Text: Exodus 32:1-24

What comes to mind when I say the word “idol” or “idolatry”? Chances are most of you thought about a golden statue or worship that involves bowing down to or praying to a figure/model representative of a god, a deity.

For many, this sounds rather primitive, naïve or foreign. Something you would see in an underdeveloped, uncivilized nation. However, idolatry is more prevalent and present than you may think...especially in the sophisticated, western civilization.

Though we do not face a pantheon of false gods like the Israelites did, we face pressures from a pantheon of false values--materialism, love of leisure, sensuality, worship of self, security, entertainment and many others.

The second commandment deals with idols. This may be something that most of us can't relate to--unless we include life goals, values or passions that revolve around something other than God Himself. What is the object of our affections, our efforts, and our attention? Where does the majority of our time go? On what do we spend the greatest amount of our resources?

Message: “Contemporary Idolatry”

Read & Explain: Exodus 32:1-24

The Truth about Contemporary Idolatry:

1. **Idolatry makes something other than God one’s “god.”**

What is a “god”? According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary:

1 *capitalized*: the supreme or ultimate reality: as a: the Being perfect in power, wisdom, and goodness who is worshipped as creator and ruler of the universe 2: a being or object believed to have more than natural attributes and powers and to require human worship; specifically: one controlling a particular aspect or part of reality 3: a person or thing of supreme value 4: a powerful ruler

I would like to add this definition: Being or object we believe is worthy of our affection, devotion, trust, and servitude.

2. **Among God’s people idolatry often involves the worship of something or someone other than God as though it were God.**

A polytheistic or multi-gods culture may worship any number of “gods,” but Israel’s religion is monotheistic, the worship of only one God.
The heathen may worship their “gods” by whatever name they wish; Israel can worship a “god” only by the name of Yahweh. Israel’s idolatry is a more dangerous variety because it can appear to be the worship of the true God, when, in fact, it is the worship of some other “god” in the name of the true God.

This idolatry is, by far, the most dangerous and the most prevalent among Christians. It looks and sounds so pious and zealous but it is misdirected. It has the “appearance of godliness” but not its purity or power.

2 Timothy 3:1-5  

1 But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. 2 People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them.

3. Idolatry can be either conscious or unconscious.

In Exodus 32 Israel’s idolatry is both conscious and deliberate (stiff necked people). In other instances, idolatry may be practiced without actually knowing what is happening. However, innocent or naïve idolatry is still idolatry.

4. Idolatry seeks to replace what cannot be seen with something that can be seen—it is physically oriented.

The underlying issue of idolatry is faith, since faith focuses on what is not seen.

Hebrews 11:1 Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.

Idolatry attempts to replace something invisible or perceived as absent with something present and visible. Ironically, while the problem was one of seeing God, He was visibly present behind them, on the mountain.

Ironically, as well, it was what the Israelites “saw” that was wrong, and which got them in trouble. We are a physically-oriented people. We say, “Seeing is believing,” but for Christians the opposite is true.

John 20:29 Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

For those who have not seen the risen Lord, we nevertheless have the promise of His presence with us so we do not need visible tokens (idols) of His presence.

5. Idolatry is still a temptation for God followers today since the circumstances of today are very similar to those found in Exodus 32.

There are some remarkable parallels between the situation which Israel faced in this point of her history (Exodus 32) and that faced by the church today. The more we understand these parallels, the more we ill grasp the possibilities for practicing idolatry today.

In the Book of Exodus, God had come down, manifesting Himself to men. Moses, God’s appointed leader then was called up and away from the people, but they were left with clear instructions from God regarding their conduct (10 Commandments). Without their visible leader, Israel fashioned one of their own making, thus breaking their covenant with God and disobeying His law.
In a similar way, God came down and manifested Himself to men in the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. A few of the leaders of the church saw Him, both before and after His death, burial, and resurrection, and they reported these things to men.

Our Lord was then taken up into heaven and the church was left behind with clear instructions as to how God wants us to live (the Bible). In His absence, Christians are tempted to look for something or someone visible to assure them of God's presence and power (religious form, religious leadership).

6. **Idolatry is a matter of leadership, since ultimately whatever we serve is our “god” and whatever is our “god” is what we follow after.**

Exodus 32:1 "Come, make us gods who will go before us."

Put in simplest terms: people choose their gods in order to follow after them. Thus, our gods become our leaders.

Example in Exodus 32 – the Israelites crafted a young bull (golden calf). The young bull was a symbol of the reproductive ability of manhood (sexual strength), fertility. Notice the sort of worship or activity the Israelites participated in as they worshipped or celebrated their god.

In his bestseller **The Reason for God**, Keller further develops this line of thought, showing the reader examples of how we are led through idolatry:

- If you center your life and identity on your spouse or partner, you will be emotionally dependent, jealous, and controlling. The other person's problems will be overwhelming to you.
- If you center your life and identity on your family and children, you will try to live your life through your children until they resent you or have no self of their own. At worst, you may abuse them when they displease you.
- If you center your life and identity on your work and career, you will be a driven workaholic and a boring, shallow person. At worst you will lose family and friends and, if your career goes poorly, develop deep depression.
- If you center your life and identity on money and possessions, you'll be eaten up by worry or jealousy about money. You'll be willing to do unethical things to maintain your lifestyle, which will eventually blow up your life.
- If you center your life and identity on pleasure, gratification, and comfort, you will find yourself getting addicted to something. You will become chained to the "escape strategies" by which you avoid the hardness of life.
- If you center your life and identity on relationships and approval, you will be constantly overly hurt by criticism and thus always losing friends. You will fear confronting others and therefore will be a useless friend.
- If you center your life and identity on a "noble cause," you will divide the world into "good" and "bad" and demonize your opponents. Ironically, you will be controlled by your enemies. Without them, you have no purpose.
- If you center your life and identity on religion and morality, you will, if you are living up to your moral standards, be proud, self-righteous, and cruel. If you don't live up to your moral standards, your guilt will be utterly devastating. -- *Tim Keller, The Reason for God (Dutton, 2008), pp. 275-276, and Tim Keller, "Talking About Idolatry in a Postmodern Age," www.thegospelcoalition.org*
7. **Idolatry is really a matter of manipulation and control.**

Even though Israel had seen the invisible God in action, they still wanted the familiar gods they could see and shape into whatever image they desired. How much like them we are! Our great temptation is still to shape God to our liking, to make him convenient to obey or ignore.

**How can we tell if contemporary idolatry affects us?**

Here is a really simple place to start: ask questions. Just stop long enough to ask questions.

Try this one: what consumes most of my time, energy, attention, affection, or resources? If worship really is about attributing the worth or value of something, what do I value most?

Or this one: Will this way of thinking—this idol—sustain your life over the long haul? I know that it may give you a sense of purpose or meaning or fulfillment now, but will this last?

How about this question: Can this thought process—this god—sustain you through the hard times? Will this way of thinking that you've adopted, by which you judge your whole life, carry you when life goes south? Will this commitment that you make with your life sustain you when life gets hard?

Here, I think, is the ultimate question that you need to ask: What's the end result if I pursue this path long enough? If I choose this direction in my life, if I choose to govern my life by thinking this way, where am I ultimately going to end up? Can you separate yourself from the immediate long enough to look ahead a bit?

**LifeGroup Discussion Questions:**

Take a moment to read or review Exodus 32:1-24.

1. As you were listening to this account in Exodus 32, what most impressed you or stood out to you?

2. Why does this account of Israel’s idolatry seem so ironic...so “unbelievable”? (Possible answers: they were just miraculously delivered by God from Egypt; God spoke the 10 Commandments to them recently; they could see the powerful presence of God on Mt. Sinai)

3. What was their motivation in having Aaron make an idol for them? (Possible answers: a god they could see – Moses was “gone”; a god who could lead them; a god whose worship involved sensual pleasure; this sort of God was familiar to them – one of the gods of Egypt)

4. Why do you suppose Aaron complied with their request? (Possible answers: fear, perhaps he wanted to become the nation’s new leader or spiritual representative)

5. What was God’s response to Israel’s idolatry? (See Exodus 32:7-14. God “disowned” them – “your people”; he was ready to destroy them and restart with Moses)

6. What is idolatry? (Possible answer: making something or someone other than God, someone’s god; worshipping an image that represents a god)

7. Idolatry seeks to replace what cannot be seen with something that can be seen—it is physically oriented. When it comes to spirituality or religion, why do we often need something physical or tangible?
8. Kelly felt that God followers or Christians today are still tempted to do as the Israelites did in Exodus 32. Why do you think this may still be a temptation for us today?

9. What might idolatry look like among those who profess to be Christian? What about non-Christians?

10. Idolatry may really a matter of manipulation or control. What do you think that means? (Our great temptation is still to shape God to our liking, to make him convenient to obey or ignore)