the single biggest topic in all of Scripture.¹¹ It's the second commandment. And then throughout both testaments we have repeated prohibitions against idolatry. As opposed to idolatry we are told to worship God in Spirit and in Truth

I. Which leads to my final point.

1. Point one: we were created to worship God;
2. Point two: we end up worshipping other things.

3. Point three: worshipping other things damages us. It makes us small. We are never bigger than our idols.

VIII. Point four: The most dangerous idols are subtle.¹²

A. Idolatry happens when the honor that is due to the Triune God – and to Him alone – is given to something, anything else.

B. For most of us the things that are going to make a run at first place in our lives – that are going to seek some of the power and glory due to God alone – are not ugly-faced statues or blatantly evil practices, but good things that have been promoted beyond their worth.

1. Many of the idols are invisible – they are not things we can touch at all. They are beliefs and dreams and systems.

C. And the fact that they are good – and the fact that they are invisible – makes us less likely to realize that they have become a problem. At least anytime soon. It can take a long time.

1. If you start in Chicago and are driving to Los Angeles and you start seeing signs for Indianapolis, you are going to be aware pretty quickly that you've got a problem.

2. But if you start in Chicago and are headed for Seattle and all the roads you are make it clear that you are heading West, it may be a while before you realize that you're headed for Los Angeles not Seattle. You are only off by a few degrees when you leave the Windy City, but you are going to end up hundreds of miles from your destination when you hit the West Coast.

D. You will be either surprised or disappointed if you expect this series to have lengthy arguments against praying to jade statues or making sacrifices before pictures of your ancestors. Those are not our issues. Those are not our idols.

E. What we are going to be looking at in this series are good things that become dangerous because we try to make them ultimate things.¹³

F. Of course, that is not the only thing we will try to do in the weeks ahead. We will also look at God. I believe Tozer was right when he said that the person who comes to a right belief about God is relieved of ten thousand temporal problems, for they see at once that these have to do with matters which at the most cannot concern him for very long.¹⁴

G. All of this will also require that we look honestly at ourselves – which is rare.

IX. In just a moment the campus pastors will be coming up to lead us in a prayer of confession as a step towards celebrating Holy Communion. It is my prayer that during the weeks ahead we will see ourselves a bit better. It is very hard for us to see our blind spots or our idols. Few do so. Few are brave enough to go there. Our spouse or children might see

our idols. Perhaps our close friends. But not always. There can be some collective delusion going on.

- A. Who or what has first place in your life?
- B. What is the thing you treasure the most? You'd give up last?
- C. How have you fashioned God in your image? Please remember our study earlier in this book – when God revealed his name - “I AM who I AM” – making it clear that he will be who He will be, and not who we try to make him.
- D. Please stand.

X. Campus Pastor / Collective Prayer

- A. Loving Heavenly Father, We thank you for mercy extended to us. We thank you for a measure of health, the comforts of home, the provision of food and clothing. We thank you for moments of domestic peace and harmony. Your grace and mercy are amazing.
- B. Hear our prayer of confession. We mourn our sin and confess our ingratitude to you. We have not put our hope in you, nor have we waited patiently for you to act on our behalf. We have trusted and delighted in your creation rather than in you, and we have looked to our idols to make us glad. Forgive us for our many sins. We do not deny them or excuse them, but confess that we have broken your holy law and fallen short of keeping your commands.
- C. Lord Jesus, thank you that when we repent you will not cast us off nor condemn us. You do not point out our mountains of sin, but unthinkably forgive us and give us your righteousness.
- D. Holy Spirit, grant us an uncommon measure of self-awareness so we can see our idols and turn from them to you. We place all our hopes in the powerful blood of our Savior. Amen.

Small Group Questions

- E. What is an idol?
 1. Any item that receives the honor that it due to the Triune God.
 2. One of the things that distinguishes an idol from something else is that later, with perfect clarity, you regret the attention it received.
- F. What are the idols you see in Western culture? In your life?
- G. Does God need our worship? If not, why is He jealous (Exodus 20:5) for our love?

1. Which some people mistakenly believe that He needs us to worship Him because He is somehow insecure and incomplete.
 - a) Nothing could be further from the truth.
 - b) God does not need us. We need Him.
2. I think the problem grows out of the word “jealousy” because that can be a petty emotion.
3. But it doesn’t have to be.
 - a) It is right that I am jealous of Sheri’s love and not willing to share it with others.

H. Why do we avoid worshipping the Triune God?

I. How do we worship in Spirit and truth?

J. Do you agree that it is possible for well-intentioned Christians to worship the church, the Bible or other important aspects of our faith?

¹As Frederick Buechner writes in *Wishful Thinking*, “they (idols) are fine things to have around. But to make them the standard by which all other values are measured, 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.”

² In his commentary on Exodus, Phil Ryken notes that the Egyptians had at least three cow gods – Hathor, Isis and Apis. (Ryken, p. 919).

³ Contributing to the confusion is the fact that they talk about God (singular) and gods (plural).

⁴ The word used here – l’tzachek – which is translated “to dance” is likely a euphemism for sexual behavior. It is the same word used in Genesis 26:8, where it is clearly sexual in nature.

⁵ The first allusion to idolatry is found in the account of Rachel stealing her father’s teraphim (Gen 31:19) which were the relics of the worship of other gods by Laban’s forefathers. During their captivity in Egypt the Jews fell into idolatry and it was a long time before they were delivered from it (Josh. 24:14, Ezek. 20:7). It is likely that they were purged of these idols during their forty years of wandering in the desert. But it appears that they will pick up new idols as they re-enter the promised land and mix with other peoples. It is not until the Babylonian exile that the Jews appear to give up on ancient idols.

⁶ Isaiah 46:6-7

⁷ I Cor. 10:14 & I Cor 5:11)

⁸ Col. 2:18

⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (1.11.8).

¹⁰ Piper wrote: “The greatest enemy of hunger for God is not poison but apple pie. It is not the banquet of the wicked that dulls our appetite for heaven, but endless nibbling at the table of the world...the greatest adversary of love to God is not His enemies but His gifts. The most deadly appetites are not for the poison of evil, but for the simple pleasures of earth. For when these replace an appetite for God Himself, the idolatry is scarcely recognizable and almost incurable...we are not talking about vices, but about the gifts of God...all of them can become deadly substitutes for God.” Frederick Beuchner wrote: “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 the standard by which all other values are measured is to make them your masters, to look to them to justify your life and save your soul is sheerest folly. They just are not up to it.”

¹¹ Phil Yancey, *Tree Trunks and Other Trivial Pursuits*, *Christianity Today*, p. 80. Date ?

¹² As Elizabeth Barrett Browning said, “the devil is most devilish when respectable.” (Aurora Leigh, Bk VII, 1.101)

¹³ In the last sermon he ever preached, C.S. Lewis noted what William Law said, “If you have not chosen the Kingdom of God, it will make in the end no difference what you have chosen instead.” Those are hard words to take. Will it really make no difference whether it was women or patriotism, cocaine or art, whisky or a seat in the Cabinet, money or science? Well, surely no difference that matters. We shall have missed the end for which we are formed and rejected the only thing that satisfies. Does it matter to a man dying in a desert by which choice of route he missed the only well?.

¹⁴ A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, p. 11.