

Exodus 32:1-6

Don't Have a (Sacred) Cow!

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Study Notes & Comments...

What, exactly, is a 'sacred cow?' A sacred cow is a subject or topic, considered by a majority (or powerful minority) of people, to be *untouchable*. It is a topic of discussion you don't dare broach, approach, speak against or challenge unless you are prepared to be viewed and spoken of with disdain by that group of people. Subjects that are 'sacred cows' may be considered by some to be 'holy' (small h).

The truth is, however, that 'sacred cows' are neither holy nor untouchable. The sense of 'holiness' exists only because the majority (or powerful minority) believes it exists. They put their faith in the sacred cow, but it is really a made-up righteousness, a pretend holiness, a pretend 'god' of sorts. It is a topic afforded worship and awe because of its political nature. In fact, a better word for 'sacred cow' might be 'political correctness.' That's a phrase most of us do understand and can relate to.

In our study today we are going to take a look at one, big, sacred cow. Turn to Exodus, chapter 32. We'll read through it in a moment, but first, some background.

Moses had been chosen by God to lead His people, Israel, out of slavery in Egypt. You may remember the story of the 'burning' bush (Exodus 3), from which God, speaking to Moses, instructed him to go to Egypt and lead His people out from under the oppression of Pharaoh. Moses obeyed, and went to Pharaoh, along with his brother Aaron, to relay to Pharaoh God's Word: 'Let my people go!' (Ex. 5) Pharaoh refused, but through a mighty display of power, plagues and miracles, Pharaoh did finally relent and let the people of Israel leave Egypt (Ex. 7-12). God provided salvation for His people, brought them out of Egypt into the wilderness, and provided food and water to sustain them. Best of all, the Lord was present with them, and went before them as a pillar of fire and cloud to lead them through the desert to the promised land (Ex. 13:21-22). Along the way, the Lord brought them to Mt. Sinai, where He would give them His covenant, written in stone, containing what we call the Ten Commandments.

At Mt. Sinai, the Lord God called Moses up to the mountain where he met with the Lord in all his glory to receive the law and the commandments. It's at this point that we begin our story for this study. Moses left the people camped around the foot of Mt. Sinai, and after many days, did not return. The people began to wonder what had happened to him. More days passed, and eventually, the people gave up on Moses, figuring he had starved to death or been attacked and killed by a wild animal.

With this background in mind, we'll now take a look at Exodus 32, verse 1-6. Read through the passage.

In verse one, we see the people of Israel had given up on Moses ever coming back. Their 'leader' was gone. What to do now? When Moses left, he put his brother Aaron in charge (see Ex. 24:14), but the people seemingly didn't accept him in the role of leadership (32:25). With their spiritual leader gone, the people wanted another leader of *their own choice*, and they made for themselves a 'god' of their own liking.

In reading this passage, I cannot help but to ask the question, who were the people of Israel truly following while they were traveling across the desert? Were the people following God, who saved them from Pharaoh, or were they following Moses? The answer seems obvious. **They were following Moses,**

not the Lord God. The people did not put their faith and trust in God, they were putting their faith and trust in Moses. Once Moses ‘disappeared’, they quickly lost faith.

What is startling to realize is that even though Moses had not been seen for many days, the glory of God *could* be seen. The glory of the Lord had descended upon the mountain (Ex. 19:17-20) and it was into that glory that Moses went to speak to the Lord (Ex. 20:18-21, 24:15-18). We are never told that the glory of God ever left the mountain, in fact we can still see it when Moses comes down (relayed in Deut. 9:15). The point is, the glory of the Lord was *visible* to the people of Israel. **God’s presence never left their sight.** The problem was, the people did not have their eyes set on God, they had their eyes set on Moses (ironically, this was still the case when Jesus came and taught the people). As a result, when Moses left, there remained a spiritual void in the people. The ‘man’ they had put their faith in had disappeared, and the people, as a result, found another way to fill that void.

The lesson here, is that **we do not put our faith in man, but in God alone.** Your spiritual leader should not be your pastor or teacher, it should be God, through His Word. The role of the pastor is to instruct you, encourage you, minister to you, and in all things point you to God. They themselves should not be the focus of your faith. If you make your pastor, priest, or teacher the focus of your faith, and they somehow fail you, disappoint you or abandon you, then your faith may be in jeopardy. Because they fail you, you give up on the Lord and gradually walk away. If however, you keep your focus and faith on God alone, when a pastor fails you, it won’t effect your faith because you are placing it in God, who never fails you or abandons you!

The people of Israel put their faith in the man (Moses), not in God. So, when Moses was absent from them, their faith quickly dissipated.

In verse 2-4 we see the result of this. The people fill the spiritual void. They want another ‘god’ to lead them, another god to worship. So they create their own God. They approach Aaron, the brother of Moses (who was *supposed* to be filling the role of spiritual leadership while Moses was gone, Ex. 24:14), and they say to him, make us a new god.

In verse 2, we see that Aaron complies. He tells the people to bring their gold earrings to him, and when they do he melts them in a pot and molds the resulting concoction into a golden calf, which then becomes the object of the people’s worship. The fact that Aaron does this is quite shocking. In fact, when Moses returns from the mountain after forty days, he asks Aaron, ‘what did the people do to you that you brought such a great sin upon them?’ (v.21). Moses seems equally shocked that Aaron, his brother (who would eventually become the High Priest) provided this idol for the people to worship.

What would have possessed Aaron, Moses’ right-hand man, who personally witnessed the great miracles of God, to do such a thing – to create this ‘sacred cow?’ While we are not told directly, we are given a hint in verse 22 of this chapter. Aaron explains to Moses that ‘the people’s hearts were *set on evil.*’ We are given the impression that the people were *determined* to have ‘god’ to worship, and Aaron, in his reply, seems to indicate that he simply gave the people what they wanted. Aaron was persuaded to accept the choice of the people as to how and what they should worship.

How is it that Aaron could justify this? How could the man who was filling in as ‘spiritual leader’ give the people a sacred cow to worship?

For the answer, read verse 5 and 6. In verse 4 we see *what the people say* about the golden calf; “This is your god (generic Hebrew word for God used here), O Israel, that brought you out of Egypt!” In verse 5 and 6, we see *what Aaron says* about the calf. Aaron makes a proclamation; “Tomorrow is a feast to the Lord.” (the word used here in the Hebrew is Yahweh or Jehovah – the specific name for the God of Israel!)’ The very next morning Aaron leads them in giving burnt offerings and peace offerings to the

Lord before this golden calf!

Herein lies the main lesson of this study. Aaron, the spiritual leader of the people (for the moment), conformed to *the people's choice* for God. Aaron gave the people of Israel the god *they* wanted. He wanted to appease the people, to make them happy. Perhaps, in some way, Aaron thought to himself, "at least they are taking part in the ritual offerings."

Aaron's perspective seems to be that this golden calf is somehow a material *representation* of Jehovah God, the God of Moses. Aaron saw the calf, built an altar before it and says, "Tomorrow we make a feast unto the Lord (Jehovah/Yahweh). So in Aaron's mind, **he is trying to make all this OK by dedicating his work to God.** Then, in verse 6, he leads the people in bringing burnt offerings and fellowship offerings to God. Can you see how perverted this is? Aaron was took this idol made by his own hands, and tried to incorporate it into worship of the one, true God. It's twisted. **You can't take something that does not honor God, adapt it into a new form of worship and call it Holy.**

In a way, this story is very much like going to a church where the majority rules, where the people decide what is 'sacred' and what is not. **If you have a church run by the desire of the people, where the people make the rules, then God is not ruling!** The purpose of the church is to study God's Word, hear His voice, learn about Him, worship Him, and fellowship with and encourage other believers. It's all about following God and submitting to His will. That's why you cannot run a church based on popular opinion. **You cannot incorporate man's works and philosophies into true worship.** This story should be a warning to churches and pastors who attempt to integrate worldly ideas and concepts into 'ministry' to make it more attractive and palatable to those living in sin.

Once you start operating a church based on popular opinion and majority rule, you head down a slippery slope. Before long, you may have a church where homosexuality is OK, pornography is tolerated, and where abortion is a perfectly acceptable choice. These are all 'sacred cows' in our culture today, and popular opinion wants the church to accept these things. The problem is, these things all go *against* God's Word. Each of these 'sacred cows' are ideas God plainly teaches us in His Word are not acceptable for righteousness. Thus, **a church run by popular opinion is a church that, in essence, worships a different God.** Because if you, as a pastor or priest, say these things are acceptable to God, that these things can be incorporated into a holy lifestyle, then you aren't speaking from the Word of God, you are speaking from the wicked heart and desires of men. In accepting worldly ideas into worship, we conform to the world, which takes us out of God's presence and favor.

What does the Apostle Paul say about this very subject? Turn to Romans 12:1-2

"Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God--this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will."

Paul goes on to warn us that as we remain holy and pleasing to God with our bodies, we cannot take this to mean we are somehow 'better' than other people. Paul continues this thought in Romans 12, verse 3:

"For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you."

We must all recognize our true position in Jesus Christ. We are only saved because of God's great mercy and love. None of us, truly, can be 'righteous' before God in and of ourselves. It's only by the saving work of Jesus that we are saved. It's only by faith in Jesus that we are made 'righteous' (John 3:16-17,

Romans 10:9-13)

Finally, Paul speaks of how our attitude should be toward each other and those who are worshiping 'sacred cows.' Romans 12:9-21

"Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

In other words, as men of God, our attitude toward those who put their faith in 'sacred cows' should not be one of self-righteousness. **God has not called us to have a 'holier than thou' attitude.** God simply calls us to express His love and mercy, to speak the truth, to stand firm on His Word, and to offer hope and the light of truth in a dark world.

Going back to Exodus 32, Aaron's response, as the spiritual leader of the moment, should have been to stand firm on God's principals. He should not have taken part at all in the people's rebellion. What he *should* have done, is simply worship the Lord, *showing* the people of Israel, by example, how to properly worship the Lord God. He should have led the people in offering untainted praise and fellowship to God. Even if they chose not to follow, Aaron is still serving his role appropriately.

What is God's response to sacred cows? It is one of wrath and judgement (this is why Paul warns us to remain sober about our position in the Lord in Romans 12). Think of the people of Israel here, exalting this golden calf and saying that 'this is the god who brought us out of Egypt!' They are denying the saving power of God. They are taking the great work of mercy that the Lord provided, and are attributing it to the work of their own hands. It is no wonder, that God considered destroying the people of Israel after this event. (Ex. 32:10) Fortunately for them, the people of Israel had an intercessor, someone righteous before the Lord to plead for them, and that of course, was Moses. We, too, have an intercessor, and that is Jesus (Romans 8:31-39). No matter what sin we've committed, no matter how much we might deserve judgement, if we put our faith in Jesus he is there, at the right-hand of God, interceding in our behalf. We experience mercy, because of the righteousness of Jesus who intercedes for us.

A summary of a few of the lessons in this study:

- 1) **Put your faith in God, not man.** Man will fail you, God will not. Keep your eyes on Jesus. Study God's Word, and learn from the truth that Jesus imparts to us.
- 2) **Pastors and teachers,** do not be conformed to this world! Worship the Lord your God in Spirit and Truth! Lead by example, not by following the tide of popular opinion.
- 3) **True love from God is sincere.** God has not called believers to have a 'holier than thou' attitude. If we approach others sacred cows with this attitude, we risk setting up sacred cows of our own. Do not be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good, that is, overcome with God's righteousness, not your own.

4) **Throw down your sacred cows.** We all have our own ‘sacred cows.’ Each one of us has something we feel very strongly about, that we will stand up on a pedestal to preach or defend. Whatever your ‘cow’ is, make sure it’s in line with God’s Word. Otherwise you are drawing attention to a subject that is not truly worthy of attention.