

Sunday November 10, 2019  
Lesson 11: The Permission Trap  
Scripture: Exodus 32: 1-6

**Context:**

The next lesson on knowing God is from the book of Exodus in the Old Testament. In this lesson we realize the consequences of giving ourselves permission of what we know to be wrong. We recognize the freedom of choice God gives us as well as the results when we abuse the freedom God gives us.

The scene described in this chapter of Exodus is often known as the people's first of many rebellions against Moses. Earlier in the book, there is the mention of a tabernacle that the people have been commissioned to build. Yet the people of God have different plans.

When Moses is up on Mount Sinai, the people get antsy. They haven't seen Moses and so they get left to their own devices. They complain that Moses has been absent for too long and tell his brother Aaron that he should fashion "a god" to "go before" them to lead them to the promised land.<sup>1</sup> They feel that there is a vacuum of leadership and they need something to take Moses's place.

Aaron acquiesces to the people and they come before him with golden jewelry and wealth from Egypt. They melt it down and form a golden calf. Yet it is important to note Aaron's response to this creation. He says that these are the gods who brought them out of Egypt. He does not call it their God. In fact, Aaron tries to justify the golden calf by saying that the next day they will have a festival to the Lord and they will bring sacrifices and celebrate.

Aaron is trying to use an intermediary to keep the people happy. The phrase "go before" is nowhere in Exodus and is only when people are requesting "an image of the messenger of God" in other places in the Old Testament.<sup>2</sup> One might think they want an object that represents the power of God like the Ark of the Covenant or the tablets that Moses will bring down the mountain.

The golden calf is made but the people take it to the next step. They make the messenger concrete and begin to worship it. Yahweh is not being set aside, yet Yahweh is now given a messenger that the people worship. When the messenger is worshipped, it moves beyond just being a symbol. God is transformed from God to gods. In constructing the messenger, the people forget about the commands from God and loyalty is ultimately dismissed.

Of course when the discovery is made, God alerts Moses and he must go and play the role of the true messenger of God. The people have blatantly disregarded God's law and are now teetering on catastrophe and complete mutiny. It is one of the many times that the Israelites will rebel against God. They are given freedom and yet they abuse the

<sup>1</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, "Exodus," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2010), 281.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

privilege that comes with freedom.

### **Application**

If you are a movie buff, hopefully you've seen the classic film, Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*. The golden calf scene is epic with the people dancing around a golden calf, food and wine being poured everywhere, and just general debauchery. It conveys the gravity of what the people have chosen to do with Hollywood providing the glamorous effects.

In both the text and the movie, there is a group of people who have the perfect excuses for their decision to make the golden calf. Moses has led them astray. Moses is gone. They haven't seen God. They justify their decision to rebel against God and Moses and could care less about the covenant they have made. They allow their anxiety to overwhelm them and they worship a god who will not bring them life.

We are reminded that we have been given a great freedom when it comes to the choices we make everyday. God makes a covenant with us to have life and we can choose what we will do with our time. Our behavior is up to us; we can be loving and encouraging; or caustic and dismissive. We can choose if and when we want to worship, or we can choose to have countless days where we just do whatever we want. When it comes to our resources, we can choose to share our money with our church or community or just spend on ourselves.

The best part is that the earth will not swallow us up for making the wrong choice. We can justify our choices and decision. Giving excuses can be where we reign supreme. We are also given a chance to correct our mistakes or even repent. We are given grace in that God doesn't punish us for the mistakes we make or the sins we commit. And thank God for that, because all of us would be in big trouble if lightening were to strike us for every sin we committed.

Yet ultimately, at our core, we know when we have abused the freedom we have been given. We may try to deny or suppress it. But odds are we know the truth, but to fix it may cost us in ways that rattle our world and may even make others angry.

The golden calves today come in many different forms. Whether it is something in the church or in our personal lives, there are things that we can sometimes put so much focus on as a conduit to God, we begin to worship those things. We come up for excellent reasons that we worship the things and we justify their existence. We know that the church terrorist will not stop their toxic behavior, but they may go after us if we stand up to them. We know that a particular ministry needs a critique or change, but does it mean we failed? It just needs to keep going so that we keep up a good front and the whole world will see our excellence.

Time and time again, we rebel against God and put our hope and trust in things that are ephemeral. The results come out in different ways and they are rarely life giving. Things and people will always disappoint us, and if too much stock is placed in them, then we may even lose our souls.

One way to be more aware of the golden calves in our lives is to ask the question: Does this connect me to God or does it control me? Whenever we start worshipping the golden calves, it becomes harder and harder to see that they are actually blocking our access to God.

Yet we are given freedom and the choice to respond in goodness to the covenant

God has made with us. It is never too late to destroy the golden calves and begin afresh. There is hope in that God gives us chances to repent and be reconciled to God and neighbor.

What are choices we are given everyday about how we live our lives? What is the good part of those choices? How can we abuse the freedom God has given us? What are the golden calves in your life? What are golden calves you see in the church? How do you justify things you know are wrong? Why do we justify the wrong things that others do? How can we all grow together in accountability and love?

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