

TAKE SIN SERIOUSLY

32 When the people saw that Moses delayed in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, "Come, make us a god who will go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of Egypt, we do not know what has happened to him." ²Aaron said to them, "Break off the earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me." ³So all the people broke off the gold earrings they were wearing and brought them to Aaron. ⁴He took what they handed over to him, and fashioning the gold with a craving tool, he made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf. Then they said, "This [represents] your God, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" ⁵When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf, and made a proclamation, saying, "Tomorrow there shall be a feast for Jehovah." ⁶So the next day the people rose early and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and then got up to indulge in revelry.

⁷Jehovah said to Moses, "Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. ⁸They have been quick to depart from the way I commanded them. They have made for themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have worshipped it and offered sacrifices to it and have said, "This [represents] your God, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt." ⁹Jehovah said to Moses, "I have observed these people, they are an obstinate people. ¹⁰Now, therefore, leave me alone so that my anger may burn hot against them and that I may consume them. Then I will make you into a great nation." ¹¹But Moses earnestly implored Jehovah his God, saying, "Jehovah, why does your anger burn hot against your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? ¹²Why should the Egyptians be permitted to say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out, so that he might kill them in the mountains and consume them from off the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce anger and do not bring disaster upon your people. ¹³Remember Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of the sky, and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'" ¹⁴So Jehovah relented and did not bring upon his people the disaster he had threatened.*

¹⁵Moses turned and went down the mountain with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands. The tablets were inscribed on both sides; they had inscriptions on the front and the back.¹⁶The tablets were the work of God; the writing was God's own writing, engraved on the tablets. ¹⁷When Joshua heard the noise of the people shouting, he said to Moses, "There is the sound of war in the camp!" ¹⁸Moses replied, "It is not the sound of those who shout in victory, neither is it the sound of those who cry out in defeat; rather, I hear the sound of those who sing." ¹⁹As soon as he approached the camp, he saw the calf and the dancing. Then Moses' anger burned hot and he flung the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain. ²⁰He took the calf they had made and burned it in the fire; then he ground it to powder, scattered it on the water and made the children of Israel drink it.

²¹Then Moses said to Aaron, "What did these people do to you to cause you to bring this great sin upon them?" ²²Aaron replied, "Do not let my lord's anger burn hot. You

know these people, that they are prone to evil. ²³They said to me, 'Make us a god who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of Egypt, we do not know what has happened to him.' ²⁴So I said to them, "Whoever has any gold earrings, let him break them off.' So they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!" ²⁵When Moses saw that the people were out of control—for Aaron had allowed them to get out of control and, consequently, they had become a derision among their enemies—²⁶he stood at the entrance to the camp and said, "Whoever is on Jehovah's side, let him come to me!" All the sons of Levi rallied around him. ²⁷He said to them, "This is what Jehovah, the God of Israel, says: Let each man strap on his sword. Go back and forth throughout the camp from one end to the other. Let each man kill his brother, let each man kill his friend, let each man kill his neighbor!" ²⁸And the sons of Levi did as Moses commanded, and that day about three thousand of the people were killed. ²⁹Moses had said, "Consecrate yourselves to Jehovah today—every man against his son and against his brother—so that Jehovah may bestow a blessing upon you this day."

³⁰The next day Moses said to the people, "You have committed a great sin. Now I will go up to Jehovah, perhaps I will be able to make atonement for your sin." ³¹So Moses returned to Jehovah and said, "Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made for themselves a god of gold. ³²But now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written." ³³Jehovah said to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against me, him will I blot out of my book. ³⁴Now go, lead these people to the place of which I have spoken to you. My angel shall go before you. Nevertheless, on the day that I punish, I will punish them for their sin." ³⁵So Jehovah struck the people with a plague because of what they had done with the calf Aaron had made. (Ex. 32:1-35)

*Literally, "stiff-necked"

Introduction

Karen was excited when she learned that she was expecting a baby. She and her friend went to the mall to shop for maternity clothes and material to make a blanket for the expected newborn. But then something unexpected began to happen: people began to point fingers at Karen; they whispered about her behind her back; they began to refer to her with very unkind labels.

Karen was pregnant, ...but she was also unmarried. Now she was confused and afraid; emotional warfare was raging within her heart; she struggled with the question, "What should I do?" She felt betrayed and alone.

A few weeks later she found herself sitting across the desk from a counselor whose kindness was able to soothe Karen in her distraught emotional condition. The counselor sympathized with Karen and pointed her to a "solution" to her problem: something she presented as an acceptable, beneficial, even necessary, alternative to Karen's present dilemma. At her prompting, Karen signed her name, paid the

required fee, changed into a scratchy disposable gown, and prepared to have her child aborted. When the doctor had finished the murderous procedure, a nurse leaned over Karen and in a quiet voice informed her, "It's all over now."

"She was wrong." Karen writes. "I was young and healthy, so I regained my physical strength quickly enough, but my mind continued to fester." Her days became filled with regret. She told herself that it shouldn't matter, it was just a blob of tissue. But she found no rest.

"Unable to deal with the hurt, I determined to 'think about it tomorrow.' And I dressed the gaping emotional wound with layers of denial."

But she found no rest, ...until the Lord removed the putrid bandages, made Karen deal honestly with her sin, and seek forgiveness from Him. (*POWER*, 8/28/94, pp.4-5)

What Karen had regarded as an acceptable, beneficial, even necessary alternative, the Lord regarded as a serious offense. The children of Israel found themselves in the same situation with regard to the incident described in Exodus 32. The lesson we must learn is this: Because the violation of God's commandments is a grievous offense, we must take sin seriously.

I. Take Sin Seriously, Do Not Minimize It

Here is the dilemma that Israel faced. Moses, their leader, had been up on top of Mt. Sinai for forty days. They do not know what has become of him, and they assume the worse: he must be dead.

"Now what are we to do? We need a leader, we need 'a god' who will visibly go before us."

In their view, they faced a serious dilemma and they were taking **necessary** action to remedy the situation.

Aaron all too willingly acquiesces to their demand. He instructed the people to bring to him their golden jewelry. He then had the gold melted down and fashioned into a golden calf, (or, a young bullock.) When the people see the golden calf, they exclaim, "*This [represents] your God, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!*" (vs. 4.) The next day the people presented their offerings before the golden calf and then got up to indulge in revelry, (i.e.; a pagan religious orgy.)

Note: The people did not view themselves as forsaking the LORD in order to worship another god; they viewed this as an alternative way of worshiping the LORD—although the LORD Himself found it to be a great offense. It was a blatant

violation of the second commandment: *“You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any replica of anything that is in heaven above or that is on the earth beneath or that is in the water below the earth”* (Ex. 20:4.) It was confusing the LORD with the pagan idols of the world: the golden calf, (intended to represent the LORD,) was copied from the Egyptian cult of Apis, (in which a bull represented the life-producing power attributed to nature.)

Are there times when we forsake Christ in everything but name, and identify our sinful choices as an “alternative” Christian lifestyle or conduct, even though such conduct violates the commandments of God, or confuses the LORD and His requirements of discipleship with the pagan practices and concepts of the world. The most common form of such rationalization maintains that God is dedicated to my personal happiness and He condones whatever will best achieve that objective. Despise the fact that such a view is opposed to the truth of Scripture: the LORD demands that we be dedicated to His glory and that we accept and pursue whatever contributes to that objective.

When Aaron is confronted by Moses concerning this incident, take careful consideration of his response. He seeks to pacify Moses and convince him that this is no big deal, it is not something about which to become angry and upset; he urges Moses, *“Do not let my lord’s anger burn hot”* (vs. 22a.) He is somewhat surprised that Moses does not know that these people *“are prone to evil”* (vs. 22b.) Aaron’s argument is, “What else can you expect from these people? They are sinners, they act like sinners, and they always will.” Aaron’s implied counsel amounts to the contention that sinners should just be accepted for what they are, expect them to sin and don’t get too upset over it.

Aaron furthermore seeks to excuse his sinful conduct by pointing to the coercive demands of the people: *“They said to me, ‘Make us a god who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of Egypt, we do not know what has happened to him’”* (vs. 23.) He then proceeds to present his sinful action as something that just happened, something that was beyond his control, something for which he was not responsible and could not really be held accountable: *“So I said to them, ‘Whoever has any gold earrings, let him break them off.’ So they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!”* (vs. 24.)

But, in contrast to Aaron’s view of sin, note Moses’ testimony recorded in Deuteronomy 9:20, *“Jehovah was angry enough with Aaron to destroy him, but at that time I prayed for Aaron.”*

Take sin seriously; do not minimize it—like Aaron and the people of Israel sought to do. Referring to our Lord’s crucifixion upon the cross of Calvary, the hymn writer, Thomas Kelly, informs us, “You who think of sin but lightly nor suppose the evil great, Here may view its nature rightly, here its guilt may estimate.”

II. Take Sin Seriously, By Viewing It from God's Perspective

Note that the LORD knows exactly what the people have done:

Jehovah said to Moses, "Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. ⁸They have been quick to depart from the way I commanded them. They have made for themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have worshipped it and offered sacrifices to it and have said, "This [represents] your God, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt." (Ex. 32:7-8)

We may not see His face, but He most assuredly sees our life and knows our heart:

"Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (Heb. 4:13.)

Note that the LORD defines their conduct as sin—*"they have corrupted themselves. ⁸They have been quick to depart from the way I commanded them"*—and that He distances Himself from them, identifying sinful Israel to Moses as *"your people"* rather than my people. Later, when composing what would become known as "The Song of Moses," Moses would describe Israel in these terms: *"They have dealt corruptly with him, [they are] not his children, it is their blemish; they are a perverse and crooked generation"* (Deut. 32:5.)

The LORD exhorts Moses, *"leave me alone so that my anger may burn hot against them and that I may consume them, because they are an obstinate people"* (vs. 9-10.) The LORD expresses the desire to start all over again (*"leave me alone so that ... I may consume them"*) and make His faithful servant, Moses, the father of a new nation.

At the commandment of the LORD (vs. 27,) Moses instructs the Levites to carry out God's judgment against the unrepentant. Moses first issues a call for repentance, *"Whoever is on Jehovah's side, [let him come] to me!"* Here is a call for the people to separate themselves from the pagan orgy into which their festival had degenerated (vs.26.) Then Moses instructs the Levites to carry out God's judgment against the unrepentant, without mercy or favoritism (vs. 27.) The Levites did, in fact, execute the command issued to them; God's warning of judgment was no idle threat, it was in fact executed (vs.28.)

Take sin seriously, by viewing it from God's perspective. Let us rightfully see it as an offense to His holiness: *"Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong"* (Hab. 1:13a.) Let us rightfully see it as an affront to His divine lordship and sovereign authority: *"Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' but do not do what I say?"* (Lk. 6:46.) Let us rightfully see it as rightfully meriting the judgment

of God: *"We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve"* (Lk. 23:41,) such was the testimony of the penitent thief on the cross.

Note that when Moses saw for himself as the LORD saw, Moses had the same reaction as the LORD:

Jehovah said to Moses, "I have observed these people, they are an obstinate people. ¹⁰Now, therefore, leave me alone so that my anger may burn hot against them and that I may consume them. Then I will make you into a great nation." (Ex.32:9-10)

As soon as he approached the camp, he saw the calf and the dancing. Then Moses' anger burned hot and he flung the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain. (Ex. 32:19)

III. Take Sin Seriously, and Look to Christ for Grace

The only thing that stood between the outbreak of the LORD's holy wrath and the people of Israel was the intercession of their divinely appointed mediator.

Moses emphasizes that Israel is the LORD's people whom He brought forth out of Egypt: *"Moses earnestly implored Jehovah his God, saying, 'Jehovah, why does your anger burn hot against your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand?'"* (vs. 11.)

In concern for the honor of the LORD's name, Moses pleads with the LORD to not bring disaster upon His people, but to remember His covenant:

"Why should the Egyptians [be permitted to] say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out, so that he might kill them in the mountains and consume them from off the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce anger and do not bring disaster upon your people. ¹³Remember Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of the sky, and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'" (Ex. 32:12-13)

The LORD is moved by Moses' intercession, He turned from the calamity He said He would bring upon His people, namely, the annihilation of the entire nation. *"So Jehovah relented and did not bring upon his people the disaster he had threatened"* (vs. 14.) Compare Moses' Old Testament era ministry of mediation with its New Testament counterpart, the mediation of our Lord Jesus Christ:

... if anyone sins, we have someone who speaks to the Father in our defense— Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. ²He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John

2:1b-2a.) Literally, *“he is the propitiation for our sins,”* (i.e., the sacrifice that satisfies the divine justice and appeases the divine wrath of God.)

As their mediator, Moses confronts the people with their sin and offers to make atonement on their behalf. Moses declares to the people, *“You have committed a great sin. Now I will go up to Jehovah, perhaps I will be able to make atonement for your sin.”* (vs. 30.) Moses pleads with the LORD to grant the people forgiveness, offering to take their place: *“please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written”* (vs. 32.) Compare Moses’ willingness to bear the judgment of God on behalf of Israel with our Lord Jesus actually taking that righteous judgment upon Himself: *“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’”* (Gal. 3:13.)

As their mediator, Moses calls upon the people to repent as the only way to avoid the judgment he is commissioned by the LORD to execute (vs. 26-29.) Let us take to heart both the warning as well as the promise of Scripture, *“He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy”* (Prov.28:13.)

Take sin seriously, and look to Christ for grace. Look to Christ for both the grace of forgiveness as well as the grace of repentance; the Lord Jesus declares, *“Apart from me you can do nothing”* (Jn. 15:5.)

Conclusion

What Karen had once regarded as an acceptable, beneficial, even necessary, alternative, the LORD regarded as a serious offense. The lesson we must learn from the incident involving the golden calf is the same as that which Karen had to learn: The violation of God’s commandments is a grievous offense. We must take sin seriously, because the LORD our God takes sin seriously. As the Apostle Paul proclaimed to the Athenians, *“God ... commands all men everywhere to repent, ³¹because he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice”* (Acts 17:30-31.)