

## HOW TO APPROACH THE LORD

*20<sup>22</sup>Then Jehovah said to Moses, "This is what you shall say to the children of Israel: You yourselves have witnessed that I have spoken to you from heaven. 23You shall not make any other gods to be beside me; you shall not make for yourselves gods of silver or gods of gold. 24You shall make an altar of earth for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings—your sheep and your oxen. Wherever I cause my name to be honored, I will come to you and bless you. 25If you make an altar of stone for me, you shall not construct it out of hewn stones; for if you use a tool in building it you will defile it. 26And you shall not ascend my altar by steps, so that your nakedness not be exposed upon it." (Ex. 20:22-26)*

### **Introduction**

Charles Colson tells of a practice he frequently employed while working for the White House during the Nixon presidency.

Whenever the president wanted to gain the support of an influential leader, whether it were a leader in business or education or the church, that particular leader would be invited to the White House. There he would be greeted by Mr. Colson who would escort him to a luncheon held in the executive dining room. After lunch he would be treated to a special interview with the president; from the executive dining room Colson would walk him upstairs to the Oval Office. Inevitably, the guest would find the visit to be an overwhelming experience.

Colson remarks:

I took all kinds of groups to see the president, from friendly cattlemen to sophisticated educators enraged over budget cuts or the Vietnam War. It was always the same. In the reception room they would rehearse their angry lines and reassure one another, "I'll tell him what's going on. He's got to do something."

When the aide came to escort us in, they'd set their jaws and march toward the door. But once it swung open, the aide announcing, "The president will see you," it was as if they had suddenly sniffed some intoxicating fragrance. Most became almost self-conscious about even stepping on the plush blue carpet on which was sculpted the Great Seal of the United States. And Mr. Nixon's voice and presence—like any president's—filled the room.

Invariably, the lions of the waiting room became the lambs of the Oval Office. No one ever showed outward hostility. Most ... forgot their best-rehearsed lines. They nodded when the president spoke, and in those rare instances when they disagreed, they did so apologetically, assuring the president that they personally respected his opinion. (Charles Colson, *Kingdoms in Conflict*, pp.306-307.)

If this is the way the movers and shakers respond when ushered into the presence of the president, how should we respond when we enter the presence of the living God? If we are to approach the LORD in a manner that is worthy of Him, and acceptable to Him, we must be aware of who He is and what He requires. Because the LORD is the living God who is sacred and holy, we must approach Him in the way He prescribes.

## **I. When You Approach the LORD, You Must Acknowledge that He Alone is God**

The LORD strictly warns His people: *“You shall not make any other gods to be beside me; you shall not make for yourselves gods of silver or gods of gold”* (vs. 23.) In answer to the question, “What is required in the first commandment?” the Westminster Shorter Catechism replies as follows: “The first commandment requires us to know and acknowledge God to be the only true God, and our God, and to worship and glorify Him accordingly.”

Consider the Apostle Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 8:4-6. *“We know that a worldly idol is nothing”* (vs. 4;) i.e.; there is no idol in all the world that has any substance or life. Note how God Himself describes the idols:

*But their idols are silver and gold, made by the hands of men. <sup>5</sup>They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but they cannot see; <sup>6</sup>they have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but they cannot smell; <sup>7</sup>they have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but they cannot walk; nor can they utter a sound from their throats. (Psl. 115:4-7)*

Note, too, God’s challenge to the idols of the world:

*Present your case, demands Jehovah; produce your compelling arguments, declares the King of Jacob. <sup>22</sup>Let them bring forth [their idols] and let [those idols] inform us about the future. Tell us what is about to happen [in the immediate future], so that we may consider these things and take note of their outcome; or make known to us events that will occur [in the distant future]. <sup>23</sup>Tell us the things that are still to come, so that we may know that you are gods. Indeed, do good, or do evil, so that all of us may be dismayed and filled with fear. <sup>24</sup>Look! You are nothing, and your works are utterly worthless; whoever chooses you [to be their god] is detestable. (Isa. 41:21-24)*

The Apostle Paul continues, *“We know that ... there is no God except one”* (vs. 4.) That is to say, the God of heaven who has revealed Himself in the Bible and in the Person of His Son Jesus Christ, He is God, and He is the only God. In Deuteronomy 4:35-36, Moses reminds Israel of the LORD’s revelation to them at Mount Sinai,

*You were shown these things so that you might know that Jehovah is God; besides him there is no other. <sup>36</sup>From heaven he made you hear his voice to*

*discipline you. On earth he showed you his great fire, and you heard his words from out of the fire.* (Deut. 4:35-36)

Once again, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Apostle Paul teaches that the LORD alone is God, in contrast to the *“so-called gods—whether in heaven or on earth—just as indeed there are many such gods and many such lords”* worshiped by the world (vs. 5.) Such “gods” are in fact are no gods and no lords, but in reality are merely angels who have fallen from the service of the living God and have become demons, as Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 10:20, *“But [what I am telling you is] that the sacrifices of the Gentiles are being offered to demons, not to God; and I do not want you to have communion with demons.”*

In contrast to the non-gods of the world, the Apostle again asserts, *“[there is] one God—the Father—from whom all things come and for whom we live”* (vs. 6.) The Christian knows the true God as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and subsequently, as our heavenly Father. The Christian also knows the true God to be the sovereign Creator of all things: *“from him and through him and unto him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen”* (Rom. 11:36.) The Christian acknowledges the true God to be the center of our lives and the purpose of our being—consider the testimony of a Christian man: “Before my conversion I was self-centered, after my conversion I became God-centered.”

Furthermore, the Christian knows *“one Lord—Jesus Christ—by whom all things exist and by whom we [live]”* (vs. 6.) Jesus Christ is the one Lord to whom God the Father has entrusted all authority (note Ephesians 1:20-22) and before whom all shall finally bow (note Philippians 2:10-11.)

the apostle Paul speaks of God the Father as having *“raised [Jesus] from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms,<sup>21</sup> far above every rule and authority and power and dominion and every title that can be given, not only in this present age but also in the coming age.<sup>22</sup> And he put all things in subjection under his feet, and he appointed him to be head over all things for the church.”* (Eph. 1:20-22)

*... God exalted him to the highest position and bestowed upon him the name that is above every name; <sup>10</sup>so that before the name Jesus [now possesses] “every knee should bow”—in heaven and on earth and under the earth—<sup>11</sup>“and every tongue confess” that Jesus Christ is LORD to the glory of God the Father.* (Phil. 2:9-11)

In writing, *“Jesus Christ [is the one] by whom we [live],”* Paul is confessing the fact that Jesus Christ is the One by whom the creation was brought into being and by whom the creation is sustained,

*... by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were*

*created by him and for him. <sup>17</sup>He is before all things, and by him all things hold together.* (Col. 1:16-17)

In addition to the initial work of creation, it is by Christ and in Christ Jesus that our relationship with God has been re-established and is sustained.

The apostle Paul writes that these truths about God and Christ are the sure knowledge we as Christians possess, having been revealed to us in God's own Word and by God's Holy Spirit. This is knowledge that has been lost or rejected by some who still insist on bearing the name of Christ even though they have denied His truth. Consider, for example, the Rev. Cecil Williams who ministers to San Francisco's largest congregation, including Jews, Muslims and Buddhists. In spite of, and even in defiance of, the revealed Word of God, Rev. Williams believes that "diversity and tolerance is essential to the church's survival." (*The Sheboygan Press*, 1/26/96)

Contrary to the heretical opinion of such as Rev. Williams, and many like him, the God-given truth is this: When you approach the LORD you must acknowledge that He alone is God. Here is the testimony of the New Testament: "*there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus*" (1 Tim. 2:5.)

## **II. When You Approach the LORD, You Must Acknowledge Your Own Lack of Personal Merit**

In the land of Canaan the LORD would come and reveal Himself to Israel; at those places of revelation the people were to erect an altar for the LORD. The altar Israel was to erect on such sites was to be nothing more than a simple mound of earth or a pile of stones. The people are forbidden to construct altars of hewn stone; as the LORD declares, "*If you make an altar of stone [for me], you shall not construct it out of hewn stones; for if you use a tool in building it you will defile it*" (vs. 25.)

What is the point of this instruction and prohibition? The command that Israel was not to contribute to the making of the altar by means of their own craftsmanship or handiwork is emphasizing the fact that we cannot contribute to our salvation. We must approach God based solely on what He has done for us. In terms of New Testament revelation the point of the command is this: A man is received into fellowship with God based upon the work of the Lord Jesus Christ, not the merits offered by the man himself, note Titus 3:4-5,

*... when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, <sup>5</sup>he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.* (Titus 3:4-5)

Consider some common attempts made by men in their effort to approach the LORD based on their own supposed merit. Some men seek to favorably compare

themselves with notorious sinners in an effort to appear just and thus acceptable before the LORD. By way of example, note the Pharisee described in Luke 18:9-12,

*To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: <sup>10</sup> "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup>The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup>I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'" (Lk.18:9-12)*

But the real question is, "How well do we compare with Christ the one true model of righteousness?" Only the Lord Jesus can give this testimony concerning His life:

*The one who sent me is with me; he has not forsaken me; because I always do the things that are pleasing to him. (Jn. 8:29)*

*... the prince of the world ... [finds] nothing in me (Jn. 14:30)* Referring here to the devil, Jesus declares that the devil has no case that he can bring against Him and no point at which he can seduce Jesus to sin.

Other men seek to offer unto God acts of religious devotion. Note again the Pharisee described in Luke 18:11-12, *"The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself ... <sup>12</sup>I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get'"* (Lk. 18:9-12.) But consider Jesus' description of what the LORD demands as the expected form of devotion:

*Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and integrity. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. (Matt. 23:23)*

Yet other men seek to redefine the law of God, by seeking to limit the law's demands merely to acts of transgression and not to our thoughts and motives. But consider the Lord's divine interpretation of the law of God:

*You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' <sup>22</sup>But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell. ...<sup>27</sup>"You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' <sup>28</sup>But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matt.5:21-22, 27-28)*

Contrary to the futile attempts of men to justify themselves before the LORD, the God-given truth is this: When you approach the LORD you must acknowledge your own lack of personal merit—and trust alone in the perfect righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ. Note the testimony of the apostle Paul:

*... whatever things were gain to me, these things I now regard as loss on account of Christ. <sup>8</sup>But much more than that, I regard all things as loss on account of the all-surpassing value of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, because of whom I have suffered the loss of all things. Indeed, I regard [all such things as] rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ, <sup>9</sup>and be found in him—not having my own righteousness which is derived from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God received by faith. (Phil. 3:7-9)*

### **III. When You Approach the LORD, You Must Acknowledge Your Moral Uncleanness**

The LORD further forbids the construction of steps ascending up to an elevated altar; the reason: *“so that your nakedness not be exposed upon it”* (vs.26b.)

From the time of Adam and Eve’s transgression, nakedness has become associated with the exposure of our sinful being, compare Genesis 3:9-10, *“Jehovah God called to the man, and asked, ‘Where are you?’ <sup>10</sup>And [the man] said, ‘I heard your voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; so I hid myself.’”* Nakedness is self-exposure. Since the time of mankind’s rebellion in the garden of Eden, our self-exposure has been the exposure of a sinful being in the presence of a holy God.

It is essential that we honestly acknowledge our moral uncleanness. But this is something that sinful man refuses to do willingly, consider the following examples. An elderly couple insisted, “We have never sinned.” As the man uttered those words his whole body literally trembled, as his conscience strained to cry out against him. A young man could not comprehend how he, “a good person,” could entertain such evil thoughts and do such wicked things—again, it was a matter of refusing to honestly acknowledge his moral uncleanness, his sinful human nature.

Consider David’s testimony inspired by the Holy Spirit: *“Surely I have been a sinner from birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me”* (Psl. 51:5.) Then, too, consider his prayer, *“Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me”* (Psl. 51:10.)

What is the testimony of the Lord Jesus concerning the heart of man?

*Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen and understand. <sup>11</sup>What goes into a man’s mouth does not make him ‘unclean,’ but what comes out of his*



*mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean'...<sup>18</sup>... the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man 'unclean.'<sup>19</sup>Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.<sup>20</sup>These are what make a man 'unclean'..." (Matt. 15:10-11,18-20)*

We must avail ourselves of the provision offered to us by God: the cleansing blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

*If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.<sup>9</sup>If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 Jn. 1:8-9)*

Contrary to the contemporary emphasis on self-esteem, self-acceptance, and positive self-image, the God-given truth is this: When we approach the LORD we must acknowledge our moral uncleanness—and trust in the perfect provision of Christ the Savior.

## **Conclusion**

How are we to approach the LORD? He provides us with these three guidelines: 1) we must acknowledge that He alone is God; 2) we must acknowledge our own lack of personal merit; and 3) we must acknowledge our moral uncleanness.

Having rightfully acknowledged these great spiritual truths, we must receive and rest in God's great provision for our salvation, the person and work of His own Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. As the writer to the Hebrews exhorts us,

*Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.<sup>15</sup>We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.<sup>16</sup>Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (Heb. 4:14-16)*