

# EXODUS—WEEK 25

## THE GOLDEN SIN



F. Michael Slay  
*A DEEP Study*

**The Fellowship of Ailbe**

*The Cover Picture is The Adoration of the Golden Calf by Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665)  
on display at The National Gallery, London, England*

God starts off explaining the centrality of the Sabbath. Then He turns His attention to the crowds at the bottom of the mountain.

His people are actually worshipping a golden calf. This can't end well.

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Thank you.

Exodus 31:12–32:20 — The Golden Sin  
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1 Exodus 31:12–17 (ESV)

*And the LORD said to Moses, “You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, ‘Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you. You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you. Everyone who profanes it shall be put to death. Whoever does any work on it, that soul shall be cut off from among his people. Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death. Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever. It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.’”*

*Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths. Above all? What? Is He with the union or something? Why would giving everyone a day off every week be above all?*

Because it orients life. Note that this does not contradict Matthew 22:37b, where Jesus names the greatest commandment. *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”* (ESV) In fact, this is part of it.

Honoring the Sabbath is essential to loving God.

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The Sabbath structures all of our lives—even those of atheists. There are a lot of folks who want to erase any hint of Judeo-Christian tradition from our culture. Fine, let them promote an eight day week.

Good luck with that. The concept of a seven day week is so central to the structure of our civilization that it never occurs to anyone to rebel against it.

Okay, we get that, but many Christians don’t realize how important honoring the Sabbath is. It’s essential to loving God because it rules our lives.

Each day is known by its position relative to the Sabbath. If we treat the Sabbath as just another day, the whole week loses its bearings. We may honor God for a moment, but that isn’t the whole pattern.

Actually, my description of the Sabbath as just “a day off,” misses the point too. It’s not just a day of rest. Those who do not honor the Sabbath are acting as if they consider themselves more qualified than God to determine how it should be spent.

If He really is the Lord of our lives, we should live like it. Sabbath worship in the morning is not enough; the whole day should be holy.

“Holy” means “separate to God.” That’s what the Sabbath is.

2 Exodus 31:18–32:6 (ESV)

*And he gave to Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.*

*When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, “Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.” So Aaron said to them, “Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD.” And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.*

This takes first prize in the “you’ve got to be kidding” category. They actually said, of the golden calf they had **just made** (long after crossing the Red Sea), “*These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!*” The stupid thing is made out of their earrings for crying out loud. How could they think, even for a minute, something that silly?

Forget the humor; this is a real question that needs a real answer. Sure, sin makes us stupid, but if it can actually make us that stupid, we need a warning label or something.

In their defense, having been raised in a polytheistic culture, they haven’t caught on to this monotheistic thing just yet. So, they don’t understand that this violates any rules, or even that it violates common sense.

But that’s our common sense. Common sense in ancient Egypt is that each aspect of life has a god in charge. So, who’s the god of sea crossings? Making one up seems silly to us but not to them.

This explains why Aaron’s reaction to their declaration is so mild. *When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD.”*

Neither Aaron nor the people saw this as an outrage, so, rather than throw a tantrum, Aaron tries to gently move their focus back towards the LORD.

Leave it to Moses to throw the tantrum.

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Worship services must appeal to a range of audiences, while never violating God’s designs. This can get tricky. Some people are offended by the things that others find most uplifting.

Pray for your worship team. Their time and talents are a sweet offering to the LORD.

Without their contribution, what would you do?

3 Exodus 32:7–10 (ESV)

*And the LORD said to Moses, “Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’” And the LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you.”*

God will relent from this plan—and He knows that he will—but this kind of talk is just chilling. It displays God’s perspective in a way that’s both frightening and humbling.

There are lots of adjectives we can use to describe people: fallen, sinful, selfish, greedy, stupid, violent, impulsive, illogical, angry. This list is endless.

But here we see a ghastly new one—replaceable. We like to think that we’re unique, that the world would be lacking something without us. We derive some of our self-worth from this. We recoil from the idea that we’re disposable.

The Bible speaks to our uniqueness.

*As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. — 1 Corinthians 12:20–24a*

Yet, here God announces His willingness to wipe out the entire nation of Israel. He can *make a great nation of Moses* with a snap of His fingers. Why put up with these clowns? They’re not worth the work, especially given that they’re not irreplaceable.

This makes Jesus’s trip to the cross all the more surprising. God has options we don’t like to think about.

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Being replaceable doesn’t interfere with our ability to glorify Him. One of the key ways we can do this is through “secret service”—performing low-profile tasks. These are the little things that don’t get much attention. While we don’t notice them, God does. We usually only notice when something goes wrong.

So, remember to pray for the folks who do their works virtually in secret—things like clean up after Sunday school, prepare communion, work in the nursery, fix the air-conditioning, run sound in worship, etc.

Pick out one or two people who fill these vital but underappreciated shoes and lift them up for a special blessing. Ask God to encourage them and energize them.

And encourage them yourself.

4 Exodus 32:11–14 (ESV)

*But Moses implored the LORD his God and said, “O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, ‘With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth’? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, ‘I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.’” And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people.*

Notice that Moses’s counter-argument has nothing to do with mercy or the suffering the people might endure; it’s all about God. His holiness and reputation are the whole point.

This is not to say that Moses doesn’t care about his people, but that’s just not his main point. Something more important is at issue.

This continues the ubiquitous, “it’s not about you,” theme of the Bible. Still, many people read the Bible and think it’s all about **our** getting into heaven. That’s because we, being people, have a people-centric point of view about everything. That’s understandable.

Imagine that the cows in India can understand Hinduism. Given the amazing deference Hindus show to cows, they might think that Hinduism is all about cows. It’s not; that deference is part of something larger. Still, it’s understandable that cows would over interpret this because they are, after all, cows.

We’re the same way. We think Christianity is all about getting people into heaven. This isn’t even particularly sinful; it’s just our perspective. You have to pay attention first to the things that matter to you just to survive. For example, when we drive, we think first about our safety. Other drivers matter, but their safety can’t be our primary focus. Sure, Christ calls us to great altruism, but normal survival thinking is how we’re wired.

We should remind ourselves often that it’s not all about us. Humble yourself before the LORD.

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This all about a different perspective and a different way of living. At The Fellowship of Ailbe, we call this, “Practicing the Kingship of Jesus.”

We’re wired for self-preservation, but Christ calls us to Him as our Lord. Having a Lord doesn’t mean you lose your self-preservation wiring; it just means the Lord is our lord—our highest priority.

The classic conflict between the two is when we are called to not deny Him under pain of death. We’re not likely to have a test of faith like that though. Martyrdom isn’t part of modern American Christianity.

The problem is that we fail the little tests we do have. Growing beyond this weakness is the point of “practicing” the Kingship of Jesus. Only relentless attention and prayer can get us there.

5 Exodus 32:15–20 (ESV)

*Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand, tablets that were written on both sides; on the front and on the back they were written. The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets. When Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, “There is a noise of war in the camp.” But he said, “It is not the sound of shouting for victory, or the sound of the cry of defeat, but the sound of singing that I hear.” And as soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses' anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. He took the calf that they had made and burned it with fire and ground it to powder and scattered it on the water and made the people of Israel drink it.*

Now that’s a tantrum! Just imagine how intimidating Moses must have been to get those people to drink the water with the powder in it.

A couple of technical points are worth mentioning here. First off, many people think there were five commandments on each tablet. With apologies to Mel Brooks, each tablet actually had all ten (written *on the front and on the back*). Like all legal contracts, there were two copies—one for each party. Eventually, we will see both copies placed in the ark, which is unusual and significant.

Second, gold is three and a half times as heavy as iron. A solid gold calf big enough to be visible to Moses when *he came near the camp* would be so heavy, you’d need a forklift to move it.

So, unless the calf was small enough to fit in your pocket, it couldn’t have been solid gold. It must have been made of gold covered wood, or some other easily worked material like Styrofoam. Otherwise, Moses couldn’t have *burned it with fire and ground it to powder and scattered it on the water and made the people of Israel drink it*. The powder was ashes and/or charcoal.

So Moses sees the calf and trashes the place. This is a magnificent precursor of Jesus clearing the temple in Matthew 21:12-13.

Righteous indignation is a thing of wonder.

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As beautiful as righteous indignation is, it probably belongs in the “do not try this at home” category. Moses and Jesus have the gravitas to pull it off; we don’t.

So, what should we do when confronted with a situation that needs correction? Just sticking a cork in it can’t be right; that’s hiding our lamp under a bushel. What’s the right thing to do?

Clarity, not volume, is the key. Think strategically. If you just trigger a bunch of pushback, what have you accomplished? There’s usually no rush either. In that case, you have time to think, then say what needs to be said privately. Be winsome. Choose your words carefully, so that you cannot be misunderstood.

*“Discretion is the perfection of reason, and a guide to us in all the duties of life.” — Walter Scott*

*Questions for reflection or discussion*

1. Does the Sabbath start the week or end it?
2. What aspect of our culture makes it difficult to worship God the way He prescribes it?
3. What “little things” are more important to the church than people realize?
4. When is self-preservation in conflict with practicing the kingship of Jesus?
5. When has an attempt at giving righteous criticism worked? When has it not?