

**Grace to You** :: *esp Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

### **Ask Jesus Into Your Heart**

Scripture: Revelation 3:20

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One doesn't simply invite himself over to the White House for a night in the Lincoln Bedroom, or into Buckingham Palace for tea with the Queen. No matter how earnest your desire or assertive your request, you will be denied access.

And that's no surprise to most people. We understand that monarchs and heads of state require a certain level of exclusivity, and we generally respect those boundaries.

However, we don't have that understanding when it comes to the Lord and His heavenly kingdom. Too many people assume their entrance into God's family is a function of their own earnest desire. Phrases like "Asking Jesus into my heart" or "Accepting Jesus as my personal Savior" are emblematic of a mentality that carelessly reverses the roles in salvation. And that mentality is widespread in the church—today those phrases are some of the most common Christian clichés, ushering in what you might call the era of the altar call.

During my formative years as a Christian, I became so familiar with these expressions that I never seriously thought about their meaning. I always assumed the idea was biblical, since it seemed to echo Jesus' words in Revelation 3:20: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me."

### **Knocking on the Door of Your Heart?**

Jesus is not a jilted suitor shut out in the cold by those who reject Him. As Paul Washer once said, "If He wants to kick the door down, He'll kick it down." Additionally, the door does not represent the hearts of all people but rather the particular church that Christ's message was aimed at. John MacArthur rightly points out:

Though this verse has been used in countless tracts and evangelistic messages to depict Christ's knocking on the door of the sinner's heart, it is broader than that. The door on which Christ is knocking is not the door to a single human heart, but to the Laodicean church. Christ was outside this apostate church and wanted to come in—something that could only happen if the people repented. . . . The Lord Jesus Christ urged them to repent and have fellowship with Him before the night of judgment fell and it was too late forever. [1] John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Revelation 1-11* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999) 140.

Not only is Jesus not waiting at the doorstep of your soul, He is also not waiting for you to offer an invitation, or even respond to His invitation. The language of Scripture is that of compulsion. Paul preached, "God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent" (Acts 17:30). When the apostles preached the gospel their messages ended with the strong commands to repent

and believe (Acts 2:38; 3:19).

Finally, while it is true that Jesus promises to reside in believers (John 15:4), a drastic change must happen before that can take place. The unbelieving heart is dead, hard, and cold to spiritual things. Before Christ can reside in one's heart through the Spirit, He has to exchange the heart of stone for a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26).

When you stop to think about it, asking Jesus into your heart goes against the nature of the gospel, and begins one's new spiritual life with a poor understanding of what has just occurred.

### **Who Needs Acceptance?**

The sloppiness of modern evangelistic clichés is also painfully evident in the phrase “accepting Jesus as your personal Savior.” A brief moment of reflection should be all that's needed to identify the problem. On the day of judgment, it is *we* who will need Christ's acceptance. To say that we accept Christ dangerously assumes that we sit in judgment and Christ stands on trial.

Our evangelistic terminology needs to reflect the knowledge of our proper place with respect to Christ when it comes to gaining *His* acceptance. Jesus clarifies who needs to accept whom when He says,

Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to me on that day, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name cast out demons, and in your name perform many miracles?” And then will I declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from me, you who practice lawlessness.” (Matthew 7:21-23)

There is an eternal difference between you accepting Christ and Christ accepting you. I've often argued that the thief on the cross was a very good theologian because he had no trouble recognizing who needed whose acceptance. Perhaps, like me, you bought into the cliché without thinking it through. Whatever the case, it's always dangerous to assume that Christian slogans equate with biblical truth.

### **Making Jesus Lord?**

Modern evangelistic outreach regularly follows the call to “accept Jesus into your heart” with the phrase “and make Him your Lord and Savior.” Sadly, when I first encountered the language of contemporary altar calls, I never stopped to ask what Jesus' job description entailed before I “made Him Lord and Savior.”

God's Word is abundantly clear on this point. Christ's Lordship has never been contingent on anybody's willingness to grant Him that title. Jesus *is* Lord. And your present belief has no bearing on that eternal reality. He is Lord of Christians, atheists, and everything else in the universe—whether they bow their knee in repentance or burn in a hellfire of regret:

Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him

the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:8–11)

According to Paul, “Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness?” (Romans 6:16) Using this Spirit-inspired logic, you don’t need to *make* Jesus Lord of your life, you simply need to demonstrate that He *is* Lord of your life by submitting to Him in repentance, faith, and obedience.

### **The Altar Call and Its Wayward Offspring**

There is nothing wrong with evangelism that impresses upon the sinner the urgency to repent and believe. But formulaic altar calls have spawned all sorts of reckless Christianese and faulty views of salvation. They are the tragic legacy of Charles Finney, a nineteenth-century evangelist who denied the sovereignty of God in calling and regenerating sinners.

Finney’s desire to see greater numbers of converts at his meetings led him to invent the “anxious bench.” Finney was convinced that revival hinged on the preacher and his methods. The anxious bench was one of Finney’s favorite preaching tactics. It provided vacant seating at the front of the church where those who were worried about eternal matters could sit, be specifically preached at, and personally converse with the preacher after the meeting.

While you wouldn’t see that exact pattern repeated today, the pragmatic principles are still at work in modern altar calls and evangelistic crusades. It was the walk to the front that set the wheels in motion. And humanly engineered means of producing converts have been rampant ever since.

### **Using Appropriate Biblical Language**

In stark contrast, God’s sovereign means of salvation have never changed. He draws the sinner through His call (John 6:44; Romans 8:28), convicts the sinner by the Holy Spirit (John 16:8), regenerates the sinner by His power (Ezekiel 36:26; 2 Corinthians 5:17), and sees the sinner through the lens of Christ’s atoning work (2 Corinthians 5:21).

The preacher should never presume to take upon himself any of the Holy Spirit’s responsibilities. Instead, God has chosen preaching as the means of proclaiming Christ crucified and calling for the response that *He* demands—repentance from sin (Acts 17:30–31) and faith toward Christ (Ephesians 2:8–9; Acts 20:20–21).

Rather than asking sinners to accept Christ we should call them to plead for *His* acceptance. Rather than telling sinners to “make Jesus Lord” we should call them to submit to His lordship. And instead of calling sinners to a saving altar, we should entrust them to a sovereign Savior.

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