

“Anger, Judgement, and Mercy” based on Exodus 32

Delivered by Dan McLaurin on September 14, 2025, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

Today, I want to do something a little different. I know Presbyterians don't like change, but I want to look at all of Chapter 32 because there's a lot that goes on before the golden calf and there's a lot that goes on after the golden calf that I think is really important. When Drew sent me the lectionary a couple of months ago, I chose this passage for a couple of reasons. One was that in the Sunday School class I'm in, we had just gone through Exodus.

Also, I chose this passage because I thought it would be challenging. I'm the kind who likes to read and study the hard parts of the bible and I thought this would be a challenge. In light of the recent events here in our country, I just didn't realize how challenging it would, but I felt like the Holy Spirit guided me to this passage and I feel more so now.

So, let us look at this story. At the beginning of chapter 32, we read, *“When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron and said to him, ‘Come, and make gods for us and you shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man whom brought you out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’*

“And Aaron 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.’ So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears and brought them to Aaron. He took the gold from them and formed it into a mold and cast an image of a calf and they said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up from 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 festival to the Lord.’ They rose early the next day and offered burnt offerings and burnt sacrifices of well being and the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to revel.”

At this point in our story, the Israelites have been recently delivered from slavery from Egypt by God's mighty hand. They're camped at the base of Mt. Sinai and Moses has gone up the mountain to receive the law from God. But Moses has been up there for 40 days and 40 nights and the issue seems to be of a leadership vacuum without Moses, although Aaron is in charge.

Without proper leadership, the people grow restless and uncertain, fearing that Moses may not return and impatient to move on, they approach Aaron, Moses's brother and second in command with a troubling request: “Make us gods to go before us.” These are the same people who had twice said, “all the words the Lord has spoken, we will do.” All that's forgotten. Without hesitation, Aaron grants their request and takes their gold and makes it into a golden calf.

At this point the key words are “to go before us.” I don't think the people are seeking a substitute for God at this point, but an image of a messenger of God. Up to now the messenger was understood as a living representation of God – not separate from God, but a living representation, like Moses. This image makes their representation concrete and accessible. The emphasis on the absence of Moses means that he is the one who has thus far mediated such divine leadership. The construction of the image as a divine messenger gives the figure a more permanent place at the head of the people. It gives them a visible, tangible element to come see in the absence of Moses's leadership.

God is not being set aside, at least that's what Aaron understands, as he says they will have, "a feast to the Lord." Now the people engage in an act of worship to God. The messenger has been elevated to a worship that is appropriate for God. The golden calf has been elevated to a status alongside God. Now, the goal of the Exodus was to deliver the people to be able to serve God, but this has taken a bad turn. This action of turning the messenger into God is a fundamental act of disloyalty to God who had delivered them and entered into an intimate relationship with them.

The big question to me was, "Why didn't anyone step up and say this is a bad idea?" Where were the other leaders? Did not anybody ever say, "How can this be the one who led us out of Egypt when five minutes ago, it didn't even exist?" You see the confusion of God with the messenger is not an uncommon problem for communities of faith. It's a common problem today, too.

People often lift up those who speak and lead for God. They give their primary allegiance to the messenger, sing their praises, and ascribe to the messenger what only God can do. It's a serious and common form of idolatry and it can be a problem for the messenger who might encourage or unknowingly submit to such kinds of thinking. I could use other examples, but I'll leave it at that.

Now, we turn to what I just read earlier. One of the questions and key verses I want to read and focus on is verse 7: "When the Lord said to Moses, go down at once, your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt have acted perversely."

If God is all knowing and all seeing, then why didn't God sent Moses down before hand, before all of this got out of hand. I think that what it comes down to is that God gives us free will. We can choose to accept God. We can choose to reject God. God does not make us puppets for him to control. God gives us a choice and in effect, God informs Moses that if this is what the people believe and confess, then let them. But if they wish to make a confession other than God, they will have to bear the consequences. God does not treat such unfaithfulness lightly and asks Moses to leave him alone so that judgement can be executed on these people.

This would entail letting the effects of the brokenness have their way with the people. In other words, Israel is staring into the face of a future far more devastating than any experience of bondage in Egypt. But Moses does not leave God alone. I like the relationship that God and Moses have. In fact, Moses speaks on behalf of the people, even though he has not seen what is going on.

The boldness of his reply indicates the nature of the relationship between God and Moses. In this relationship, dialog is invited and indeed welcome. In other words, God is not the only one who has something important to say. Moses does too. And Moses appeals to God. He appeals to God's reasoning and appeals to his reputation with a reminder of his promises.

This is what we see in verse 11, *"O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand?" He appeals to God's reputation – what would other people say, "that God brought the people out of Egypt just to kill them in the desert?" He reminds God of his promise to lead them into the promised land."*

What's amazing is that God is open to what Moses has to say. He takes Moses's contribution seriously, honoring it as important to shaping the future. God's response to Moses is immediate and direct and God changed his mind. Now, I know God is unchangeable, in that his will and

purpose is not changeable, but the God of Israel is revealed as one who is open to change. God will move from decision made and course charted in view of ongoing interaction with those affected.

God may adjust models and directions, but not ultimate goals, and does so in response to human responsiveness. This means there is an openness to the future on God's part, and it reveals what it is about that is unchangeable – God's will for the salvation of all. God always acts, even changes, in order to be true to and accomplish those unchangeable ways.

After this interaction with God, let us look back at the scripture at verse 15, *"Then 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. The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved upon 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 made by victors or the sound made by losers; it is the sound of revelry that I hear.' As soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses's anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets from his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain."*

In this section, Moses is angry when he gets there. I don't know why he didn't get angry before, but when he descends the mountain and witnesses their idolatry, he throws down the tablets with the 10 commandments. In his anger, he shatters them in a symbolic act that Israel has broken their covenant with God. You could basically say that Moses has broken all 10 commandments.

Then Moses "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." I'm not sure how you change or grind gold into powder, but he did. He confronts the problem, eliminates the problem, and basically turns this golden calf into human waste.

"Moses said to Aaron, 'What did this people do to you that you have brought so great a sin upon them?' And Aaron said, 'Do not let the anger of my lord burn hot; you know the people, that they are wicked. They said to me, '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.' So 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!'"

I like that phrase, "Out came the calf" like he just threw the gold into the fire and all of a sudden out came the calf. He was trying to deflect blame and that's how sometimes we do it. At verse 21 it continues: "When Moses saw that the people were out of control (for Aaron had lost control of them, prompting derision among their enemies), then 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."

This is where it gets hard. I could very easily have skipped over this part. But Moses said, *"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." The sons of Levi did as Moses commanded, and about three thousand of the people fell on that day. Moses said, "Today you have been ordained for the service of the Lord, each one at the cost of a son or a brother."*

Moses now stands at the gate and makes a public stand to the people. "Who's side are you on?" Do they belong to God or not? No threat is made. This is just an invitation. This is not a call for

community loyalty. It's a call for commitment to God alone. The following slaughter could have been avoided at this point if everyone had answered positively.

The issue no longer is whether they participated in worship of the golden calf, but now are they willing to declare themselves for God. The great majority remain unmoved and their silent indifference to the call is deafening. In other words, this is a revealing of the deep levels of disloyalty. Being on God's side requires decision, action, and separation. The Levites responded positively as a group, forsaking their past and choosing now to be loyal to God. They receive an unexpected task from God to be executioners of divine judgement on those who did not respond.

At this junction in Israel's life, when its entire future is at stake, radical sin is believed to call for radical measurements. Continued life for the community is believed to be possible only through the death of some. Declining Moses's call to stand for God is not an open matter for Israel. The relationship with God even takes priority over all other relationships. The far reaching of good or bad leadership on a community of faith is not unique to Israel, but all of human history.

So, how does Moses respond? On the next day, he says, *"You have sinned a great sin. But now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin."* So Moses returned to the Lord and said, *'Alas, this people has sinned a great sin; they have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will only forgive their sin—but if not, please blot me out of the book that you have written.'* But the Lord said to Moses, *'Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book. But now go, lead the people to the place about which I have spoken to you; see, my angel shall go in front of you. Nevertheless, when the day for punishment comes, I will punish them for their sin. Then the Lord sent a plague on the people, because they made the calf—the one that Aaron had made.'*

Moses continues his agenda and keeps death and life closely intertwined, pleading with God to forgive his people. God makes it clear that each person is accountable for their own sins. Moses cannot atone for the people's sin by sacrificing himself. This underscores the holiness of God and the seriousness with which God regards sin. The book mentioned is the Book of Life and is often understood as a record of those in right relationship with God. To be blotted out means severe judgement and separation from God's covenant blessing for eternity.

This episode is a critical lesson to the Israelites about the consequences of disobedience. Despite witnessing God's miracles firsthand, with plagues in Egypt and the parting of the Red Sea, they quickly turn to idolatry when faced with uncertainty. God's response balances justice with mercy. While he holds the sinners accountable, he does not destroy the entire nation and instead continues to lead them toward the promised land, reaffirming his covenant blessing.

Understanding the context of Exodus 32 highlights the gravity of turning away from God and the importance of personal accountability. It foreshadows the need for a perfect mediator between God and humanity, fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Unlike Moses, who could not take the sins of the people, Jesus offered himself as the perfect sacrifice, bearing the sins of the many and providing a way for reconciliation with God.

This passage reminds us of God's unyielding holiness, righteous judgement, and enduring mercy. It calls us to reflect on our own lives, recognizing the seriousness of sin and embracing the grace offered through faith in Christ. Understanding this story helps us recognize the seriousness with

which God views sin and the personal accountability. It calls us to self-examination. It calls us to repentance and to acknowledge that we cannot rely on others to make us right with God.

Instead, we are invited to accept the grace offered through Jesus Christ, who bridges the gap our sin has created. In essence, Exodus 32 reveals a just and holy and merciful God who demands righteousness, provides a means to obtain it through faith in Christ. This encourages us to approach God with humility and reverence to confess our sin and embrace the forgiveness and new life he offers. This is a powerful reminder that the depth of God's character is an unwavering commitment to justice and mercy in his relationship with us.

Exodus 32 contains a timeless truth that is highly relevant to Christians today – Sin is not a trivial matter to God. In our modern culture, it's easy to downplay or rationalize sin, viewing specific actions as mere mistakes or social norms. However, God's response to the Israelites underscores that sin is a direct offense against his holy nature. For us today, this means we must take sin seriously in our lives. It is a call to self-examination prompting us to consider areas where we may have allowed complacency or compromise to creep in.

God's declaration of "whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book" emphasizes that each person is accountable to God for their own actions. We cannot rely on the righteousness of others, be it family, church leaders, or tradition to cover our sins. In an age where collective identity outsizes personal responsibilities, this calls us back to understand that our relationship with God is personal. It challenges us to face our shortcomings and earnestly seek God's forgiveness.

In his compassion, Moses offered to be blotted out of God's book in place of the people. God clarifies that Moses cannot alone atone for their sins. This highlights the limitations of even the most faithful human mediators. It points us to the significance of Jesus Christ as our perfect mediator. Unlike Moses, Jesus is without sin and was killed bearing the total weight of humanity's sins. As it says in Hebrews, "Therefore, he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promise of an eternal inheritance." This invites us to put our trust wholly in Christ for our salvation and encourages us to live faithfully in covenant community with God through Christ.

Just as the Israelites were called to uphold their covenant with God, we obey his word. This doesn't imply perfection, but a sincere commitment to follow him, relying on the Holy Spirit for guidance and strength. Applying the truths of Exodus 32 to our lives can deepen our understanding of God's character and our relationship with him. It moves us to live authentically before God, appreciating the immense grace we have received through Christ, inspiring us to walk faithfully in his ways.

Some practical steps to apply would be to reflect and repent, to regularly examine our hearts and confess sins to God, embracing his forgiveness. We need to trust in Christ alone, relying on Jesus as our mediator and source of our righteousness, rather than personal merits. We need to pursue holiness, commit to living and obeying God's word, empowered by the Holy Spirit. We need to extend grace. Just as you've received mercy, forgive and support others on your spiritual journey.

By acknowledging the seriousness with which God views sin and embracing his grace through faith in Christ, we can experience a transforming relationship with him. Let this understanding inspire us to walk faithfully and hold accountability in sharing God's love and mercy with those around us. Amen.