

9) Exodus 20: 22 - 32 - THE GOLDEN CALF

1) Everyday Matters - 20:22 - 23

Here are applications of specific commandments to the everyday living circumstances of Israelites among themselves. It is difficult for us moderns to accept:

- slavery as a matter-of-fact institution
- distinction in punishments between slave and free, female and male, child and adult
- the principle of retaliation of some sort (eye for an eye)
- capital punishment

If the Israelites live by the commandments, they will inherit the promised land.

How does Jesus reframe such laws in the gospels and his “Sermon on the Mount” (Matthew 5-7)?

2) A Ceremony in which the Covenant between God and Israel is reaffirmed - 24

- all the people assent to their bonding with God.
- the ceremony includes a reading of “the book of the covenant” which is the 10 commandments and perhaps 20:22 - 23 added on.
- God provides stone tablets inscribed with the 10 commandments for the people’s instruction and remembrance.
- Moses appoints Aaron and Hur as his deputies while he goes up to the mountain to receive further instructions from God.

3) Liturgical issues - 25-31

Moses receives specific instructions about the construction of the sacred furniture and priestly attire. Aaron is to be high priest and his role (25) is to take people’s sins to God and take upon himself symbolically their guilt which requires atonement.

In Chap. 31, the importance of the Sabbath is spelled out. Profaning it leads to death. Compare this to Jesus’ words to the religious authorities of his day: “The Sabbath is made for humans, not humans for the Sabbath” (Mark 2: 27-28), indicating that it should serve the spiritual needs of people compassionately rather than demand adherence regardless of hardship. But clearly, the original intention is to take the Sabbath seriously as a day of rest and this benefits those whose labour can be relentless and hard. It is intended to encourage human dignity and health. Threatening language of consequences is intended to incite people to take the commandment seriously.

4) The Golden Calf - 32

1-4: Moses is gone for 40 days and 40 nights. The people get impatient, hostile and they gather menacingly around Aaron. Aaron is intimidated or else he too begins to doubt Moses’ return. He acquiesces to their wishes and constructs a calf of gold,

proclaiming it to be their liberator.

5-6: "These" are your gods, says Aaron. But the golden calf is one. Is this a reference to a god in plural form the way God is referred to in Genesis (*Elohim*)? More probably, this incident parallels a similar incident in I Kings 12: 28 where Jeroboam, the rival king constructs two golden calves to rival the God of Israel.

Was the calf a replacement of God or God's messenger Moses (for Aaron also tells the people that the next day they will celebrate a festival to the Lord)? Maybe Aaron doesn't fully intend to replace the Lord but clearly the people sacrifice to the image and worship it (something they have never done with Moses). Aaron violated the 2nd commandment and the people along with Aaron are pretty close to violating the first.

The people not only sacrifice and consume a meal, they rise up to "revel." The Hebrew word *tsahak* implies a wild forgetfulness and oblivion.

7-14: God responds angrily. God tells Moses two things. Moses is to go down at once (7), and he is to leave God alone (10). Moses is to be the mediator of God's punishment in the same way as he has been the mediator of God's salvation. But God also wants some solitude to stew in anger. Does God fear that if Moses stays God may soften and change God's mind about what God purposes to do to Israel? God's hurt reflects the anger that can take hold when we feel hurt and betrayed. Genuine love is always personal, and hence the hurt can run deep, as can the anger.

God's anger, of course, is directed at the people, not Moses. In fact, God proposes to destroy the people and start over again with Moses the way God did with Abraham and with Noah. But Moses has a better idea. He does not have a hungry ego. He deflects God's proposal in favour of a plea that God show mercy to Israel. God can save them again, not from slavery to Pharaoh, but slavery to their own sinfulness.

Moses takes 3 lines of approach to God.

- A) In v.11, Moses calls for logic to prevail. It would be illogical to turn around and destroy a people that you (God) have saved.
- B) God's reputation among the nations will suffer if they see the destruction of God's people at God's hands.
- C) Moses challenges God to consider how forgiving the people will be an even greater way to fulfill the original promise to Abraham and the people.

Is this reasoning and wrestling with God Moses also reasoning and wrestling within himself?

Based on God's nature to be merciful, God cannot resist the force of Moses' plea. God will not violate God's own nature as love, a love that must become ever more steadfast the more the people keep disappointing God and failing their commitments. God changes God's mind (or is it that God gets in touch with God's true nature, which is: once the smoke settles on the anger of hurt, what remains is the original love and compassion that remains steadfast). The bible does indicate this in numerous places.

This also gives credence to the idea that prayer can affect the heart of God and God's will. Or is it that prayer changes our faith in what change and healing possibility can come to be?

15-20: The people may be forgiven, but they will also be punished, and particularly those who are unyielding in their guilt. Moses and Joshua arrive back to the camp. Moses is hot with rage (so was it God or was it Moses who was struggling with the anger???). He throws down the tablets shattering them into pieces. He melts down the calf into powder, puts it into the drinking water and forces the people to drink it. It is bitter, but better drinking something that tastes bad than more severe a punishment.

21-24: Aaron is confronted. Moses asks him, in effect, why he showed no back-bone in the face of the sinful insistence of the people? Aaron responds by trying to pass the buck. Don't be mad at me, he says in effect, you know how evil these people can be. What's a poor fellow like me to do? I had no choice, they made me do it. Further in v.24, he even has a curious way of describing how the calf was constructed. "I threw it (gold) into the fire and out came this calf." Sin happened almost automatically or by magic. He didn't make it, it just happened. (This sounds like Adam's and Eve's rationalizations in the garden - Genesis 3) Aaron, like Adam, like Peter in the gospels, are faithful yet cowardly. There are people like Moses and Aaron in the bible, among us and within us. We can be both cowardly and brave. All of us are still included within the sphere of God's love even though we must also absorb some hard lessons and consequences as we learn and grow. What does it mean for God to love us through the hard knocks of life?

25-29: For the first time, Israelites are challenged to make choices as individuals against each other, even relatives and friends. Evidently there were many who upon seeing Moses return were still stubbornly resisting his (and God's) leadership. The Levites distinguish themselves for their faithfulness and there is a promise already that they will have special status before God as a clan. Under Moses' orders, however, they carry out an extra punishment, the slaughter of 3,000 of the resisters. Now we are not told how they decided who was guilty and who was not. Nor are we told who else participated in the killing. Moreover 3,000 in comparison to 600,000 males plus women and children (the count earlier in Exodus) is not great. Does this mean it was a relative minority that committed sin?

Given these difficult questions as well as for structural and literary reasons, many scholars have suggested that vs 25-29 were inserted later into the text and that without them the text reads quite smoothly.

But also, we are encouraged to see Israel not as a collection of individuals (some resisting and suffering for it and others remaining faithful and surviving), but rather as a single collective unit. There is corruption within each of us, and cowardice. There are consequences we face for our mistakes and sometimes we get away with things on the outside whereas our conscience troubles us within. But we also have the courage to remain steadfast in our integrity and we rise up again when we fall down. All of this is

part of who we are as God's imperfect children on a journey out of enslavement to liberation, out of bitterness, indifference, hate and despair into a fullness of faith, hope and love.

30-34: Now that Moses has been the instrument of a double punishment on Israel, he intercedes on behalf of the people. He asks God again to forgive the people's sin. And if not, he tells God, "Blot me out" along with them. God, too, will give a punishment to the people (v.35), but God forgives the people, and only the guilty will be blotted out of God's book of salvation. Once again, let's ponder this account collectively. Moses represents the best possibilities in us: mercy, compassion and a readiness to absorb the disappointment. The people represent the worst in us: readiness to falter and to blame everyone else and circumstances rather than taking responsibility.

Lessons:

- 1) Stay faithful to God even when God appears distant or absent from your trouble or struggle.
- 2) The purging, pruning, and punishments of life can be therapeutic, cathartic and therefore necessary for the long-term good, growth, and maturity of the faithful.
- 3) Moses is a model of self-sacrificial love, willing to lose his life for the sake of an undeserving people.
- 4) God is one who can repent and forgive, one who is moved and affected, grieves and changes God's mind for the sake of love. Or is it that love's energy works this way, raging at injustice, losing sleep over the suffering of others, seeking ever new ways to build bridges, heal, restore and transform lives in new directions with new ways of relating to people and the earth?