

American Idols

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Exodus 32:1-8

Sermon Series:
God's Big Story

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To Americans living in the progressive 21st century, idol worship seems altogether antiquated and irrelevant. Nobody pays homage to golden calves anymore. The whole thing is so yesterday.

Oh, really?

American Idol will debut its 8th season on FOX TV in January. Who will be crowned the next American Idol? I'm dying to know! Who will replace last year's champion, David Cook? How do you account for the enormous popularity of this show? Call it celebrity fame!

Jake Halpern has written a provocative book on the subject, *Fame Junkies: The Hidden Truth Behind America's Favorite Addiction*. Americans are addicted to fame. "We have done it to ourselves," Halpern writes. "In our effort to boost children's self-esteem, we have overshot the mark. We're left with a generation awash in narcissism and an exaggerated sense of self-importance and entitlement."

Let's look at idolatry from the perspective of God's Big Story. We are created for relationship with God and one another. Sin, however, destroys these relationships. We worship gods of our own making; namely, the god of self. Yet God restores these rela-

tionships. God creates, sin destroys, but God restores.

God's restoration process is inaugurated through something called a covenant. The Ten Commandments, as I said last Sunday, stipulate what it means to live in covenant relationship with God.

The first two commandments have expressly to do with idolatry. The first commandment states, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). The second commandment follows suit, "You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above or that is on the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them" (20:4-5). After God rolls out his Top Ten list of commands, He reiterates to Moses, "You shall not make gods of silver...or gold" (20:22).

Moses lingers on Mt. Sinai for 40 days to receive a hand-signed copy of the Ten Commandments. Meanwhile, back at the ranch, God's people are becoming restless. People start speculating whether Moses has died up there. They press Moses' brother, Aaron, "Come, make gods for us" (32:1).

That shouldn't come as any surprise to you. Whenever God doesn't accommodate our timetable, we take matters into our own hands.

Idolatry is the practice of making good things into ultimate things.

Aaron, inexplicably, doesn't consult God. He simply concedes to their request. He instructs people to hand over their gold jewelry and forges molten gold into a golden calf (32:2-3).

Why a calf and not an antelope or bear? God's people want to resemble their Phoenician neighbors. Their god, Baal, was often depicted as a calf. Their supreme god was a bull to express strength and reproductive prowess.

Things go downhill from here. Aaron declares a festival to the Lord (32:5). I don't think so! We're told, "They sit down to eat and drink and rise up to revel" (32:6). That's a nice way of saying the festival degenerates into a drunken orgy.

They don't reject God outright. What they want is a material god, something they can see. They want gods with faces. They want a God substitute.

Why is God so adamant about making idols? By making God into a material image, we begin to think about manipulating God. We haul God around with us, to make Him do what we want. A material god becomes a shrunken god.

It would be like saying God lives at 124 Park Street, NE, Vienna, VA. Surely this is God's house and God lives here. But God lives everywhere. Solomon invests 14 years to build a magnificent temple, yet on the occasion of its dedication, he has sense enough to recognize "God does not live in buildings made with hands"

(1 Kings 8:27). God lives everywhere and goes anywhere.

An idol is anything that takes the place of God. Idolatry is the futile attempt to look to anyone or anything for salvation apart from God. Simone Weil said, "One has only the choice between God and idolatry."

If our greatest joy and supreme delight is found in relationship with God, separation from God will inevitably bring alienation and restlessness. We resort to making idols to help fill the gap.

Paul writes in Romans, "People exchange the truth about God for images resembling people or birds or animals....They worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator" (1:21-25). Instead of living for God, we set our hearts on created things and order our lives around them.

All of us have desires. We desire to be happy, satisfied and fulfilled. Whenever we seek to satisfy these desires in material pursuits, the result is disastrous. Idols are the wrong way to satisfy legitimate desires.

Idols are not, in and of themselves, bad. Quite the opposite; even good things can become idols when they begin to dominate our lives. Idolatry is the practice of making good things into ultimate things. Idols don't fit our souls' God-shaped vacuums.

Take the human sensation of hunger. Hunger pains are perfectly normal ways for our bodies to signal our need for nourishment. But when hunger becomes excessive, gluttony and all manner of eating disorders ensue.

“The human heart is a relentless factory for idols.”

- John Calvin

We can idolize most anything: success, romance, family, status, popularity, beauty, you name it. John Calvin writes in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, “The human heart is a relentless factory for idols. Everyone is an expert at inventing idols.”

Idolatry is not one sin among many. Any failure to trust God becomes idolatrous. Sin results whenever we replace God with a God substitute. Suppose a man cheats on his income tax return. We might call him a sinner for cheating on his income tax. But he is also an idolater. He makes money and possessions, or the status or comfort he derives from them, more important than God.

John Bunyan wrote *Pilgrim’s Progress* from his English prison cell in 1678, you might be interested to know. He was jailed ten years for unauthorized preaching. His book is an account of one man’s journey from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. Christian meets up with a fellow traveler named Faithful, and they come to a town called Vanity. A fair in the town is in progress called Vanity Fair. In Bunyan’s world of allegory, Vanity Fair represents all the enticing worldly pursuits that would distract the Christian from salvation. Christian and Faithful refuse to enter into the spirit of the fair. They announce they are in the market for truth. The townspeople take offense; they beat them and cast them into jail. They are summoned before Judge Hate-good. Three witnesses take the stand against them, Envy,

Superstition and Pick-Thank (to “pick a thank” is to curry the favor of someone for devious ends). The jury is comprised of Mr. Blind-man, Mr. No-good, Mr. Malice, Mr. Love-lust, Mr. Live-loose, Mr. Heady, Mr. High-mind, Mr. Enmity, Mr. Liar, Mr. Cruelty, Mr. Hate-light and Mr. Implacable. No wonder that Christian and Faithful are sentenced to death. Faithful is executed, but Christian manages to escape. Shortly thereafter, his spirits soar when he meets up with a fellow traveler named Hopeful.

The excesses of the world can be described as a Vanity Fair. It offers us all manner of frivolous diversion from the things that really matter.

The prophet Ezekiel speaks of the tendency for idols to reside in the human heart (14:1-8). The human heart is never neutral. It must worship and serve something. Everyone is religious; atheists included. Everyone worships and serves something. Religion is anything to which we give ultimate allegiance.

Rooting out idols isn’t, sorry to say, a once-and-done affair. It’s an ongoing battle. Calvin is spot on, “My heart is an idol factory constantly elevating and worshiping other people and things above God.”

Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, has compiled a list of would-be idolatries. Here are a few of them:

Power idolatry: I am irritated, discontent or unsatisfied unless I have power and influence over others.

Where are we looking to things other than God for fulfillment and satisfaction?

Approval idolatry: I am irritated, discontent and unsatisfied unless I am loved and respected by others.

Comfort idolatry: I am irritated, discontent and unsatisfied unless I experience pleasure in my life.

Image idolatry: I am irritated, discontent or unsatisfied unless I have a particular look or body image.

Control idolatry: I am irritated, discontent or unsatisfied unless I am able to gain mastery over all areas of my life.

Helping idolatry: I am irritated, discontent or unsatisfied unless people are dependent on me and need me.

Work idolatry: I am irritated, discontent or unsatisfied unless I am highly productive at getting things done.

Materialism idolatry: I am irritated, discontent or unsatisfied unless I have a certain level of wealth, financial freedom and nice possessions.

Family idolatry: I am irritated, discontent and unsatisfied unless my children and/or my parents are happy with me.

Have I missed anyone? He lists 20 idolatries in all, but I suspect this much will suffice!

In 1934, Christians joined together as a Confessing Church to resist Hitler's takeover of the German Protestant Church. They wrote a manifesto called *The Theological Declaration of Barmen*. The essence of this creed is the affirmation "Jesus Christ is Lord." They regarded any other person or entity elevated to a

position of supremacy to be idolatrous. "We reject the false doctrine as though there are areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ but to other lords...."

We are a community of Christians in this church committed to following Jesus Christ as Lord. Discipleship is a lifelong endeavor. We are learning all our lives what it means to follow Jesus Christ as Lord.

What lesser lords have become idols in your life? Remember, we can idolize anything. Even good things can assume ultimate importance. Where are we looking to things other than God for fulfillment and satisfaction?

