

Sermon 107, Unholy Cow,¹ Exodus 32:1-6

Proposition: The way Israel made the Golden Calf warns us against idolatry, false theology, and false worship.

- I. Making the Calf, vv. 1-4a
 - A. Some Precursors to Idolatry, v. 1
 1. Walking by Sight, Not Faith, v. 1a
 2. Seeking a Malleable Leader, v. 1b
 3. Seeking a god/guide, v. 1c
 4. Using a Man-centered Moral Compass, v. 1d
 - B. Some Costs of Idolatry, vv. 2-3
 1. Financial Costs
 2. Family Costs
 - C. Some Context for Idolatry, v. 4a
 1. The Calf as Anti-ark and Anti-Tabernacle
 - a) 6 chs. of instructions v. no instructions
 - b) Presence of God v. absence of God
 - c) Rush job v. time and preparation
 - d) Aaron's solo work v. Artisan team
 2. The Calf as Israel's Original Sin
- II. Interpreting the Calf, vv. 4b-5
 - A. False Claim: The Calf Is Your Exodus God, v. 4b
 - B. False Claim: The Calf Is to be Worshiped by Sacrifice, v. 5a
 - C. False Claim: The Calf Helps Us Worship Yahweh, v. 5b
- III. Worshiping the Calf, v. 6
 - A. No sin offering
 - B. Pagan revelry
- IV. Application
 - A. Shun the precursors to idolatry
 - B. Live on God's gifts rather than paying idolatry's costs
 - C. Accept the Incarnation, the Holy Spirit, and the house of God as providing all the presence of God you need
 - D. Embrace true theology
 - E. Celebrate Divine Worship according to God's commands

¹ The title is taken from Phil Ryken's sermon on this passage in his *Exodus: Saved for God's Glory* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000), ad loc.

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, in case you were wondering, yes, today's sermon on the Golden Calf is going to be largely negative in tone and content. My goal is to preach Christ — but today, I do so by preaching anti-Christ! By that I mean, of course, that I will describe Christ through looking at the opposite, the idol that the people and Aaron made while Moses talked with God atop Mt. Sinai. This idol, in all its gross ugliness, points to the beauty and sufficiency of Jesus Christ. God is not with us in a calf, golden or otherwise. He is with us in a man, His Son.

Nonetheless, there is often much to learn from the negative, and even anti-Christ, or anti-Ark and anti-Tabernacle, can show us something of what our Heavenly Father and His Eternal Son are like. We begin by looking at the first four verses, which describe the process of making the calf. Then we see the theology of the calf outlined in three basic claims (which are all false, by the way). Finally, we see the practical outworking in the method of worshiping the calf. Making, interpreting or theologizing, and worshiping — all show us the false, and thereby highlight the true God who goes before us and is with us.

I. Making the Calf, vv. 1-4a

The process of making the calf is told in very quick brush strokes, which as we'll see is part of the point.

A. Some Precursors to Idolatry, v. 1

There is much to learn even in the first verse, the background or precursors to making the calf.

1. Walking by Sight, Not Faith, v. 1a

Immediately we encounter the statement “When the people saw that Moses delayed.” What did they do? They saw! Their confidence in Moses, and through him in God, was based on what their eyes told them. They were, in short, walking by sight and not by faith.

“To the elders he said, ‘Wait here for us until we return to you. And behold, Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a legal matter, let him approach them.’ Then Moses went up to the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain” (Exo 24:14-15 NAS).

Moses did not say how long he was going to be gone. I think it is really pretty reasonable to imagine that someone who has completely vanished into a glory-storm that looks ferocious and deadly from miles away, and has not come out in over a month, may be dead. The people didn't actually say that, but they said “We don't know. We know what we see, which is that Moses is not here. We don't know what has become of him.”

They were not walking by faith in the God who brought them out of Egypt. The scary thing here is not that their sin was so wild and absurd; the scary thing is that their sin is eminently reasonable. It's totally understandable that they were ready to move on with life!

Brothers and sisters, I want you to notice the tug of this precursor to idolatry in your own life. When you are tempted to worship some other god, the presence and influence of what you can see is very, very powerful. If you fall for the pleasure god, seeing your pleasure right there can be very tempting. If you want to worship the god of grievances and grudges, seeing the

person who wronged you can be very tempting. If you want to worship the god of wealth, seeing the Mercedes in the parking lot can trigger you. And so on. The bottom line here is that when you are driven by what's in front of your eyes, rather than by the truth of God that you have heard with your ears, you are majorly at risk for idolatry.

Israel saw that Moses wasn't there. And rather than believing that the unseen God was going to bring Moses back to them, it was easier to drop Moses. It made more sense to adopt a different approach. We followed Moses and it didn't work! Okay, he got us out of Egypt, but he dropped us here in the desert and he's vanished. Now we need a new method to finish escaping Egypt.

Don't do it, brothers and sisters. Don't walk by sight instead of by faith. Believe that God is there even when you can't see Him. Believe that He will deliver you even when you see absolutely no human or earthly help. Trust His promises even when their fulfillment appears to be utterly remote.

2. Seeking a Malleable Leader, v. 1b

The second risk factor for idolatry is found in the people's assembling against Aaron. What are they doing? They are seeking a malleable leader. We all have a weak spot for this. In our context, it's often called advice-shopping. I don't like what my pastor told me, so I'll ask another pastor and another until I get the answer I want. I don't like what my parents told me, so I'll keep asking until someone agrees with me.

The people wanted a leader who would do what they wanted. They didn't go to Hur. They had a feeling that Aaron was old enough, and open enough, that he could be bullied into compliance.

When you are seeking a leader who is interested in giving you what you want, you are at risk of idolatry.

So positively speaking, you and I need to shun this precursor to idolatry.

3. Seeking a god/guide, v. 1c

The third thing the people want is a god who will go before them. They had the pillar of cloud and fire. It was still clearly visible atop Mt. Sinai, a dark mantle of cloud with a glowing flame at its center. In its majesty, it clearly disclosed the presence of Yahweh Himself there on the mountain. And yet Israel averted their gaze and said "We need a god that will go before us through the wilderness." Did they still have the idea of traveling to Canaan and settling down on the mountain of God there? I would venture a "Yes." So often, even though our sin completely contradicts the Christian message and the Christian hope, we can simply incorporate our sin right into the hope that we have for the future. "I will watch this pornographic video today, and plan on continuing to have a happy, intimate marriage tomorrow." "I will worship the golden calf today, and assume that it will lead me to the promised land tomorrow."

4. Using a Man-centered Moral Compass, v. 1d

That brings up the final risk factor for idolatry. It's what I call a man-centered moral compass. You can see it in the Israelites' running wild while Moses is gone. It was only his presence that had restrained them from sin. Men, I think many of us have a similar attitude about our wives. "I

won't check out the hot girl at work because what would the missus think?" "I won't view porn because my wife wouldn't like it." It's true that your wife wouldn't like it, and that her disapproval is a good thing and a good motive. But if it is your main motive, look out! That means that as soon as something happens to your wife, the fence is down and you are free to wander off the path and into sin. If it is only the moral judgment of some other human being that is restraining you from sin, then you don't hate sin. Your moral compass is not locked onto God's unchanging standard, but onto human beings' fluctuating views. Plenty of good women have been corrupted and started watching erotic material with their husbands. Plenty of idolatry-hating Israelites were more than happy to worship the golden calf when it made its appearance without Moses around. If you are faithful at work only because the boss is watching, faithful to do your homework only when the teacher is breathing down your neck, faithful to do your chores and maintain your home only when your parents or the neighbors are watching, you have a man-centered moral compass and you are at risk of idolatry.

Well, Israel had all four of these things going on. They were walking by sight, not faith; they had a malleable leader; they desired a god to guide them; and they had no internal restraint in the absence of Moses.

Look at your own life for these factors. When did you last shop for advice and leadership you wanted? What areas of your life tempt you to walk by sight, not faith? Where is God's leadership not enough for you? Who has become your external conscience? Is there anyone whose absence would open you to sins you don't commit right now? Brothers and sisters, beware. The devil is very cunning, more so than any beast of the field. He can take any of these precursors and use it to draw you away from Christ.

B. Some Costs of Idolatry, vv. 2-3

And so they gladly paid the costs of idolatry. There are two costs mentioned in these verses.

1. Financial Costs

The first is the financial costs. An idol consumes gold. It takes money and funnels it into an image that eats up value and does nothing in return. The Israelites appear to have had lots of gold jewelry. Indeed, the verse seems to say that both men and women, and children of both sexes, wore gold earrings. And they gave them all to Aaron.

2. Family Costs

The family cost is a little more subtle. But if you notice, Aaron specifically tells the men to lead their families into idolatry. He doesn't tell the men themselves to hand over their earrings; he just tells them to make their wives and children hand them over. Indeed, he uses a rather aggressive verb here, "tear off." I hope that the Israelite men did not walk into their tents and rip the jewelry out of their families' ears. But Aaron seems to envision precisely this. Allow me to say that whether this was done or not, when you worship an idol this is the kind of person you become. You become the kind of person who would rip jewelry out of your little girl's ear to serve your false god with. Rather than loving your wife and children, you see them as resources to be exploited in service of your idolatries. If you worship the sports god, you can put your children into lots of sports and endlessly pressure them to be good so that you can vicariously experience

the thrill of being good at sports. If you worship the god of academic success, ditto. If you worship the god of power and control, you can bully your family and abuse them so they shake in their boots when you enter the room. If you worship the god of self-fulfillment, you can throw a fit any time your family threatens your self-image, and teach them all to tiptoe around your moods. And so on. Ripping earrings out of their ears is just the beginning of a long and cruel process.

So what should we do instead? Live on God's gifts instead of paying idolatry's costs. What does that mean? It means to go to God for His help in every aspect of your life. When you are not sure you have enough money, pleasure, power, take it to Him. Ask Him to provide for you. When you are lacking friends, when you need a better job, when you are discouraged about the state of our nation and our church, what should you do? Rather than turning to the dark powers that promise results *now*, turn to God, who promises results in His own time and in His own way. True worship of the true God is work. It's tiring. But it will not leave you feeling like you just got your insides sucked out by a spider. God gives more than He takes. Always. The opposite is true of idols. They take more than they give.

So if you're living out of emptiness, you're living in idolatry. If you are living based on neediness rather than based on fullness, sufficiency, you are living in idolatry. Your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. The life of devouring neediness is not the Christian life. The person who has to have stuff, and have it now, is not living the Christian life. Live on God's gifts rather than on the idol's black hole of desire that sucks in everything and returns nothing.

C. Some Context for Idolatry, v. 4a

Well, allow me to share a few more observations about this passage based on its context.

1. The Calf as Anti-ark and Anti-Tabernacle

What is the context? Well, the story of the golden calf is sandwiched between 12 chapters of revelation from the top of Sinai and 6 chapters that describe how that revelation was implemented in the construction of the tabernacle. The tabernacle is a place for God to dwell in the midst of His people. The calf is a way for a false god to dwell in the midst of the people. In terms of the context, then, I see four major ways in which the calf seems to be an anti-Ark and an anti-Tabernacle.

a) 6 chs. of instructions v. no instructions

The first way is that the six chapters of instructions for the tabernacle contrast powerfully with the total lack of instructions for the golden calf. There is no preparation, no gathering of many different types of materials, no detailed plan, no model shown on the mountain, and above all, no word from God. The golden calf was made in an afternoon, at most in a whole day.

b) Presence of God v. absence of God

The tabernacle was a place for the presence of God. The golden calf, despite supposedly standing for God, really marked His absence, for He cannot be represented by a bull with horns and hoofs.

c) Rush job v. time and preparation

We also get the distinct impression that the golden calf was a rush job. I know very little about the process of sculpting, but I'm pretty sure that you can't make a good work of art in an

afternoon. On the other hand, the construction of the tabernacle took the better part of a year. Which is going to provide a more lasting religious center for Israel?

d) Aaron's solo work v. Artisan team

Finally, the tabernacle was built by Bezalel and Oholiab, plus I'm sure many others worked under their direction. Meanwhile, it appears that Aaron single-handedly made the golden calf.

The text is light on details about the calf precisely to emphasize that it is the opposite of the detailed tabernacle. It is supposed to be a quick and dirty substitute for God's authorized way of living and meeting with His people. Instead, it is so quick and so dirty that we obviously have to reject it. The calf has no point of contact with the living God.

How do we counter the anti-Tabernacle? Here's how. Accept the Incarnation, the Holy Spirit, and the house of God as providing all the presence of God you need. Brothers and sisters, you have the church in your life. That is the house of God, the family of faith, the body of Christ. It is a holy temple in the Lord. If you are in church (which you are, listening to this sermon), you are in God's presence. Plus, you have Jesus, the one whose name is God with Us, who became one of us to save us. You have the Holy Spirit. You can't always be in church; we only meet a few hours a week. But you can always be in the presence of God by the Spirit. The Spirit lives in your heart. He has come to replace the earthly presence of Jesus. And we are actually better off with the Spirit's invisible presence than we would be with Jesus' visible presence. As crazy as it sounds, you are better off sitting in that pew with the Spirit in your heart and me in the pulpit than you would be sitting in that pew without the Spirit and Jesus Christ in the pulpit.

It was to our advantage that Jesus went away. His Spirit is Almighty, and is closer to us than we are to ourselves. Why would you resort to the anti-Tabernacle? You have the presence of God. He is not found in a new car, or in a gallon of ice cream. He is not to be located in a Sunday morning hike in your favorite wilderness area. He is not in the game-winning touchdown. He is in church, in your heart, and in the heart of your Christian brothers. Seek Him there!

2. The Calf as Israel's Original Sin

The context also has very little mention of sin. We have Israel grumbling in the wilderness and breaking the Sabbath, but almost all the mentions of the word "sin" in Exodus refer to this incident with the golden calf. It's a rewrite of the scene in Gen. 3 where Adam and Eve fall into sin. Israel too, freshly delivered from Egypt and reborn in the waters of the Red Sea, comes to Sinai and falls into sin. The ongoing threat of divine punishment at the end of the chapter seems to imply that the sin of the golden calf is a sort of permanent threat hanging over the people of God. We can turn to idols so fast it would make Moses' head spin. Again, you don't need an idol. What is the true God failing to provide for you? Name it. And once you've named it, say to yourself "If God is not giving this to me, I don't need it — not at the price of apostasy from Him." If your wife won't give you a lingerie night, you don't need a hooker at the cost of your marriage. If your health won't give you a serving of ice cream, or if your bank account won't allow a getaway to Maui, or if your church won't allow for a staffed nursery, you don't need to demand those things from an idol instead.

II. Interpreting the Calf, vv. 4b-5

Well, the Israelites and Aaron together not only made the calf, but proceeded to theologize about it. They make three theological statements about the aureate animal.

A. False Claim: The Calf Is Your Exodus God, v. 4b

They call this brilliant bull the Exodus god: “These are your gods,” or “This is your god” (could be translated either way). Now, despite the fact that they just watched Aaron make it from their earrings, they dare to call this animal the thing that brought them up out of the land of Egypt. Apparently they have forgotten the plague of boils on livestock. Apparently they have forgotten that the wrath of God was appeased by the blood of the lamb — something that a bull has no interest in. The Passover was not accomplished by smearing grass stains on the door frames.

But reason has nothing to do with it. They were in the grip of walking by sight, wanting a visible guide, wanting a god they could control. And so they uttered and embraced the obvious lie that this blasted bull was their exodus God. There is no way it could have brought them out of Egypt. But did they care? No. It was visible, and it was shiny, and it was not too particular or precise about anything they didn’t want it to be particular and precise about.

B. False Claim: The Calf Is to be Worshiped by Sacrifice, v. 5a

Well, Aaron jumped in on the act right away. Just like today’s tech companies, he realized that if you build something solid, you don’t get repeat business very often. A bull like this could easily last longer than his lifetime. But he was a professional priest, and so he quickly found a way to sell services to the bull-worshippers that would give him job security every day for the rest of His life. Quick as lightning, even quicker than he had thrown the bull together, he threw together an altar in front of it.

What did that altar mean? That the calf was to be worshiped by sacrifice. This bovine will be happier with you if you give it your best . . . bulls, and wine, and stuff. This ain’t the Chick-fil-a cow, folks, asking people to spare the lives of its kind. No. This bull is apparently cannibalistic and devouring, like all idols. It is a symbol of virility and strength, but it does not have the strength to protect its own kind.

To this day, idols demand sacrifice. If you live for pleasure, then you have to give up work and family time and sleep and many other things to the imperious claims of your wretched idol. The same goes for every other idol, whether it’s the autonomy god, the convenience god (to which we sacrifice our children in a rite called “abortion,” or perhaps “daycare” or “television”), the power god or the laziness god — they all demand sacrifice. But the true God provides His own sacrifice. He gave His only Son so that we would not have to sacrifice ourselves. Yes, He asks that we be like Him. But He asks only that we worship His Son because His Son was the ultimate sacrifice — not to recreate it with our own children and goods.

C. False Claim: The Calf Helps Us Worship Yahweh, v. 5b

The final false claim, and perhaps the granddaddy of them all, is that the calf helps us worship Yahweh. “Tomorrow,” intones Aaron, “shall be a feast to Yahweh!”

Now, some have tried to soften the impact of this statement, arguing that Aaron is trying to buy time, hoping that Moses will return before the projected feast and put a stop to the

nonsense that Aaron is too weak to oppose. That could be. But as with our method of interpreting the tabernacle, let's try to look for the obvious rather than the esoteric. And what is obvious about this statement is that it is made in the context of the inauguration of the calf as a part of Israel's religious life. The calf is associated with a feast to Yahweh, such that to feast to Yahweh is something performed with the help of the calf. In the starkest terms, Aaron is saying that to feast in front of the calf, to feast with an idol presiding, is a legitimate way of worshiping Yahweh. That is garbage. In the narrator's conception, which is also God's conception, the presence of a visual aid is not some kind of assistance to worship of the true and living God. Rather, it is defeater, a corrupter, a poison. To put the visual aid up front and say "This is Yahweh; feast to Him!" is to not worship Yahweh at all. It is to worship the visual aid, to make it an *idol*. Remember, the Greek word *idol* means "little seen thing." God is the opposite. He is immense, and He is invisible. If you can see it, it ain't God. The one exception to this rule is the Lord Jesus Christ — but again, if He is in Heaven and you're not with Him, you still can't see Him.

Now, it is abundantly clear to the most casual reader of this passage that God hates worship with a visual aid, the narrator hates worship with a visual aid, and Moses hates worship with a visual aid. There is no minority report on this anywhere in Scripture. The worshiping of God by images is forbidden in the second commandment.

Aaron & co. didn't say that they were worshiping Apis or Baal or some other ANE god typically represented by a bull. They would not have admitted to being idolaters. They were committed Hebrews, and they were worshiping Yahweh of Hosts, maker of Heaven and Earth. But from the narrator's perspective, they aren't worshiping Yahweh at all. They are sinning grievously against Him and worshiping an idol.

They made a calf in Horeb,
and worshipped the molten image.

Thus they changed their glory
into the similitude of an ox that eateth grass. (Psa 106:19-20 KJV)

The psalmist is even more direct than the Mosaic narration. They worshiped, not the true God in a wrong way, but an altogether false god.

Now, this issue is far from dead. To this day, a faction within the visible church asserts that worship with visual aids and depictions of God is okay, necessary, even more godly than its absence. The Roman Catholics, the Eastern Orthodox, and many Lutherans, Methodists, and Baptists allow for worshiping God with a visual aid. The papists place a crucifix at the front of every church building. The Orthodox fill the entire church with icons, including a large wall of them at the front of the room. And they typically depict Christ the Pantocrator in the dome, looking down on His people with His hand raised in blessing.

Brothers and sisters, this should not be controversial: According to Moses, the author of Exodus, such worship is an abomination and offensive to God. Our Westminster Confession actually calls Roman Catholics idolaters precisely because of their use of crucifixes and other religious images as worship aids.

Rome and the Orthodox do not dispute that Exodus thinks of icons and crucifixes as abominations. But they insist that the Incarnation legalized depictions of God, or at least of Christ. If there were even a single verse of the NT that gave color to such an assertion, I might consider it. But you cannot find a single text to suggest that the second commandment no longer applies.

Golden calves, aureate pictures of Christ and saints and Mary — these things were swept away by the Reformation, “the greatest act of the church catholic,” as Philip Schaff called it. Sweeping them away was right, necessary, and noble. To suggest otherwise is to validate the golden calf as a legitimate artistic expression on the part of the newly liberated Israelites. The narrator has one word for that: Nonsense. Just as pornography is not free speech, so idols are not art. Remember, the false theologizing about the Golden Calf reminds us to embrace true theology, and the truth that God has revealed Himself definitively in the word, *not in the image*.

III. Worshiping the Calf, v. 6

Well, the people went ahead with the “Festival to Yahweh” — just as liberal denominations today announce that they are descending to the next level of queer perversion “by the Holy Spirit’s leading.” It’s a total lie. But at this festival, they sacrificed to the “god” that had “brought them up from Egypt.” It wasn’t a god, and it hadn’t done squat for them. But they still sacrificed to it.

A. No sin offering

Notice two things, though. The first is that they did not offer sin offerings. This idol did not hold sins against anyone. It didn’t need to forgive because it saw nothing wrong.

B. Pagan revelry

And of course, the other side of the worship is that it was not worship at all. There was no Holy Spirit and no truth involved. It was just pagan revelry: eating, drinking, playing. True worship is work; false worship is entertainment, play, relaxation.

So what do we learn from the golden calf, the anti-tabernacle? We learn to obey our God and celebrate His worship according to His commands. He told us how to worship Him. Let’s worship Him that way, not out of control with pagan revelry, but under the Spirit’s control, with love, joy, and peace, singing with the Spirit and with the understanding also.

So shun the precursors to idolatry, brothers and sisters. Live on God’s gifts rather than paying idolatry’s costs. Accept the Incarnation of Christ, the gift of the Spirit, and the household of God as providing all the presence of God you need. Embrace true theology, and celebrate the worship of God according to His commands. That is what Christ would have you do; that is what He died to bring about. Amen.