

Worship & the Law of God

Today we will be continuing our mini-series on Worship. Today's sermon and topic is titled "Worship and the Law of God." And so what I'd like us to think about today is how God's law is related to our worship. Specifically, the point I want to drive home is this: God tells us how we are to worship him. Man can and has dreamt of their own ways to worship God. But God tells us how he wants us to worship him. He tells us what is pleasing to his sight. Honest intentions and heartfelt motivation is not sufficient. God's gives us many commandments in his law. But some of his laws deal with how to worship him. That's especially the case with the second of the Ten Commandments. The second commandment is: "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them" (Exodus 20:4-5a).

It's precisely the second commandment that we see the Israelites breaking in this passage. Essentially they look to worship and serve God in a way directly against God's law. That sort of worship does not please God. Rather, it's described here as a very serious sin. And so this is the subject I want us to examine today as we look at this passage. And after we look at this passage, I'll then offer some application to how we go about striving to worship God according to his laws.

So let's begin in verse 1. There's the context for the passage. The problem that the people have is Moses' absence. Up until this point, Moses had been God's representative to the people. Though it was God who led the people out of Egypt, he had done it *through* Moses. That's even what they refer to in verse 1; that it was this man Moses who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. And so now they had been miraculously brought out, where? Into the wilderness. To this Mount Sinai. But now their leader had gone back up into the mountain and left them all alone. Days turned into weeks. What had happened to Moses, they must have thought? Did he finally give up on them? Did he desert them? Did something tragic happen? Maybe a wild animal got him? The people's patience had worn thin. Moses was delayed and they were tired of waiting in the middle of nowhere. Their trust in God's representative had run out. So, they decide to take matters into their own hand.

You know people like to worship God through something tangible. Up to that point, Moses, had been that something tangible for God's people. The Israelites had worshipped God thru the leadership of Moses. Moses had brought God's Word to the people. He had told them how to worship God and what pleased God. But now because of Moses' continued absence they decided to find some alternative way to meet their God who had brought them out of Egypt. Maybe then they could move on in their journey. Maybe they could finally get out of the wilderness. Maybe they could finally arrive in the land of milk and honey that they had been promised.

And so the solution that they came up with, along with Aaron's help, was to make an idol. That seemed like the conventional wisdom at the time. That's how the other nations related to their gods. They worshipped their gods through idols, through some tangible representation of their god. And so Aaron makes for them a golden calf, an image of a young bull. This was a very common form to represent a god in the ancient near east; many cultures and peoples pictured their gods as a calf or bull. The Egyptians, for example, often represented one of their gods, named Amon-Re, as a bull. And actually, for the Egyptians, that god was believed to be the

chief of all the gods. And so a golden calf was quite a fitting image to represent the God of the Jews, at least from the prevailing worldly wisdom.

Realize, that is what's going on here. I think we today can kind of think people back then were just more superstitious and frankly foolish. How could anyone think that a gold idol that they made could be a god? But realize, they didn't believe the image itself was God. They were trying to worship God through that graven image. That is what's going on here. The people weren't picking a new god here. That would have been breaking the first commandment, not to have any other gods before the one true God. This was breaking the second commandment, making and worshipping an image of the one true God.

Just look at verse 4. When Aaron makes the golden calf, how do the people describe it? What's their confession of faith about this new idol? "This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt." That's the right confession, in some sense. That's how God had identified himself to the people. He had said, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt" (Ex 20:1). And so the people are saying here that this golden calf would be their new representative to their God. It would be their attempt at a visible reassurance of God's presence among them. It effectively would function how Moses had functioned. Moses, as God's spokesman, was a bridge between the almighty God and the people. With the absence of Moses, the people create this golden calf, to effectively be a replacement for Moses, a new way to interface with God.

Aaron reinforces this in verse 5. He made a public proclamation that the next day would be a feast to the LORD. Notice that the word LORD is all capitals. This is the personal name of God: Yahweh. Aaron is not saying that the golden calf is some new god that they would start to worship. No, this golden calf represented the LORD, Yahweh, the one true and living God who had just brought them out of Egypt. Again, the problem here is not them picking a new false god. The problem here is how they decided to worship the one true God. They decide to worship God on their terms, instead of on God's terms.

And worship God through the calf is exactly what they proceed to do. Aaron builds an altar next to the thing, to prepare for the feast he had announced. God had given Israel three main feasts through which they were to worship God., but Aaron announces a special one here for this new golden calf. The next day their worship goes into full swing, verse 6. They offer burnt offerings and peace offerings. They eat and drink in typical fashion for a holy feast. It says that they rose up and play. That might have had some sexual connotations, but it probably just referred to what we see in verses 18-19. That the people started dancing and singing. In other words, they were having a party for the LORD.

In some sense, this all sounds holy and good, doesn't it? They were worshipping the one true God that delivered them from slavery in Egypt. They threw the kind of party for God that the world at that time said was the way to do it. Think of all the offerings they gave. They even had given up their fancy gold earrings from their wives and children to make this happen. They pulled out all the stops. From the world's eyes, this was the way to worship your God!

But was God pleased with this worship? What was God's assessment? Verse 7. While God is speaking with Moses on the top of Mount Sinai, God interrupts their meeting to let Moses in on what's happening. Moses is too far away from the people to know what's going on. Moses is only human. But God sees all things. Worship, even bad attempts to worship, come to his attention. And so in verse 7, God gives his assessment. The people had corrupted themselves. They had so quickly turned aside from the commandments God had given them. They had already broken the second

commandment as a people. In verse 9, God describes the people as a stiff-necked people. Parents, imagine when you're trying to get your young child to do something, and they stiffen their whole bodies in resistance. That was Israel. God had given them many commandments, including commands on how, and how not to, worship him. Their actions were about as direct violation of the second commandment as you could imagine. God's law directed them one way, but they were stiff-necked to his direction. They fought against his directions.

God's assessment of the situation gets pretty serious in verse 10. He says they were worthy of his wrath and judgment. They deserved to be consumed for their sin. This was a very serious sin. Think about this. Moses was actually up on the mountain to get the Ten Commandments engraved in stone. Just writing those commandments down on paper wasn't enough. God had given so many different instructions and laws to the people. All these laws were basically written down on paper in the book of the covenant. All these many laws were part of the covenant God made through Moses with the people. And yet there was something especially significant about the Ten Commandments that God would have Moses come up to the mountain to have them engraved in stone. And so God is engraving these Ten Commandments in stone, a summary of God's moral laws, while at the very same time Israel is down the mountain breaking one of these commandments!

Do you see the irony? Do you see how horrendous this was? How despicable it was? How right God was to say that the people were so "quick" to turn aside from his commandments? And so God was right to be angry. And so Moses in turn, became angry, when he came down the mountain and saw what the people had done. Moses' reaction in verse 19 was a perfect picture of what the people had done. Moses throws the two stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments to the ground. He throws them and breaks them to pieces. But it wasn't really Moses who had broken them. It was the people. They had broken the commandments by their sinful worship.

Moses then says what we now already know. Verse 21 and 30 he says the same thing, first to Aaron, and then to the people. This was a "great" sin, he says. Verse 25 shows that their religious feast had went from bad to worse. At that point the people had become unrestrained. In other words, the people had gotten into such a frenzy that it was out of control; probably more like a riot at that point. In other words, my point is this. It doesn't matter the *intention* of the people. It doesn't matter that they intended to worship the one true God. God legislates even how we are to worship him. And to go against that, even with good intentions is a sin. And it's not just a light sin. It's a very serious sin, with very serious consequences, in terms of the strict justice of God. And it can even have bad effects on the people, because one sin usually leads to more. Here the people turn into some riotous frenzy. So I hope you see how serious of a sin it is to worship God in a way other than how he commands us to do.

So look with me a little further at this passage from that angle. Look with me at the judgment that had come upon Israel. When God first tells Moses about the sin that the people were doing, God threatens judgment to just completely wipe out the people. But it seems God encourages Moses to intercede for the people. And that's what Moses does in verses 11-13. And it has a positive effect. God relents from totally wiping out the people. But then Moses goes back down to the people and begins to bring both judgment and discipline. God's anger seems echoed in Moses. Moses utterly destroys the golden calf. He makes the people drink up whatever is left. In verse 25 he calls the people to return back to the LORD, and then through the Levites executes a capital punishment on about three thousand of the frenzied people.

And so God relented from wiping out the people, because of Moses' intercession, but instead Moses on God's behalf executes judgment and discipline on the people. After the dust clears, you have the remaining people back in order, repentant of their sin. Moses has the people in verse 29 consecrate themselves to the Lord. But even after this repentance, even after this return to the Lord, there is still a problem, isn't there? The object of their sin had been destroyed. The frenzied people had become restrained. The people had turned back to the LORD's side by returning to Moses, God's servant. The people were consecrated to the Lord. But there was still an issue, wasn't there? There was still the issue that they had sinned. Sin, especially sin of this magnitude, could not be simply overlooked, could it? Moses didn't think so. Moses thought it needed to be atoned for. Covered up. Dealt with. That what he says in verse 30. And so Moses goes back to the Lord in verse 31 and pleads to God for forgiveness. What happens next is so interesting and so revealing. In verses 32, Moses essentially offers himself along with the people. Moses says that if God will not forgive the people, then to take Moses out of his book of life. Moses tries to offer himself in the place of the people. But guess what? God doesn't bite.

Moses showed a wonderful intention here. He was willing to suffer on behalf of his people. But God says no. Verse 33. God says that whoever has sinned against him, that person himself will be blotted out of his book. Verse 35 ends the chapter with a note that God did strike the people because of their sin with the golden calf. Moses could not, even if he offered himself, atone for the sins of the people.

Of course, as Christians, how can we not read this in light of Jesus Christ? The New Testament reveals that Jesus as the Messiah intercedes for God's people; that Jesus is the atonement for God's people. And what do we see Moses try to do in this chapter? We see him first intercede for the people, and then to try to atone for the sins of the people. He is only marginally successful in this. Think about Moses' intercession in verses 11-13. In what ways could Moses appeal to God to not destroy the people? What compelling reason could Moses give? Moses doesn't have much to work with in trying to intercede for the people. They had just broken God's explicit commandments. And so what does Moses appeal to? Well, first he appeals to God's glory. Then he appeals to God's promise. There's nothing in Moses or in the people he could appeal to. So he appeals to God's glory - why destroy the people, the Egyptians might mistakenly think you were freeing them with evil intent all along, just to destroy them. And then Moses appeals to God's promise to the patriarchs - how he promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, of the great nation that he would bring forth from them, and of the great land that he would give them. And so that's all Moses has to offer. Nothing in himself or in the people. Then we he returns to try to make atonement for the people - again, what does he have to offer? He brings confession and repentance. He and the people are sorry about the sin. They ask for forgiveness. But they don't have any way to right the wrong. Moses tries to stand in the place of the Israelites, to essentially offer himself to atone for them. But that's not enough. One man can't atone for the sins of so many.

But do you see the difference in Jesus Christ? Jesus intercedes and atones for the sins of his people. He does what Moses here could not! Moses had very little to offer. But Jesus has so much more. Jesus had himself to offer. Jesus went to the cross as a sacrifice for God's people. And that was of infinite value. Because Jesus was the eternal Son of God. Jesus was holy and righteous. Perfect and sinless. God come in the flesh. He was the only human that could actually bear all the sins of humanity, because he was also God. And so when Jesus comes to intercede for us before God the Father, he doesn't come empty-handed. Jesus can come to the Father, and say, this one belongs to me. I purchased him on the cross.

I paid the penalty of his sin. I have covered the sin. It is atoned for me. Justice has been satisfied. This one is justified.

This is the case for all God's people. Back then, and even now. Any Jew back then who tasted of God's forgiveness, ultimately did so because they trusted in the one God would send to bring salvation. We taste of that forgiveness in the same way. We trust by faith in Jesus who was sent to atone for our sins. He atoned for our sins by doing what Moses could not. By taking our place. By bearing God's wrath for us. Any mere human would be fully consumed by this wrath. But Jesus bore it all, so that we can be saved. I remind us all of the gospel today. Believe in Jesus. He gives us the true atonement. The true salvation.

Think about Jesus then, with regards to worship, and with regards to this passage. The people back then wanted some tangible way to worship God. When Moses was with them, they were generally content for Moses to lead them in worshipping God. Well when Jesus came down, we finally had God among man. We worshipped God by worshipping Jesus. Jesus said he was the way! We worshipped God through Jesus. But Jesus has left us. He's ascended up into heaven. Should we panic as the Jews did back then when Moses was delayed in coming back down the mountain? No. But not without reason. Because though Jesus left us physically, he hasn't really left us. No, he told us that if he goes, it will be to send us a helper. An advocate. Jesus sent his Holy Spirit to be among us. That's what happened at Pentecost, recorded in the book of Acts. The Holy Spirit was poured out on the church.

And so today we still worship through Jesus. When Jesus was on earth, he said a day was coming, and already was there, when we'd worship God in Spirit and in truth, John 4. Even though Jesus is ascended up into heaven, we worship through Jesus, because we worship through his Spirit that he sent. Because Jesus sent his Spirit, we always have God's presence among us. We need not panic. Jesus is always with us. And so we worship God through him, because we worship now in the Spirit.

But Jesus said we would worship in Spirit *and* in truth. It's that truth part that is really brought out in our passage, isn't it? Jesus said we must worship in Spirit and in *truth*. In other words, we must worship God according to his commandments. I said at the beginning of our sermon that our topic for today was Worship and the Law of God. It's God's laws that tell us the truth of how God is to be worshipped. We see in this passage a breaking of God's law in how the people tried to worship God. This reminds us that our worship must be according to God's law.

And so as we conclude this sermon today, I want us to reflect on how this passage inform our church's worship. Basically, what I've wanted to show today is a basis for what theologians call the Regulative Principle of Worship. The RPW. The Regulative Principle of Worship. This is an important term to describe a philosophy in how we worship God. The Calvinistic and Reformed churches at the Reformation really pushed for this, and rightly so. Basically, the Regulative Principle of Worship says that we must only worship God in the way that he tells us to do. We are not free to just make up our own ways to worship God. What this means is that whatever element of worship is commanded in Scripture either explicitly or by example is *required*, and that whatever is not commanded is *prohibited*. This says that God tells us what is pleasing to him, and not ourselves.

This principle doesn't come only from the second commandment or this passage with the golden calf, though those are good places to start. But there are a number of passages in Scripture where we see God telling us how to worship him. And there

are a number of passages where we see God unhappy with people when they worship him in ways other than how he's told us. Isn't that the case with examples such as Cain and Abel? Both made offerings to the Lord, but one was pleasing to God and one wasn't. Or with Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10. God struck them down because they offered strange fire to the Lord, an offering that God had commanded them to offer. They tried to worship God in a way that he hadn't commanded. It may have been well intentioned. But God will tell us how to worship him. The examples from Scripture go on.

And so in practice, what this Regulative Principle means is that we identify three aspects of our worship. There are elements, forms, and circumstances. Elements, forms, and circumstances. The *elements* are the specific things we do in a worship service like prayer, or preach, or sing praises. The *forms* are the ways we perform those elements, like we might pray the Lord's Prayer, or a prayer that a pastor wrote up. The *circumstances* are just that, like when we pray, do we use a microphone or not, so that people can hear the prayer. The Regulative Principle really only strictly applies to the elements. They are the things God tells us to do in our worship to him. Our worship should include all the elements God has told us to include. And it should not include other elements that God has not told us to include. And so we do things in our worship services like sing praises, pray, preach the word, etc, because these are all elements God has commanded us to be doing in our worship. We don't make up other non-biblical elements and bring them into the worship, even if they sound nice. Again, it's the *elements* of our worship that are that we are talking about. They're the only things strictly governed by the Regulative Principle. The *forms*, or how we actually perform the elements, are not governed by the Regulative Principle, but they should be informed by Scripture. Where Scripture tells us the exact form to use, then we need to use that, and when it is silent on the details of the form, then we have some liberty. And it when it comes to the *circumstances*, Christian prudence and wisdom needs to dictate the circumstances. There's nothing that the Regulative Principle would have to say about the circumstances.

So that's the basic principle. At our church, we've tried to order our service in this way. We look for our worship service to have the elements in it demanded by Scripture, and *only* those elements. Of course, many other Reformed churches affirm this same concept, yet still might have some differences in application. For example, some churches have drama in their worship services, with the argument that drama is a *form* of preaching, and not a separate *element* (that would be non-biblical). I generally would disagree; I think drama is an element in and of itself. Not that you can't do dramas, but I just wouldn't do it on a Sunday worship service. I'd save that for like a youth group presentation, or maybe a special outreach service. Just not a part of the formal worship service.

Now, frankly, I think this kind of discussion is healthy for the body of Christ. We need to discuss these matters and think through these things. And we should do that with great charity to our brothers when we disagree on some of these things. But it's very important to discuss these things as a church. Why? Because this passage shows us how very, very, important this subject is. God cares very much that his people worship him *only* according to the ways he tells us. It's a *great* sin to do otherwise. Yes, Christ forgives sins even of this nature, so we're not saying that churches that error on this are damned to hell or something. But if we are looking to please our Lord in worship, then shouldn't we be thinking about these things? Shouldn't we want to worship God in the way that will please him the most?

Part of why this is a healthy discussion, is because the dangers are clearly out there, and not so far off as we'd like to think. We can all be like Aaron in this

passage, so quick to give into the pressures to make our worship like the prevailing wisdom of the world. But hasn't the New Testament church already fallen into this same trap before? I think of the church during the Middle Ages. So much of the pagan, superstitious, practices of the cultures in the world influenced the church. The next thing you know, you've got the church having new elements of worship. Worship through candles. Worship through venerating dead saints. Worship through prayers to angels. Worship through relics. Worship through paintings. These are all things that crept into the church in the Middle Ages, and still affect parts of Christ's church even today.

And yet are we that far off from these dangers? For example, we still have so many symbols and images that are used in Christendom today. People always want tangible things to lay their hands on when they worship God, just like in our passage for today. Most evangelical Christians would never say they are worshipping God through these things. But the danger is there, that one day they are just a symbol, and the next day you wake up and suddenly they've taken on too big of a role in your worship.

But again, this concern is not just about images and symbols. It's bigger than that. We need to heed the history of our church. Both the sacred history we've have recorded in Scripture, and even the history we've have recorded in church history. We need to see the ways the church has so quickly become too inventive in how we worship God. So quick to worship God according to pagan or worldly ideas. But I hope that this passage has reminded us not to try to outsmart or outthink God. God knows what pleases him. He's told us. So let's worship him in the ways he tells us. Let's worship him according to his laws. Let's worship him in Spirit and in truth. Amen.

Copyright © 2008 Rev. W. Reid Hankins, M.Div.
All Rights Reserved.