

Unit Title : **WORSHIPPING GOD**  
Lesson 3a : **FORBIDDEN WORSHIP – IDOLATRY (MAN-MADE)**  
Bible Story : **ISRAELITES & THE GOLDEN CALF**  
Lesson Scripture : Exodus 32; Rom. 1:21-25; Exo. 20:3-6; Mat. 4:10

**Main Emphasis** : True worship is God-centered.

**Objectives** : By the end of this session, the students should be able to:

1. define idolatry;
2. acknowledge worship is to be addressed to God alone;
3. distinguish worship to the Creator and to man-made structures;
4. give examples of things made by man;
5. determine God is a jealous God;
6. determine disobedience to God's commandments is a sin;
7. differentiate the characteristics of God and a statue;
8. assess their worship if God-centered;
9. recite the memory verse.

**Words to Remember:**

**IDOLATRY** – worship of idols; extreme admiration, love, or reverence for something or someone.

**CALF** - a young bovine animal, especially a domestic cow or bull in its first year.

**STATUES** - a carved or figure of a person or animal, especially one that is life-size or larger; man-made.

**MAN-MADE** - made or caused by human beings (as opposed to occurring or being made naturally)

**Memory Verse:**

**Psalm 100**

<sup>1</sup> Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth.

<sup>2</sup> Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs.

<sup>3</sup> Know that the Lord is God. It is He who made us, and we are His; we are His people, the sheep of His pasture.

<sup>4</sup> Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name.

**Pre-Session Activity:** Distinguish structures/things whether God-made or man-made. Show pictures of common statues worshipped historically.

**Lesson Proper** :

Recap: What is the greatest commandment? How do we worship God?

The children of Israel had been in bondage in Egypt for over two hundred years. God called Moses, the deliverer, and told him that He had heard their cries and was about to deliver them (Exodus 3:6–8).

While Moses was up on the mountain receiving God's laws, the people were getting anxious down on the plain. Moses spent forty days (Exodus 24:18) up on the mountain with God, and by the end of that time, the people were beginning to think Moses had died or left them. The people urged Aaron, their temporary leader, to make gods for them to follow. Since they were accustomed to having visual representations of gods, this was the natural (but sinful) result of their thinking. Aaron took their gold earrings, which they had brought from Egypt, and

melted them down to make a golden idol. The idol he crafted for them was a calf, but Aaron maintained the name of the Lord in connection with it (Exodus 32:5). He was merging the pagan practices they were familiar with and the worship of the God they were just beginning to be re-acquainted with. Aaron called the people together and told them that the golden calf was the god who delivered them from Egypt. The people offered sacrifices and then engaged in pagan rituals, including orgies (Exodus 32:25) to worship this new god.

**Why calf?** The bull was a symbol of strength and fertility, and the people were already familiar with bull gods from Egypt. Bulls were also typical animals of sacrifice, so to use their image as a symbol of the god being worshiped was a natural connection. Aaron's bull was a mixture of the powerful God who delivered the people through mighty works and the pagan methods of worship that were borrowed from the people around them.

### **EXODUS 20:3-6**

**(Let the students read it in English NIV and in Filipino *Mabuting Balita*)**

God certainly held the people accountable for their corruption (Exodus 32:7-10) and was ready to destroy them for their sin. Moses' personal intercession on behalf of his people saved them.

God is not to be worshiped with images, because any image we make will draw more attention to the work of our hands than the God who made all things. Also, there is no way we can ever fully represent the holiness and awesomeness of God through an image. To attempt to do so will always fall short. On top of this, God is a spirit (John 4:24), and we cannot form an image of a spirit. We worship God by believing His Word, obeying it, and declaring His greatness to others.

### **Life Application :**

God wants a God-centered worship for He is a jealous God. This is a holy jealousy for no one can worship two masters (Matt. 4:10; 6:24). Disobedience to God's commandments is a sin. As with any other sin, the punishment is death, and the only proper response is repentance just as how Moses intercedes for the Israelites' sin of idolatry. The problem with mankind is that, having a physical body, people wanted to worship the things eyes can see or physically visible, which is contrary to God being a spirit.

We worship God alone in spirit and in truth so our worship to God should not be physical, but spiritual. A statue that is supposed to represent Christ will definitely fail to do that. Man-made things, like statues, focus people on an earthly Christ, not the heavenly, omnipresent Savior.

Exo. 20:6 considers those who keep His commandment. It means we must make a stand to obey His commandments in spite of what others say or do, unlike Aaron based on the story.

In Rom. 1:21, even though you know God, come to church regularly, pray, read the Bible, etc. still you might not worship and glorify Him with you heart. There are times your worship is meaningless though you know a lot about God and the scriptures. You tend to worship more not the Creator but other than Him. Man always has something or someone to worship, the question is what or who is it. Try to assess your worship if it is God-centered or not.

**Evaluation :**

- 1. What do you mean by idolatry?**
- 2. What caused God's anger based on the story?**
- 3. Differentiate God and man-made structures (e.g. statues)?**
- 4. What commandment is violated when you worship idols?**
- 5. What is God's response to idolatry? How come?**
- 6. How do you define true worship? How is your worship?**

## **Background of the Lesson (For Teachers):**

### Idol, Idolatry

The most prevalent form of idolatry in biblical times was the worship of images or idols that represented or were thought to embody various pagan deities.

**The Old Testament.** From the beginning the threat of idolatry was in the midst of Israel. The forefathers were idolaters and, while Abraham was called out of a polytheistic background (Joshua 24:2), some persons brought their gods with them (Gen 35:2-4). Israel's sojourn in Egypt placed them under the influence of the Egyptian religion, but God's sovereignty was manifest by his judgment upon the gods of Egypt (Exod 12:12; Num 33:4). Israel, however, quickly succumbed to idolatry by worshiping a golden calf at Mount Sinai (Exod 32).

In Canaan Israel was influenced to worship Baal and other deities. Perhaps it was the fact that the Canaanites, who controlled all of the fertile valleys, offered their fertility cult religion as an explanation for greater productivity to the Hebrews, who had to settle for the less productive hills, or it may have been the emphasis upon sexuality that eventually seduced Israel to the worship of idols. Other reasons included materialism (Deut 31:20), intermarriage (1 Kings 11:2-4), political persuasion (1 Kings 12:28), environmental factors (1 Kings 20:23), the conquest of other nations (2 Chron 25:14), and power (2 Chron 28:23).

The first commandment is to have no gods before God (Exod 20:3; Deut 5:7). In addition, the construction of any images (Exod 20:23) or even the mention of the names of gods (Exod 23:13) was forbidden. Invoking the name of a god was an acknowledgment of its existence and gave credence to its power. By swearing in the name of another god (1 Kings 19:2 ; 20:10 ), the people would be binding themselves to

an allegiance other than God ( Joshua 23:7 ).

Since idolatry substituted another for God it violated the people's holiness and was parallel to adultery; hence the frequent use of negative sexual imagery for idolatry, especially by the prophets. Both intermarriage and formal treaties were prohibited because of necessary affiliation with pagan gods (Exod 23:32-33), leading to eventual fellowship (Exod 34:15) and worship of idols (Num 25:2-3).

Among the most severe commands were the instructions to destroy the inhabitants of Canaan because they served idols (Deut 7:16). Included was the destruction and desecration of their idols (Deut 7:25) and all cultic paraphernalia (Deut 12:2). Insightful are the verbs employed for the destruction of idols. Eradication included cutting and pulling down, smashing, grinding, breaking, burning, and similar physical actions—all reminders of the inability of idols to protect themselves.

Beyond destruction, desecration by scattering the corpses and bones of slain idol worshipers upon centers of idolatry, underlined the degree of impurity idolatry caused (Lev 26:30). Destruction was to be so extensive that their names (memory) would be eliminated from the cult site (Deut 12:3).

The testimony of Scripture is that God alone is worthy of worship. Active acknowledgment of idols by prostration, sacrifice, or other means of exaltation is not only a misdirection of allegiance; it robs God of the glory and honor that is rightfully his (Isa 42:8). God even placed limits of philosophical inquiry upon his people, indicating that they were not to seek the method of pagan worship because of associated evil practices (Deut 12:30-31). The sense of Scripture was to destroy idolatry or be destroyed by it.

In contrast to such a bleak picture it is interesting to note that some of the highest accolades of Scripture are reserved for those individuals who shunned idolatry: Abraham, the friend of God; Moses, to whom God spoke face to face; and David, a man after God's own heart, are three examples.

Theologically the reason given for prohibiting idols is that God is unique and unrepresentable. Deuteronomy 4:15-19 states that Israel saw no form of God at Sinai; therefore they were not to make any images of him or any other object of creation. Failure to acknowledge God as sovereign Creator opens the door to idolatry and spiritual blindness (Isa 42:5-9). Making images of foreign gods and attempting to represent the Lord were both forbidden as contradictions of the monotheistic revelation of God.

Scripture views idols as impotent. They are powerless to save (Isa 45:20). When Israel called upon idols there was no response. Israel was even told, with the voice of irony, to call upon idols for help (Deut 32:28; Judges 10:14; Jer 11:12) but the gods could not even save their own people (2 Chron 25:15). Idols are nothing (Jer 51:17-18) and lifeless (Psalm 106:28).

Reference to the construction of idols in Scripture is more prevalent than might be expected. From the selection of materials to the final embellishment of eye paint the process is most effectively portrayed in the great prophetic parodies of Isaiah 44:6-20 and Jeremiah 10:1-16. This attraction for many to worship an idol—its tangible nature—is also its greatest weakness. Fabricated by human hands, idols cannot see, hear, smell, walk, or talk (Deut 4:28; Psalm 115:5-7; Hab 2:18-19). Idols are not to be feared since they can do neither harm nor good (Jer 10:5). What makes the polemic against idols so significant is that other religions condoned the making of images—the Lord did not!

Recorded in Scripture are the results of idolatry for both humankind and God. Those who venerate images are said to be deceived (Isa 44:20), shamed (Isa 44:11), and foolish (Jer 10:8), eventually imitating the worthless idols they worship (2 Kings 17:15; Hosea 9:10). The inevitable outcome is destruction, death, and the judgment of God (Jonah 2:8).

God's first and foremost reaction to idolatry is anger. Because idolatry challenges his person and his love for his people it is viewed in terms of God being jealous (a consuming zeal for what was rightfully his) and impugns his very name (Exod 34:14). That God did not destroy Israel because of their idolatry is clear evidence of his mercy and faithfulness. In the end God promises to destroy all the gods of the nations (Zep 2:11) and looks forward to the day when the people will throw away their idols and return to him (Isa 30:22).

**The New Testament.** Following the exile and subsequent intertestamental struggles, the Jews no longer fell prey to physical idolatry. This is why idolatry is rarely mentioned in the Gospels. As the gospel message spread it encountered various forms of idolatry in the pagan world as attested in Acts, especially Paul's encounters at Athens (17:16-31) and Ephesus (19:23-34).

The pressure of idolatry on Gentile believers explains the numerous references to idolatry in Paul's Epistles. Teaching about foods offered to idols is an excellent example of the struggle of maturing Christians with idolatry. The fact that idolatry would continue to be a threat to the church is underscored by the many references to the worship of the image of the beast in Revelation.

The New Testament stresses the exceeding sinfulness of idolatry. Frequent listing of sins includes idolatry (1 Cor 6:9-10; Gal 5:20; Eph 5:5; Col 3:5; 1 Peter 4:3; Rev 21:8) and Paul instructs believers not to associate with idolaters (

1 Cor 5:11 ; 10:14 ). Distortion brought about by idolatry is emphatically set forth in Romans 1:18-32, where image worship is seen as a downward spiral away from the true God.

The Bible understands that idolatry extends beyond the worship of images and false gods. It is a matter of the heart, associated with pride, self-centeredness, greed, gluttony (Php 3:19), and a love for possessions (Matt 6:24).

Robert D. Spender

## STATUES



