

Middle/High School Sunday School Lessons by

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Year 4: Session 2 – NOT Putting God First

Class 6: Exodus 32:1-28 – The Golden Calf

CONCEPTS that will be covered in the lesson

- Explore the concepts of “habit” and “legacy” – in the sense that a legacy of a culture/people is like what a habit is to a person. “We’ve always done it that way before”
- Point out how the Israelites have been given the legacy, from the Egyptians, a national habit so to speak, of not putting God first – it’s almost automatic to them
- Review the patterns and results we’ve seen happen throughout the stories in this session when folks put God not-first

Materials needed:

1. Movie clip (available on rfour.org) from *Kindergarten Cop*
2. Electronics that show the video clip
3. Gloves (to protect the wrist of your student volunteer)
4. Yarn (but not string – string is too hard to break)
5. Scissors

THE LESSON

OPENING PRAYER

OPENING QUESTION

- One of the things we do every class is ask and answer the opening question at the beginning of class – because it helps us 1. Learn more about each other and 2. Helps “warm us up” for some of the ideas in the upcoming lesson. So we’re going to do that now.
- So here’s the opening question for today’s class. I [the teacher] will ask the question and then to give you some time to think of an answer, I will answer first.
- Once I answer the question, we’ll go around the circle and each of us will answer.
- When it’s your turn, start with your name and then answer the question to the best of your ability.
- *Here’s this week’s question:* What is a good or bad habit that you have?

TRANSITION TO AND THEN BEGIN ACTIVITY

- Today’s story will make a little bit more sense if we talk, first, about habits
- As our answer to the opening question reveals, we all have at least one habit
- Groups of people also have habits – we sometimes call those group habits, “Tradition,” “Culture” or even “Legacies”

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- Those group habits can be just as hard to break or change as our own personal habits
- To help us think about how habits are 1. Formed and 2. Hard to change, we're going to do the following demonstration...

Begin Activity

- I need a volunteer who thinks they are strong and have great determination ... and is ok with getting their hands tied.
- [*have volunteer join at front of class – they can either sit in an armrest-less chair or stand*]
- Next, I'm going to have you put these gloves on to protect your wrists (you'll see why in a moment)
- Now put your hands out, around stomach level
- Have your palms facing each other
- Have your hands about 10 inches from each other.
- I have some yarn here.
- I'm going to wrap one loop of yarn around your gloved wrists and tie that loop closed [*but student can still keep their hands about 10 inches apart*].
- Now, can you break that yarn by pulling your hands apart?
- [*let them try until they succeed*]
- OK, very good!
- This is what happens when we first do an activity or action. Doing something one time is like one loop of yarn. It's not very strong in us and it's very easy to break out of the loop.
- So let's do this again. Now hold your hands out again.
- This time I'm going to put three loops of yarn around your wrists.
- Can you break that string?
- [*let them try until they succeed*]
- Ok, very good!
- But it was a little bit harder, yeah?
- So, when we do an action a few times, it gets a little bit more ingrained in our brain and it's a little bit harder to get out of the loop.
- Now let's try the demonstration if we use 10 loops
- Now let's try the demonstration if we use 30 loops!
- [*Continue until the volunteer can't break the loops of string anymore*]

TELL

- This is a useful illustration to help us think about how habits occur.
- They are created by repeating a behavior until that behavior is very strong within us.
- Now, habits are not good or bad.
- For instance, if we wanted to create God-centered habits, then habits can be a really good and helpful thing.
- But in today's scripture story, we're going to see how a habit that is about putting God not-first is passed on from one group of people (the Egyptians) and is embedded in another group of people (the Israelites).
- And it causes a lot problems for the Israelites

TRANSITION to Scripture Story

- The story we're going to read happens pretty soon after the Israelites exited Egypt

- Just as a reminder – Joseph and his 11 brothers (sons of Jacob aka Israel) ended up in Egypt, and over the course of 400 years, their families grew into the people of the Israel, who the Egyptians has enslaved.
- Then Moses was sent by God to tell Pharaoh to let go of the people of Israel.
- Pharaoh says no and 10 plagues occur and finally Pharaoh says “Leave!” but then changes his mind one more time which leads to the parting and crossing of the Red Sea story.
- So about 3 months after the parting of the Red Sea story, the Israelites set up camp at Mount Sinai
- Moses then goes up Mount Sinai and for 40 days talks with God. During this time, the first set of the 10 commandments is created
- The story we’re about to read happens at the end of those 40 days.
- Side note about time: this story takes place about 1400 years before Jesus is born – and about 3500 years before today.

READ Exodus 32:1-28 (*recommend class reads it out loud; one person per verse*)

1When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, “Come, make gods for us, 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.” 2Aaron said to them, “Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” 3So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. 4He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” 5When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord.” 6They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

7The Lord said to Moses, “Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; 8they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a 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!’ 9The Lord said to Moses, “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. 10Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.” 11But Moses implored the Lord his God, and said, “O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of

Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? 12Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth’? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. 13Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’” 14And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

15Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain, carrying the two tablets of the covenant in his hands, tablets that were written on both sides, written on the front and on the back. 16The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved upon the tablets. 17When Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, “There is a noise of war in the camp.” 18But he said, “It is not the sound made by victors, or the sound made by losers; it is the sound of revelers that I hear.” 19As soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses’ anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets from his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. 20He took the calf that they had made, burned it with fire, ground it to powder, scattered it on the water, and made the Israelites drink it.

21Moses said to Aaron, “What did this people do to you that you have brought so great a sin upon them?” 22And Aaron said, “Do not let the anger of my lord burn hot; you

know the people, that they are bent on evil. 23They said to me, '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.' 24So I said to them, 'Whoever has gold, take it off'; so they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!" 25When Moses saw that the people were running wild (for Aaron had let them run wild, to the derision of their enemies), 26then Moses stood in the gate of the

camp, and said, "Who is on the Lord's side? Come to me!" And all the sons of Levi gathered around him. 27He said to them, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'Put your sword on your side, each of you! Go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill your brother, your friend, and your neighbor.'" 28The sons of Levi did as Moses commanded, and about three thousand of the people fell on that day.

ASK

- Verse 1 – what do the people ask Aaron to do? (make gods for them)
- Verse 1 – why do they ask for it? (because Moses has been gone for too long, so they are looking for something to take his place)
- Verse 2 – Does Aaron argue with them? (not at all)
- Verse 3 – What is the first cost of "making gods" (all the gold rings from their ears are melted down)
- Verse 4 – What does Aaron make? (a golden calf – note that in Egypt cows are considered sacred. So what we see here is Aaron and the Israelites copying what they watched the Egyptians do for 400 years. Because...old habits don't go away very quickly)
- Verse 4 – What do the people say about the golden calf once it is made? (These are your gods, O Israel, that brought you out of Egypt)
- Verse 4 cont. – Is that true? (no)
- When you do something for someone and someone else gets credit, how does that feel? (not very good – and that's what the Israelites are doing to God right here – not giving God any credit)
- Verse 10 – What is God's first response to what the Israelites are doing? (to be left alone, destroy the Israelites and make a great nation from Moses alone)
- Verse 10 cont. – Whoa! What do you think about that!? Does it surprise you?
- Verse 14 – Who changes God's mind? (Moses)
- Verse 14 – What do you think about Moses changing God's mind/plan? (One thing that is especially interesting is that Moses uses all that God had done before with the Israelites as a way to remind God to not change directions / stop now; also, though, the Israelites do seem pretty thankless/hopeless in this story)
- Verse 15 – What is Moses carrying? (basically, the first version of the 10 commandments)
- Verse 19 – What does Moses do to the tablets? (breaks them. Note: Even though Moses breaks the tablets physically, the Israelites have already broken the covenant/commandments by their choices)
- Verse 24 – Does Aaron take responsibility for his actions? (not at all: "I threw the gold into the fire and out came this calf!" oy vey!)
- Does Aaron not taking responsibility remind you of any characters doing similar things in recent stories that we've read? (yep -- Adam, Eve and Cain)
- Verse 25 – What does Moses see? (that the people are running wild)
- Verse 26-28 – How does Moses get the people to stop running wild? (calls the sons of Levi to use swords and go throughout the camp striking down fellow Israelites)
- Verse 28 – How many people were felled that day? (3000)

TELL

- Before we talk about anything else, I want to go on record to point out how sad of a story this is
- You have Moses and God basically planning what could be some very good stuff for the Israelites while simultaneously the Israelites are ruining that opportunity, at least for the immediate time being, due to old habits they learned while in captivity
- And these things that they know – are not even their own things, but the things their oppressors, the Egyptians, knew.
- Next... **(skip to #2 if not enough time).**
- **#1 (OPTIONAL – IF TIME).** There's sometimes an argument that folks will make against church and paying attention to God, saying, "God is needy / God needs so much of our attention."
 - But what we see in this story is that if we're not paying attention to God, then we're paying attention to something else and whatever that something else is – it is costly. The golden calf was very costly, no?
 - The other things we pay attention to cost us time and effort
 - The other things we pay attention to cost us money
 - And even though we give money, time, and effort to these other things that we pay attention to – this story is reminding us in rather graphic ways that those other things are ultimately a dead end.
 - Now, this doesn't mean we're *not* supposed to pay attention to other things. Of course we are! We are curious creatures, made and designed to explore and pay attention to all sorts of things!
 - The point is that we're designed to pay attention to God first and all of those other things second.
 - It's about getting the order of priority correct. Because in paying attention to God first, we'll know what to pay attention to next and in so doing, create/make new, good, healthy habits.
- **#2.** Let's consider this story within the context of the other two stories we've read about putting God not-first
 - In all three stories, we see the same things happen once one or more people stop putting God first.
 - We see people not taking responsibility (already discussed)
 - We see people blaming other people
 - Adam blames Eve, Eve blames the serpent
 - Cain (implicitly) blames Abel for gaining God's regard even though Cain is to blame for NOT gaining God's regard
 - Israelites blame Moses for being gone.
 - Aaron blames the fire for creating a golden calf statue.
 - We see creation of hurtful divisions
 - Adam and Eve hide from God and are then removed from the Garden of Eden
 - Cain "removes" Abel from the living (that's a nice way of putting it!) and then is forced to wander about – moves away from his family and everything he knows
 - God strongly considers giving up on the Israelites and the sons of Levi remove 3000 Israelites from the living (again – a nice way of putting it)
 - We see death
 - Adam and Eve are told that they will die if they eat the fruit
 - Although Adam and Eve do not experience instant death, their son, Abel experiences a "too soon" death and at the hands of his brother no less
 - And then in today's story, we see God tempted to bring death to the Israelites, and then Moses with the sons of Levi go and do just that to 3000 of them

Transition to Movie Clip

- So this is a pretty depressing story, especially because there's not a second part of the story where it says, "Then, the Israelites developed a new habit of putting God first which meant they no longer blamed each other, hurt each other or went away from each other."
- However, I want us to consider giving the Israelites a break, here.
- And I want us to do that by thinking of them as very young, undisciplined children.
- All their lives, a collective 400 years of life, they had lived not-free.
- And once they tasted just a little bit of freedom – they didn't really know what to do with that freedom.
- Let's watch the following video clip from *Kindergarten Cop* to get a feel for what very young, undisciplined children who have their first taste of freedom might do.

WATCH Movie CLIP

ASK

- When did the kids go crazy? (after the substitute teacher left the room)
- And what was the substitute teacher's response to all of the craziness – did he handle it well? (no, he yelled at them)
- Then what did they do? (cry)
- What did the teacher do at that point? (run away)
- Does this seem similar to what we read in the story? (a little bit, yeah)

TELL

- This is, of course, a simplistic way of thinking about today's scripture story
- But, at the same time, that classroom scene is somewhat similar to the sort of scene Moses saw when he rejoined the Israelites
- Which is probably why he broke the tablets, yelled at them, and then called on the Levites to punish the people.
- But Moses wasn't *just* seeing immaturity. He was also seeing old habits of the people they had left, the Egyptians – habits formed by being captives for 400 years
- As we discussed earlier, old habits are hard to break, both for individuals and for groups of people.
- This is what the last three stories (that we've read) remind us of -- the habit of putting God not-first is a really old, really deeply seated habit in groups of people – it's been happening since the beginning of time.
- And new habits can be hard to learn.
- Sometimes, though, people DO change their habits. But it is not easy.
- For our next session, we'll look at some different ways that God tries to help the Israelites, after being freed from the Egyptians, try and break their habit of putting God not-first that they learned from the Egyptians
- Just to warn you, it does not go smoothly! And why is that? Because old habits are hard to break and new habits are hard to form!

CLOSING PRAYER