

God is imitated
Exodus 32:1-6

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A few weeks ago my family and I had the chance to go to one of the Colts football games. I was born in Denver and grew up a Broncos fan, so when the Broncos came to town, we decided to go watch them play. Our number one favorite team against our number two favorite team. Keren posted **this photo** on social media. And there were some people in this church who weren't that excited that he had a Broncos shirt on. Well, later that week, there was a lady in our church who was babysitting Hudson for us, and while mom and dad were away, **guess what she did to him?** Come on! That's not fair. Speaking of the Colts, as I've been going through the prayer request cards that are submitted at church each week, I keep seeing requests to pray for our kicker! The Lord knows we need the help!

When you see those two pictures of my son, the difference is so small, so subtle. Same kid, the pictures were taken just days apart, dressed in football gear...both shirts were blue! But with the smallest of shifts, there is a great difference. Let me give you another example. This woman is **Ariana Grande**. She is one of the most well-known pop music stars alive today. It's pretty well-known she likes tattoos. So when she released a song last year called, "seven rings" no one was surprised that she got **this tattoo**, which in Japanese Kanji means "seven rings"...or so she thought. One fan who actually knows Japanese Kanji reached out to her and let her know that this symbol does not actually mean seven rings, it means, "**small charcoal grill**." That's right, she basically tattooed weber right across her hand. I'm told that the difference between "seven rings" and, "small charcoal grill" is really small, just a stroke of the pen...but that little shift makes all the difference.

Why do I tell you those two stories today? Because as we continue in our series in the book of Exodus, the people of Israel make a small little shift. They make a mistake and get something a little bit wrong, but it ends up being a really big deal.

Exodus 32:1-6 When the people saw that Moses was so long 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 fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him." Moses has been up Mount Sinai for the last 40 days. He has been learning from God exactly how he wants his people to worship him. God has been speaking to him about the tabernacle, about the Ark of the Covenant, the priests, the altar...Remember, they have been under the influence of Egyptian religion for 400 years. They only know how to worship the way Egyptians worship. Now the one, true, living God, the God who rescued them from captivity and set them free from Egypt is teaching Moses how they are supposed to worship him. But instead of waiting for Moses what do they do? They go to Moses' brother and tell him to help them worship. They say: Moses has been gone so long...maybe something happened to him on the mountain...maybe he fell off a cliff, maybe a wild animal came and got him. He's not coming back. He's not going to tell us how to worship. So Aaron, now it's your responsibility. Make us a god we can worship. Now you would think that Aaron, this wise and seasoned leader, would talk some sense into these people, but instead...**2 Aaron answered them, "Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me."** **3 So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. 4 He took**

what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, “(This is your god), Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.” God had just told them not to make a graven image, not to try to represent him with anything in heaven, or on earth, or in the sea. This is the second commandment, but they just couldn’t help themselves. Try to understand where they are coming from. For 400 years in Egypt, every one of the gods they saw worshipped in Egypt was represented by an animal. Look at the eight leading deities in Egypt.

Amun-Ra (ruler of the sun) — **Ram**
Anubis (keeper of the dead) — **jackal**
Bastet (protection) — **cat**
Geb (keeper of the earth) — **goose**

Hathor (love, music, dance) — **cow**
Sekmet (war) — **lion**
Horus (sky) — **falcon**
Sobek (Nile) — **crocodile**

So can you tell what’s going on? The Israelites, not wanting to wait for Moses to reveal the right way to worship God are getting on with worship the best way they know how. And they end up trying to worship God just like the culture they were brought up in worshipped their deities.

5 When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, “Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD.” Remember, every time you see the word **LORD** in all capital letters, what does it mean? It means God’s personal name, YHWH, is being used. So what does that tell you? They are not making up their own god and trying to worship a cow. They are trying to worship the one true God. But they got something wrong. They made one subtle mistake. Instead of waiting for God to reveal how he wanted to be worshipped, they ended up worshipping God the way the pagan culture around them worshipped their deities. And they did much more than just make a statue... **6 So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.** That word **revelry** refers to singing, dancing, and sexually promiscuous behavior. So basically they partied. They ate a lot. They drank a lot. And they sought their own pleasure. And don’t miss this: *They did it all during a worship service in the name of the Lord.* Now there is a lot more to this chapter that we will pick up with next week, but today, I want to focus on just these first six verses and talk about worship and how it’s possible, just like the Israelites, to get our worship wrong.

When I read this passage, what jumps out to me right away is that: **Not everything we call worship is true worship.** I want to take a moment and define the word worship. In Romans 12 the Bible tells us “Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. This is your spiritual act of worship.” What does that mean? It means that worship is both what we offer to God as we raise our hands and our voice and sing his praise, as well as the lives that we live in response to his goodness and grace. Yes, worship happens here in the sanctuary, but it also happens when you leave the sanctuary and head to the restaurant, as you relax at your home, as you sit in traffic, as you engage at work. The Bible says our entire lives are to be worship, what we do here in church as well as what we do out in the world. And what we have to see when we look at this passage is that not everything that we call worship is true worship. Look at the Israelites; you can’t fault them for not being spiritual. You can’t fault them for not being religious. They were holding worship services, making offerings, e doing really religious things, but the worship they were offering wasn’t the worship God wanted. And the terrifying reality is that we are just as likely to make the same mistakes today that they did back then. If we are not

careful, purposeful, and intentional, we, too, can find ourselves being very spiritual, very religious, going to services that are in the name of Jesus, but end up with lives that look absolutely nothing like what God wants.

So that leads to a very important question for us today: **How do we ensure that we are getting worship right and not wrong?** How do we make sure we don't repeat what the Israelites did? We'll answer that question in three ways.

First answer: **Worship centered on Jesus, not ourselves.** Let me tell you a few stories...Years ago the Boston Globe ran a story about a family in a well-to-do neighborhood who invited their friends and family over to celebrate their child's christening with them. Everyone was in the living room and sitting room enjoying the party, socializing and having a great time, when someone finally said, "Where's the baby?" The heart of the mother jumped, and she instantly rushed into the master bedroom, where she had left the baby asleep in the middle of the massive bed - the same bed all the coats of all the guests were placed on. By the time she arrived, the baby had suffocated. The pain of that loss must have been unimaginable. Think about that: The party was in his honor. Everyone said they were coming there for him. But as they were enjoying one another, socializing, eating, and drinking, catching up, having a good time, he was left in the other room unable to breathe. Honored in name, but neglected indeed. Obviously, that was just an accident. No one would ever do that on purpose. But let me ask you: Do you suppose something like that could happen today? Do you suppose that could happen here? Do you suppose that could happen to you? We have a big celebration to honor someone. There are lots of people, fun, socializing and elbow rubbing...but then the person in whose name we gathered is ignored and forgotten? So often in our Christian culture, that's what church has become. Like in Exodus the festival is held in the name of the Lord. Today the service is held in the name of Jesus, but sometimes he's been left in the other room. The focus ends up placed on us, not him.

Sometimes it's that we forget to focus on Jesus. Other times it's that we are focused on an inaccurate representation of Jesus. A while back the Chicago Tribune reported the story of a New Mexico woman who was frying tortillas when she noticed that the skillet burns on one of her tortillas resembled what she thought was the face of Jesus. Now, of course, she had never seen Jesus. But when she saw those burn marks she thought, "That's him." Excited, she showed it to her neighbors, and they all agreed that there was a face etched on the tortilla and that it truly bore a resemblance to Jesus. So the woman went to her priest to have the tortilla blessed. She testified that the tortilla had changed her life, and her husband agreed that she had been a more peaceful, happy, submissive wife since the tortilla had arrived. The priest, not accustomed to blessing tortillas, was somewhat reluctant but agreed to do it. The woman took the tortilla home, put it in a glass case with piles of cotton to make it look like it was floating on clouds, built a special altar for it, and opened the little shrine to visitors. Within a few months, more than eight thousand people came to the shrine of the Jesus of the Tortilla. That is a real story! No lack of spiritual devotion, no lack of religious activities, even worship in the name of Jesus, but the Jesus they worshipped was very different than the Jesus of the Bible. We can't just do what we want, have good intentions, use Jesus' name and assume we're all good. We have to make sure the Jesus we are worshipping is the Jesus revealed in God's word. That's why we not only preach the Bible here every week, but in every single service, whether we preach from the New Testament or the Old Testament, attention is given to Jesus from God's word. **2 Corinthians 4:5 says For what**

we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord. If we want to get worship right, we take the focus off ourselves, and we put it on Jesus...and not just anyone named Jesus, but real and living Jesus revealed in God's word.

Second answer: **Worship informed by Scripture, not culture.** Think about the Israelites. Not wanting to wait for God to reveal how he wanted to be worshipped, waiting for the Scriptures to be revealed, they established their own worship based upon their own ideas - ideas that were heavily shaped by the culture they were a part of their entire lives. That can happen today. When it comes to figuring out how we are going to live our lives, our values, our priorities, our relationships, our resources...are we looking to culture or Scripture? How to date? Who to marry? How to respond to people who have treated us poorly? What to think about politics, finances, racial reconciliation, the LGBTQI conversation? Are we being shaped by culture and the prevailing opinion of our day, or going to the unchanging foundation of Scripture as our true north? That's among the reasons we spend our time on Sundays at this church in God's word. We're not giving you self-help messages ...Ten steps to a better life. Six steps to a better marriage. Three steps to having better kids. No. We open up God's word. And I hope you are doing that in your own life on a daily basis, too. If we want to worship rightly, we have to go to God's word and seek his counsel: If we read his Word, he'll tell us what he wants. **John 17:17 Sanctify them by[d] the truth; your word is truth.**

Let me give you an example. I have friends who are married. They both grew up Catholic. They believed in God but it wasn't the most important part of their life. Early in their marriage they became friends with a pastor, and they always had sharp debates with this pastor. The rule was the debates could be about any topic, and could get intense, but they always had to substantiate their position based upon the Bible. One time the topic of baptism came up. The couple, who were sprinkled as infants assumed that was the right way to be baptized. They were absolutely convinced they were right! That's what they had been taught their entire life. The debate commenced. They opened up the Scriptures and read through every passage in the entire Bible about baptism. To their surprise, there it was, as clear as day, babies are never baptized, only people who place their faith in Jesus, and it is always done by immersion in water, never by sprinkling. The pastor asked them if they wanted to set up a time at the church to be baptized. They said, "Are you kidding me? No way! Now that we know that is what God wants, we are doing it right now. Tonight." There was a pool in the yard of that house. It was late fall. It was cold. The water was dirty and stagnant and there were leaves all around. But it didn't matter. The moment they realized what the Scriptures taught, they wanted to obey immediately. Is that true for your life? God wants us to be the sort of people who search the Scriptures constantly and vigorously, and then bring every aspect of our life into alignment with his Word. That's one way to make sure we are getting our worship right and not wrong.

Third answer: **Worship focused on glorifying God, not satisfying self.** What did the Israelites do when they planned their own worship service? They ate, drank, and indulged in revelry. A lifestyle of self-indulgence rather than self-denial, seeking their own preference and pleasure, rather than God's purposes. We can do the same thing today, too. What would it be like if we stopped and asked ourselves every day, with every decision we made, "At the core level, beneath the surface, what is my motivation right now? Am I looking to satisfy my own desires or to glorify God to the greatest extent possible? How would that question shape the way you date,

shape the way you interact with your neighbor, shape the way you engage with your family this holiday season? How would it shape the way you spend your time, your money, your holidays, how much TV you watch, how quick you are to apologize, to forgive? How quick you are to encourage? Your willingness to get involved in a life group? Even down to the simplest decisions about what you eat and drink? Listen to what the Bible says in **1 Corinthians 10:31 So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.**

If our motivation in worship is to satisfy ourselves, we will end up with a god who has been suspiciously domesticated and shrunk down into our image, made useful for our purposes. But if our motivation in worship is to glorify God, instead of domesticating him and shrinking him down into our image to be used for our purposes, worship will be the very activity that God uses to shape us into his image so he can use us for his purposes. Let me share with you the story of **Rosaria Butterfield**, a lesbian and gay-rights activist who met God and experienced an unbelievable transformation. This is her story in her own words:

I was a professor who often published books and articles attacking, “the unholy trinity of Jesus, Republican politics, and patriarchy.” Oftentimes after publications in the local newspaper, I would get hate mail and fan mail. But one letter struck a chord with me. It was from the pastor of a Presbyterian Church. It was a kind and inquiring letter. He encouraged me to explore the kind of questions I admire: How did you arrive at your interpretations? How do you know you are right? He didn't argue with my conclusion; rather, he asked me to defend the presuppositions. I stared at that letter for a week.

I had grown accustomed to the Christians who mocked me on Gay Pride Day and happily announced that I and everyone I loved were going to hell. That is not what Ken did. We started exchanging letters and he eventually invited me to get together for dinner, which I accepted. My motives at the time were straightforward: Surely this will be good for my research. But something else happened, we became friends.

They entered my world. They met my friends. We talked openly about sexuality and politics. When we ate together, Ken prayed in a way I had never heard before. His prayers were intimate. Vulnerable. I started reading the Bible. I read the way a glutton devours. I read it many times that first year in multiple translations. At a dinner gathering, my partner and I were hosting, my transgendered friend cornered me in the kitchen, put her large hand over mine and warned "This Bible reading is changing you, Rosaria,"

I fought with everything I had. I did not want this. I did not ask for this. I wanted to stay the same. I counted the costs. And I did not like the math on the other side of the equal sign. But God's promises rolled in like sets of waves into my world. Then, one ordinary day, I came to Jesus, openhanded and naked. Jesus triumphed. And I was a broken mess. Conversion was a train wreck. I did not want to lose everything that I loved. But the voice of God sang a sanguine love song in the rubble of my world. I weakly believed that if Jesus could conquer death, he could make right my world. I drank, tentatively at first, then passionately, of the solace of the Holy Spirit. I rested in private peace, then community, and today in the shelter of a covenant family, where one calls me "wife" and many call me "mother."

Do you realize the difference in her story from the popular rhetoric in our day. So many are used to saying, “This is what I think is right. This is how I want to live, so I’m going to worship him in the way that I want, in the way that fits my preferences, in the way that I think is ok, in a way that looks a lot like the world around me. But this woman came to God with open hands. She didn’t say, “God, I want you to look like me, I want to look like you.” I don’t want you to affirm my already held beliefs and convictions, I want to renounce my already held beliefs and convictions and align every aspect of my life with you. This woman came to God and said, “I have open hands. I don’t want to lose everything, but if you could conquer death, I can trust you to lead my life. I’ll leave everything behind and follow you.”

If we have a misconception of God, it may seem like a small deal at first, but it will ultimately wreak havoc in our lives. It can be just a small, subtle shift. But we convince ourselves we are doing the right thing, in reality, we’re entirely off base and in the midst of idolatry without ever knowing it. We are in desperate need of knowing who God truly is. When we see him in his fullness, we can worship him for who he truly is. The best way to know who God truly is is to look at Jesus. The Bible says that in him, the fullness of deity lives in bodily form.

Invitation and Communion.