

Title: **HOW CAN I COME TO GOD'S ALTAR?**
Text: Matthew 5:21-26
Subject: *Christ Our Altar*
Date: Sunday Morning — March 27, 2005
Tape # Y-65b
Reading: *Psalms 43 and Isaiah 6:1-7*

Introduction:

How can I come to God's Altar? That is the question I want to answer in this message. Turn with me to Matthew 5:21-26. Let's read our Savior's words together.

(Matthew 5:21-26) "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: (22) But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire. (23) Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; (24) Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift. (25) Agree with thine adversary quickly, whiles thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. (26) Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing."

How are we to understand those words? What do they mean? I will show you clearly the meaning of our Lord's words in this passage in just a few minutes. But in order to do so, I want us to look at some other passages of Holy Scripture.

Since the fall of our father Adam, God has never allowed man to approach him without an altar and a sacrifice of blood. In the old days of the patriarchs, from Adam to Moses, the people of God built altars of stone, upon which they offered sacrifices to God. Whenever men drew near to God, whether to offer praise or to seek mercy, they built an altar and offered a sacrifice of blood. Even in those days, men of faith knew that God's

HOW CAN I COME TO GOD'S ALTAR?

justice could only be satisfied for sin by blood, even the blood of God's own Son, the Redeemer who must come into the world to put away sin.

ONE ALTAR

Then, when God called Moses up into the mount and spoke to him face to face he appointed one altar of sacrifice to be built, and appointed a place for that one altar in Israel alone. One spot was selected, and only one. All the rest of the world was left without an altar and without a sacrifice.

At first the altar was placed in the tabernacle; and later it was placed in the temple at Jerusalem. This was the only altar of sacrifice, by which men might approach unto God. From time to time, the prophets of God, by God's special command, raised up other altars. But for all others the rule was unbending – One altar! All other altars which men erected were erected in defiance of God's command; and their pretended sacrifices to God were an abomination to him.

As in the typical, legal dispensation, so it is now. There is but one altar upon which the holy Lord God meets sinners in mercy, only one altar upon which God can and will be worshipped; and that Altar is Christ.

(Hebrews 13:10) “We have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle.”

Proposition: The altar of sacrifice, in the tabernacle and in the temple, was typical of our Lord Jesus Christ, (his Person, his work, and his merit), as our Substitute before God. This is what God the Holy Spirit teaches us in Hebrews 13:10. – **The only access which sinners have to God, and the only acceptance we have with God is Christ our Altar.**

Our Altar is in heaven. We recognize no altar upon the earth. He who has an Altar in heaven needs no altar upon the earth. He who has an altar upon the earth has no altar in heaven. The Holy Spirit tells us this plainly.—“*We have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle.*”

We cannot approach God without a Mediator, without an Altar, and without a Sacrifice. We are all guilty men and women, our best and holiest acts are but the sinful deeds of sinful men, and our purest worship is but the

HOW CAN I COME TO GOD'S ALTAR?

worship of depraved hearts. Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? Not one. Before we can ever be accepted with God, before we can ever bring an acceptable offering or service to God, there must be a shedding of blood for the removal of our sin and guilt. We must come to God by way of the Altar and Sacrifice he has appointed, the Lord Jesus Christ.

There is no door of acceptance for us except through the merit of our great Surety, who laid down his life for us. **There is but one way by which we who are washed in the blood of Christ can offer unto God our prayers, our gifts, our praises, or our service, and that is by the Lord Jesus Christ, who alone is our Altar.** We must give ourselves to him, as living sacrifices to God, because only in him will God accept our reasonable service.

ONE ALTAR STILL

I. **There is still but one Altar by which sinful men may approach the Holy God.**

In the Old Testament there was but one altar of sacrifice by which men could ceremonially approach God; and that one altar finds its fulfillment in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ. The only altar, which can sanctify us and make us acceptable to God, is Christ.

In this Gospel Day all physical, carnal, ceremonial altars are instruments of idolatry. Use anything as an altar for acceptance with God other than Christ and you have no right to the merits of Christ. If you have another altar, your altar will drag your soul down to hell.

A. **There are many who think of the cross upon which our Savior died as an altar.**

I have heard it said that the cross was the altar upon which our Lord offered himself as a sacrifice for sin. But it is not so. That cross upon which our Lord was crucified was nothing more than the instrument of his torture. It is no more to be revered as an altar than the whips of Pilate's soldiers or the spit of those Jews, which defiled his holy face.

I would no more wear a cross around my neck than I would take the dagger a murderer used to kill my wife and wear it on my belt.

HOW CAN I COME TO GOD'S ALTAR?

B. Sometimes men talk of the heart as an altar to God.

I know what they mean. They mean that sincerity makes our service to God acceptable. It is true that there must be sincerity in our service to God, or it will never be acceptable. But sincerity itself will never make our most solemn devotion acceptable to God. Nothing but blood will ever make a man acceptable to God. Only the blood of Christ, shed for the atonement of our sin can make us accepted with God.

C. It is common for men to talk of having a family altar.

It is good to worship God in your home, with your family. But your family devotions will never make you acceptable to God.

The church of God is our family, and we have a family altar. His name is Jesus Christ our Substitute.

D. In many churches, the table used for serving the Lord's Supper is looked upon as an altar.

But the Scriptures never speak in such a way. The table spread before you is a table of communion; but it is not a table of sacrifice. It is a place of remembrance, but not a place of atonement. It is a solemn feast, but not a sanctifying feast.

E. Perhaps the most deceptive of all idolatrous notions is the idea that there is an altar of salvation at the front of the church.

You can no more obtain salvation by walking down the aisle of a Baptist church to an altar than the papists can by making a pilgrimage to Rome and climbing the stairs to the pope's seat of infamy.

There is but one Altar. There is but one place of salvation. That Altar is Christ. He is God's salvation. God only meets with men in his Son. Christ is the Altar of God's making, not man's.

(Exodus 20:23-26) "Ye shall not make with me gods of silver, neither shall ye make unto you gods of gold. (24) **An altar of earth** thou shalt make unto me, and shalt sacrifice

HOW CAN I COME TO GOD'S ALTAR?

thereon thy burnt offerings, and thy peace offerings, thy sheep, and thine oxen: in all places where I record my name I will come unto thee, and I will bless thee. (25) And **if thou wilt make me an altar of stone, thou shalt not build it of hewn stone**: for **if thou lift up thy tool upon it, thou hast polluted it**. (26) Neither shalt thou go up by steps unto mine altar, that thy nakedness be not discovered thereon.”

- Christ is our Altar of earth.
- Christ is our Altar of stone.
- Christ is the Altar of God's making.—“*If thou lift up thy tool upon it, thou hast polluted it.*”
- Christ is the Altar with no stairs for men to climb.

All forms of carnal worship, all forms of physical things that men call “holy,” all attempts to place any merit of any kind or any reverence of any kind in material things is base idolatry (Ex. 20:23; John 4:23-24; Phil. 3:3).

(Exodus 20:23) “Ye shall not make with me gods of silver, neither shall ye make unto you gods of gold.”

(John 4:23-24) “But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. (24) God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship *him* in spirit and in truth.”

(Philippians 3:3) “For we are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh.”

Let us once and for all put away every form of idolatry from our midst (2 Kings 18:4).

(2 Kings 18:4) “He removed the high places, and brake the images, and cut down the groves, and brake in pieces the brazen serpent that Moses had made: for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it: and he called it Nehushtan.”

HOW CAN I COME TO GOD'S ALTAR?

TYPE FULFILLED

II. Christ our Altar fulfils all that was symbolically portrayed in the Old Testament altar of sacrifice.

Moses describes the altar of sacrifice for us in Exodus 27:1-8. All that the altar of the tabernacle and the temple signified typically is fulfilled for us really and truly in the Lord Jesus Christ.

(Exodus 27:1-8) “And thou shalt make an altar *of* **shittim wood**, five cubits long, and five cubits broad; the altar shall be **foursquare**: and the height thereof *shall be* three cubits. (2) And thou shalt make the **horns** of it upon the **four corners** thereof: his horns shall be of the same: and thou shalt **overlay it with brass**. (3) And thou shalt make his pans to receive his ashes, and his shovels, and his basins, and his fleshhooks, and his firepans: all the vessels thereof thou shalt make *of* brass. (4) And thou shalt make for it a grate of network *of* brass; and upon the net shalt thou make four brazen rings in the four corners thereof. (5) And thou shalt put it under the compass of the altar beneath, that the net may be even to the midst of the altar. (6) And thou shalt make staves for the altar, staves *of* shittim wood, and overlay them with brass. (7) And the staves shall be put into the rings, and the staves shall be upon the two sides of the altar, to bear it. (8) Hollow with boards shalt thou make it: as it was showed thee in the mount, so shall they make *it*.”

A. The altar of sacrifice typified Christ in the use for which it was made.

1. The altar sanctified the gift, the sacrifice, which was placed upon it, and made it acceptable to God (Matt. 23:19). — Christ sanctifies us. He makes the believing soul and our sacrifices acceptable to God (1 Peter 2:5).

(Matthew 23:19) “*Ye* fools and blind: for whether *is* greater, the gift, or the altar that sanctifieth the gift?”

HOW CAN I COME TO GOD'S ALTAR?

(1 Peter 2:5) “Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.”

2. There was **one altar for all the people**, one altar for all their sins, one altar for all their sacrifices. — There is one Altar for sinners; and that Altar is Christ.
3. The altar **bore the violent heat of divine wrath**, so that the sinner might go free. While the fire consumed the sacrifice on the altar, the altar itself was not destroyed.

Even so, Christ our Altar bore the violent heat of God's wrath. He poured out his soul unto death for our sins as a sacrifice to God of a sweet-smelling savor. Yet, he is not destroyed. This sacrifice, rather than being consumed by the wrath of God, has consumed the wrath of God (Rom. 8:1).

4. The altar was **a place of refuge for guilty men**.
 - Adonijah (1 Kings 1:50).
 - Joab (1 Kings 2:28-30).

What else can a guilty man do but take hold of the horns of the altar? Christ alone is the Refuge for guilty sinners. — **There were four horns on the altar**.

These four horns represented the universality of Christ's redemption, reaching to the four corners of the earth. — “*Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.*”

You will be wise to lay hold of the horns of the Altar, and plead for God's mercy.

- The Grace Of God.
- The Merits Of Christ.
- The Promise Of God.
- The Invitations And Commands Of The Gospel (Isa. 43:25-26).

(Isaiah 43:25-26) “I, *even I, am* he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy

HOW CAN I COME TO GOD'S ALTAR?

sins. (26) Put me in remembrance: let us plead together: declare thou, that thou mayest be justified.”

B. The altar of Sacrifice was typical of Christ in its position.

The moment the sinner entered the door of the tabernacle, the first, the most important, most prominent thing he saw was that huge brazen altar. As he went into approach God the first thing he saw was the altar. As he left the tabernacle, and went out to live in the world, the last thing he saw was the altar.

1. Christ is pre-eminent. All fullness dwells in him.
2. In order to approach God, we must come by the Altar, Christ Jesus (Heb. 7:25).
3. As we attempt to live in the world, we must live with the Altar of Sacrifice, the Lord Jesus Christ, ever before our heart's eyes.
4. Every relationship in life is affected by this Altar.

C. The altar of sacrifice was typical of Christ in its form.

1. The altar was four square.

- The Fullness of God's Love (Eph. 3:19).
- The Fullness of God's Covenant (2 Sam. 23:5).
- The Fullness of God's Grace (Eph. 3:8).
- The Stability of All Things in Christ (Heb. 13:8).

2. There were no steps going up to the altar.

- There is no possibility of approaching God by the steps of your own works.
- There are no steps of preparation before you come to the Altar.
- When the priest approached the altar, no nakedness could be seen. – His robe completely covered him.

3. The altar was completely covered with blood.

- Sin can only be put away by blood (Heb. 9:22).
- Justice must be satisfied.

HOW CAN I COME TO GOD'S ALTAR?

D. The altar of sacrifice was typical of Christ in its materials.

1. The shittim wood represents the incorruptible humanity of Christ.
2. The brass represents the eternal Godhead of Christ.
3. The shittim wood overlaid with brass represents the eternal duration of the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice.

E. And the fire, which continually burned upon the altar of sacrifice, is also typical of Christ. — That perpetual flame represents:

- The eternal love of Christ for his people.
- The zeal of Christ for the glory of God.
- The purifying of God's elect by the blood of Christ.
- The unending intercession of Christ for us.

COME TO THE ALTAR

III. Now, let's turn back to Matthew 5. As we read these words of our blessed Savior, he tells us how we must and can come to God's Altar?

Christ is the only Altar. — Christ is the appointed Altar. — Christ is a living Altar. — Christ is a lasting Altar. — Christ is an accessible Altar. — Christ is a saving, sin-atoning Altar.

But how can I come to God's Altar? I am a needy sinner and need to come to God's Altar for forgiveness. And the only way I can offer up my gifts of praise and thanksgiving to my God is upon his Altar. But how can I come to God's Altar? Our Lord Jesus tells me exactly how I can and must come to God's Altar in Matthew 5:21-26.

(Matthew 5:21-26) "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: (22) But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire. (23) Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee;

HOW CAN I COME TO GOD'S ALTAR?

(24) Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift. (25) Agree with thine adversary quickly, whiles thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. (26) Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing."

"THEREFORE"

Let's look particularly at verses 23-26. The opening word, "*Therefore*," points us back to what our Lord has just stated in verse 22. — "*Whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire.*"

The word fool is found many times in Holy Scripture; but the exact word that is here translated "*fool*" (μωρον), from which we get our word "*moron*," is only used in one other place in the New Testament — 1 Corinthians 3:18. In that passage the Holy Spirit tells us that the Lord Jesus Christ is the only foundation God has laid, the Foundation upon which we must be built. Then, in verse 18, we read, — "*Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise.*"

The word "*fool*" (both here and in Matthew 5:22) means more than we commonly mean by "*moron*," "*stupid*," "*ignorant*," and "*senseless*." The word means "*godless*." — If we would be spiritually wise, we must take our place before God as fools, godless sinners, in danger of hell fire without Christ.

BE RECONCILED

(Matthew 5:23-24) "Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; (24) Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift."

"*If thou bring thy gift to the altar...first be reconciled to thy brother*" (vv. 23-24). — Without question, grace does what law can never do. Grace

HOW CAN I COME TO GOD'S ALTAR?

actually causes people to love each other. The law requires that we love one another, but it can never produce love. In fact, as the Pharisees attested by their conduct, those who claim to live by the law commonly manifest the judgmental hatred our Lord has just condemned. Those who give up all hopes of law righteousness and trust Christ alone for righteousness are taught by the grace they experience to love one another (Gal. 5:22-23).

As we bring our gifts and sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving to our God by Christ Jesus and recall some offence we have given to a brother, believers (men and women who walk in the Spirit and so fulfil the law of Christ) seek to be reconciled to the one they have offended. There is a true, sweet union in Christ. All who are in Christ are one with Christ and one with one another. When we come to him in adoration, love, and worship, we come with all our brethren (Heb. 12:22-24). As Robert Hawker put it, "His members come to him as the Head and bring with us, by faith, the whole body in our arms to the Lord (John 17:21. 1 Cor. 12:25-27)."

Our Lord's words may be properly applied to the necessity of brotherly love; but that is not what is taught here. The context points us in another, higher, more profitable direction. Our Savior is, in this entire chapter, showing us the demands of God's holy law and our complete inability to meet those demands. Is he not here telling us that we cannot come to God except upon that one Altar he has made (Ex. 20:24-26; 25:22), which is Christ?

THE OFFENDED BROTHER

The Brother we have offended above all others is God our Savior. He is that Brother with whom we have been angry without a cause. Unbelief is despising him, saying to him "*Raca,*" "*thou fool*" (1 Cor. 1:18-25; 1 John 5:10).

(1 Corinthians 1:18-25) "For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God. (19) For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. (20) Where *is* the wise? where *is* the scribe? where *is* the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? (21) For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not

HOW CAN I COME TO GOD'S ALTAR?

God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. (22) For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: (23) But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; (24) But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God. (25) Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men."

(1 John 5:10) "He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself: he that believeth not God hath made him a liar; because he believeth not the record that God gave of his Son."

There is no coming to God until we are reconciled to him in and by Christ, reconciled to Christ as our only God and Savior, our only atonement for sin, our only righteousness, and our only redemption. Once we are reconciled to Christ our Brother, once we trust him alone for acceptance with God, we may and can and do come to God upon the merits of Christ, and he accepts us, and our gifts, by the merits of his dear Son (1 Pet. 2:5).

(1 Peter 2:5) "Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ."

OUR ADVERSARY

(Matthew 5:25-26) "Agree with thine adversary quickly, whiles thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. (26) Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing."

The words of verse 24, "*First be reconciled to thy brother,*" and the words of verse 25, "*Agree with thine adversary quickly,*" obviously refer to the same person. Our "*brother*" and our "*adversary,*" in this passage, speak of the same person.

Those words simply cannot be applied to a mere earthly adversary. Try as

HOW CAN I COME TO GOD'S ALTAR?

we may, there is no way in the world that you can agree with an adversary or get an adversary to agree with you. Besides, if I am your brother in Christ, I cannot be your adversary and you cannot be mine. Brothers are friends, not adversaries.

These are verses, which have been a source of great trouble for many sensitive souls, simply because they have been so terribly misinterpreted, are truly a source of great consolation and joy, when we rightly understand them.

This passage is not at all talking about us suing one another for mercy. Our Lord is telling us how we can and must, as ignorant, godless sinners, in danger of hell fire, sue for mercy at the throne of grace.

Yes, our adversary, the devil, seeks to destroy us (1 Pet. 5:8); and many are in league with him as adversaries to our souls. It is good to try to quiet them and live peaceably, as much as is possible, with such men (Rom. 12:18). But it is utterly impossible for us to agree with such adversaries or persuade them to agree with us. Our Lord must, therefore, be speaking of something else and of someone else.

An adversary is not always one who is intent upon hurting or ruining us. In Exodus 23:22 the Lord our God declares, "*I will be an adversary to thine adversaries.*" Christ, our Brother, the sinners' Friend, is an Adversary for us against our enemies! But there comes a day in the life of every eternally loved, elect and blood bought sinner when his eye "*is dim by reason of sorrow*" (Job 17:7). In that day, when a sinner is convinced of his sin, the Lord stands as an adversary, with his bow bent like an enemy, who pours out his fury like fire (Lam. 2:4). In that hour of sorrow, the needy soul is sweetly forced by omnipotent grace to cry in the depths of his soul for an advocate with God, saying, as Job did, "*O that one might plead for a man with God, as a man pleadeth for his neighbor!*" {friend} (Job 16:21).

"BE RECONCILED"

As an adversary, the Lord our God has a controversy with his people by reason of sin. Here our blessed Savior and Advocate, the Lord Jesus, tells us to make up the breach quickly while we are in the way. That is to say, "Be reconciled to God quickly by Christ, who is himself the Way, the only way of reconciliation." The only way a sinner can be reconciled to God is to

HOW CAN I COME TO GOD'S ALTAR?

agree with him when he appears as our adversary, threatening judgment. Agree with everything he says...

- About Himself.
- About You.
- About Righteousness.
- About Satisfaction.
- About Salvation.

Christ is our peace. It is written, "*This man shall be the peace*" (Micah 5:5). — "*God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself*" (2 Cor. 5:19). — "*There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus*" (Rom. 8:1). But to those who live and die in enmity against God, Christ will soon come as the Judge. Into his hands the ungodly shall be delivered (John 5:22). Christ the great Judge shall send his angels to execute his wrath against his enemies (Matt. 13:41-42). And the prison into which they shall be cast forever is the place of everlasting darkness, torment, and separation from God called "*Hell*" and "*the lake of fire*" (2 Pet. 2:4; Rev. 20:15).

(Hebrews 4:16) "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need."

(Psalms 26:6-7) "I will wash mine hands in innocency: so will I compass thine altar, O LORD: (7) That I may publish with the voice of thanksgiving, and tell of all thy wondrous works."

Amen.