

### Overview:

In this lesson, we want students to ask themselves the question: *What am I worshipping?* Our identity is shaped by the things we value the most. If we want popularity, then we will value acceptance from others - and do anything to get it. If we want to be a high-achiever, then we will value good grades or high-paying jobs - and do anything to get it. So the question of identity is really a question of worship. *What do you treasure? What do you worship?* To help answer those questions, we'll look at the story of Israel in the desert worshipping the golden calf. This story comes **after** God has delivered them from Egypt through mighty works and wonders (Exodus 1-15), **after** he has miraculously provided manna from heaven and water from a rock (Exodus 16-17), and **after** he's made a covenant with them and given them the 10 Commandments (Exodus 20). If nothing else, the story of the golden calf indicates one clear thing about the human heart: we are prone to finding our identity in things other than God. As a result, we must be regularly evaluating our hearts to see if we have strayed away from loving God with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength. Even if we have strayed, thankfully this passage also shows Moses as the Christ figure, who intercedes for his people even in their sin and makes a way for them to be forgiven.

### 1. Idolatry is always lurking in every human heart

Read Exodus 32:1-6

#### Read it:

*Exodus 32:1 - When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, "Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him."*

#### Discuss it:

What two things are mentioned in verse 1 that set the Israelites up for their fall into idolatry?

- Moses was taking a long time
- They didn't know what had happened to him or when he would come back
- **Leader Note:** What's significant is how mundane that is! It's not like they were attacked by a foreign army or in need of food and water. They had no reason to turn to an idol. Their desire to worship the idol simply birthed from their sinful human heart. They were impatient and bored. They got tired of waiting on God and went searching for something else.

#### Apply it:

If boredom and impatience create an opportunity for the heart to be led astray, how is our culture easily prone to idolatry?

- **Leader Note:**
- **Boredom.** Our minds are so used to being entertained that we are more easily bored than ever and our minds are trained to immediately grab the phone, computer, or TV to address the boredom. Instead of using "boredom" to rest or spend time with the Lord, we have made habits of treating our boredom with entertainment that can lead us into sin, or at a minimum, open our hearts up to idolatry.
- **Impatience.** In a 5G world with GrubHub, Uber, and 2-day shipping, we have gotten more and more trained to expect things quickly and conveniently. The problem comes when we try to put God on the same schedule as the convenient services we enjoy.

Instead of trusting God with our circumstances, we take things into our own hands or look to things other than God to provide us with what we need.

**Transition:** So, after the people have grown bored and impatient and turned to Aaron for an idol, we see Aaron's response starting in verse 2.

**Read it:**

*Exodus 32:2-4a - "So Aaron said to them, 'Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, your daughters, and bring them to me.' So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf.*

**Discuss it:**

What is Aaron's position among God's people?

- **Leader Note:** He is a priest. He was supposed to offer sacrifices for the people's sin, not help them with their sin.

**Apply it:**

Aaron was the priest of God's people. He's supposed to be a leader. He's supposed to be one of the "mature" among them. If Aaron fell victim to idolatry, what "types" of people should be on guard against idolatry?

- **Leader note:** All people! Regardless of how long you've been a Christian, how "mature" you think you are, how faithful you've been in the past - none of that matters. From the new believer to the small group leader to the pastor, everyone must be careful to examine their heart for idolatry.

**Discuss it:**

What kind of idol did Aaron make?

- **Leader Note:** He made a physical idol, specifically a golden calf.

**Apply it:**

Does an idol have to be a physical statue in order to be an idol?

- **Leader Note:** Of course not. Read Acts 7:39-40.
- The key phrase in these verses is "In their hearts, they turned to Egypt."
- Idols are heart-problems, not physical statues. Idols are anything that we love or trust in more than God.

So, what are some common idols in your heart?

- **Leader Note:** Sports, video games, social media, being liked, a boyfriend/girlfriend, your family, a sin you aren't willing to give up, your reputation, etc.

**Discuss it:**

What does he use to make the idol? Do you know where the gold came from?

- **Leader Note:** He uses the gold that the people gave him. The reason this is so significant is that the gold came from the Egyptians, by God's command, as God's people were leaving Egypt. Later in Exodus, we will learn that the gold was intended to be used to build the tabernacle so God's people could worship him. So, the problem isn't just that they were worshipping something else. That's bad enough. But it's that they were worshipping something else with the things that God had given them to worship Him.

**Apply it:**

What are some examples of how we use gifts God has given us to worship ourselves or something else?

- **Leader Note:**
  - We use our intellect and worship the idol of success.
  - We use our phones to worship the idol of self-exaltation.
  - We use our money to worship the idol of convenience and comfort.
  - We use our friendships and relationships to worship the idol of acceptance.
  - We use our religion to worship the idol of self-image.
  - The reality is that we can use anything God has given us to serve ourselves rather than serving God.

**Transition:** If you can believe it, Aaron and the people actually go a step further in their idolatry. Not only have they made an idol and used God's gifts to make it....but in verses 4-6 they actually give the idol credit for God's past victories.

**Read it:**

*Exodus 32:4b-6 - "And they said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!' When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, 'Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD.' And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play."*

**Discuss it:**

What did they give credit to the idol for doing?

- **Leader Note:** They said that this idol brought them up out of the land of Egypt. That means that they're giving this idol credit for sending the plagues and parting the Red Sea!

What's significant about Aaron calling the idol, "The LORD?"

- **Leader note:** This name for God (all caps LORD) is his covenant name, Yahweh. So Aaron has taken the most intimate, meaningful, personal name for God - a name that is a sign of his never-ending love for His people - and assigned it to a statue.

**Apply it:**

How do we minimize God through our words and actions?

- **Leader Note:** We fail to give God credit for the way that he works in our lives. We often point to other things or other people as the source of happiness or deliverance. We are noticeably happy and fulfilled when our favorite sports team wins a big game, when we get attention from someone that we like, or when we perform well on a big test. Rarely, if ever, do we have that same experience when we consider the gospel or other works of God in our lives. We tend to assign our satisfaction and fulfillment to much smaller and insignificant things.

**Transition:** Now, here's a question. If you're God in this situation, how would you feel? You have done mighty works and wonders to save Israel out of slavery in Egypt, yet here they are worshipping a statue instead of you. To put it mildly, you would be angry, because what is happening is unjust. And God lets his anger be known to Moses.

## **2. Idolatry angers the LORD and is deserving of judgment**

**Read it:**

*Exodus 32:7-10 - "And the LORD said to Moses, 'Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!' And the Lord said to Moses, 'I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. Now therefore, let me alone that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you.'"*

### **Discuss it:**

These verses show the jealousy that God has for His people. How is that a sign of God's love?

- **Leader Note:** God's jealousy for his people is a sign of God's love in at least two ways. First, God's relationship with his people is compared to a bride and a groom throughout the Bible. Would a husband or wife not care if they found out that the other person was in love with someone else? Of course they would care! That's because they have a healthy jealousy for their spouse. When they get married they don't expect to have to share their spouse with someone else. That's because the special relationship of a husband and wife is supposed to be *exclusive*, and God's special relationship with his people is supposed to be *exclusive*. His anger at their idolatry is actually a sign of his deep love for them. He desires that their hearts be committed to Him because His heart is committed to them.
- Second, God knows that this idol can't actually provide His people with what they need. If they prayed to the golden calf for manna from heaven, it couldn't provide. If they prayed for deliverance from slavery, a statue couldn't help them. Only God is capable of providing the deliverance, provision, and satisfaction that his people need. Therefore, he wants them to come to him so that their needs can be met.

Why is idolatry deserving of God's judgment?

- **Leader Note:** On an obvious level, idolatry is deserving of God's judgment because it's a sin, and all sin is deserving of judgment because God is holy and just. Israel was guilty of breaking the first and second commandment and so it required payment in order for them to be forgiven.
- More specifically, idolatry is blasphemy. It makes false claims about God. When there is idolatry in our hearts it is like we are saying to God, "You are not enough to save me. You are not enough to provide for me. You are not enough to satisfy my soul. You are not worthy of my worship and devotion, so I'm going to give it to someone else or something else." When we see idolatry in this way, it's clear that it is a rejection of God and His salvation.

**Transition:** Thankfully, even though Israel was clearly caught in sin and deserving of judgment, Moses stepped in on behalf of the people. In verses 11-14 he offers prayer for the people and in verses 30-35 he offers payment for the people's sin.

### **3. Idolatry reveals our need for a mediator**

What is a mediator?

- **Leader Note:** A mediator is someone who steps in to bring peace where there is conflict.

**Transition:** Let's see how Moses plays the role of mediator. First, through prayer.

### **Read it:**

*Exodus 32:11-14 - "But Moses implored the LORD his God and said, 'O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great*

*power and a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them in the face of the earth? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, 'I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.' And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people."*

**Discuss it:**

How does Moses plea with God to keep Him from destroying Israel?

- **Leader Note:** First Moses appeals to God's character and then he appeals to God's covenant. As it relates to God's character, Moses does not want the world to misunderstand God's actions. God had clearly shown his power and divine love for Israel by delivering them from Egypt. If they were destroyed, it would look like God had saved them from Egypt only to destroy them Himself. Moses does not want God's character to be misunderstood. As it relates to his covenant, Moses prays that God would spare Israel based on the promises he made long ago to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Moses knows that God does not go back on His word.

**Transition:** The result of Moses' prayer is that God spares Israel from utter destruction. But later in the chapter Moses plays the role of mediator again - this time trying to make payment for the sins of the people.

**Read it:**

*Exodus 32:30-32 - "The next day Moses said to the people, 'You have sinned a great sin. And now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin. So Moses returned to the LORD and said, 'Alas, this people has sinned a great sin. They have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will forgive their sin - but if not, please blot me out of your book.'"*

**Discuss it:**

Moses says he will try to make atonement for the sin of Israel. What is atonement?

- **Leader Note:** Atonement is a payment that pays for the damage that was caused. Like if you hit someone's car, you have to "atone" for it by paying for their car to get fixed. In the Bible atonement has to do with payment for sin. Because God is righteous and just, sin must be paid for.

What does Moses offer as payment for the people's sin?

- **Leader Note:** It's as if Moses is hesitant as he speaks to God. He acknowledges the people's sin, and he wants God to forgive them, but he doesn't know what he can offer. And so he makes this final appeal: "God, please forgive the people. But if you won't, don't kill them, kill me." Moses offers himself as a sacrifice for the people's sin.

**Transition:** Look how God responds to his offer in verses 33-35.

**Read it:**

*Exodus 32:33-35 - "But the LORD said to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book. But now go, lead the people to the place about which I have spoken to you; behold, my angel shall go before you. Nevertheless, in the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them. Then the LORD sent a plague on the people, because they made the calf, the one that Aaron made."*

**Discuss it:**

Does it look like God accepted Moses' sacrifice for the sins of the people? Why or why not?

- Leader Note: No, he didn't. Moses asked to receive the punishment for the people, but God clearly said, *"Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book."*
- The reason for this is because Moses was not an adequate sacrifice for the people. As God would make clear later in Leviticus, a perfect Lamb was necessary to atone for the sins of the people.

**Apply it:**

Moses was not a sufficient mediator, but he does point to the ultimate mediator, Jesus Christ. How is Jesus a true Mediator between us and God even when we find ourselves with idols in our hearts?

- Leader Note: Read 1 John 2:1. Even when we stand guilty before God, Jesus is our righteousness. His sinless perfection is freely given to anyone who believes in Him and He advocates for us before the Father.
- Israel paid for their sins with a plague. The good news of the gospel is that Jesus died on the cross to take the punishment we deserved. So by trusting in Jesus, we don't have to fear the wrath and punishment of God because he has taken it all for us. Through faith in Christ, we can be completely forgiven and declared innocent.

How does the knowledge of Jesus' sacrifice help us in our fight against idols?

- Leader note: It shows us the extent of God's love for us. And when we realize how much God loves us, why would we seek to find our identity in anything else or anyone else? If we know we have the love and approval of God - as those who have been made righteous in Christ - why would we live for the approval of others? Why would we live for relationships, achievements, or reputation to try to justify our existence? When we rest in God's love in Jesus Christ, we are set free from the need to serve idols and find an identity in anything else but him.

Are you aware of any idols in your life?

What actions do you need to take against your idols?

- Leader Note:
  - Confess it
  - Put safeguards in place
  - Pray about it
  - Ask for on-going accountability

How can you replace the emptiness of the idol with deeper affections for God?

- Leader Note:
  - Actively remember the gospel and pursue your relationship with the Lord. Israel got in trouble due to their boredom/laziness. If you don't pursue God, you better believe that an idol will spring up in your heart.
  - Read your Bible, pray, go to church, enjoy meaningful Christian fellowship, read Christian books, listen to good Christian music. All of these things will stir up your love for the Lord and give less room in your heart for an idol to take root.

**Pray:**

- Pray for God to reveal your idols
- Pray for God to loosen your grip on your idols
- Pray for God to give you a love for him that overshadows your love for the things of this world.