



Don Worden

Working a few hours each day in a secular setting is a new experience for me, not done since my college days. This has given me a new perspective on how the world works, and the challenge of relating to other worldviews.

Recently this was driven home more forcefully. I met a weatherman whom I have admired for many years, and did a woodburning of two of his dogs. I took the finished project to him at the TV station.

What surprised me was how quickly he shared his blanket criticism of all “organized religion,” saying organized religion has been responsible for most wars in recent centuries (were Nazism and Communism religions?). He wanted to make sure I was not there to discuss *that* subject with him! I have been unable to get him and his reaction out of my mind.

Pictured above are Carolyn and me, along with two of our daughters, Donna Neff and Deana Alexander, at the YMCA Camp of the Rockies, Estes Park, Colorado, attending a family reunion in July of 2010. When we’re not vacationing, Carolyn and I live in Dalton, Ohio.

BIBLE READING: Genesis 3:1-7

I recently met a man whom I have admired on television, a legend among Ohio weathermen, and an advocate for animals. We met at a dog show and I did a wood-burned portrait of a pair of his dogs.

When he found out that I had been very involved with “organized” religion, his reaction surprised me. He said he had been a believer at one time, sang in the choir and “did the whole routine.” I didn’t inquire what the “whole routine” meant to him. He said most of the wars in the past several centuries have been religious wars, and that “organized religion” has been responsible for more death and destruction than almost anything else.

What do you say in response to such an outburst? I chose not to respond for two reasons: First, we were not there to discuss religion; and second, he really caught me off guard. But I have not been able to get his outburst out of my mind.

Later, I thought about the Garden of Eden and the deception of the serpent that started it all. Isn’t that deception still going on? Yes, organized religion is probably responsible for wars, famines, and human misery. But why? Deception.

The answer is not religion, but Jesus Christ and him crucified. That is what Paul told the Corinthians—that was all he would talk about! The same should be true for us. If a person is genuinely introduced to Jesus Christ, it will help make the doubts and confusion disappear.

SONG: All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Father, help me to follow Paul’s example and talk about only Jesus and him crucified, the only hope for a watching world.

—Don Worden

BIBLE READING: Genesis 4:1-16

You could call the death of Abel the first casualty over religion. We don't really know much about Abel's worship—except that it was pleasing to God, and Cain's was not. Scholars have speculated for centuries about this conflict. Perhaps the problem with Cain was that he was proud of his gardening skills, and in that spirit presented them to God. Pride has no place in worship.

Yesterday I mentioned a man I have admired who was quite vocal about his agnosticism and rejection of organized religion. Only he knows the roots of his rejection of religion; those he did not share. What we do know is that often pride and personal preference can cloud our worship—to the point of becoming a hindrance—if we are not careful.

The Bible offers some specific statements about pure religion. “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (James 1:27). “He has showed you. O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

Pride in human achievement has no place in true worship. Treating God as he should be treated, in all sincerity and humility, is a good starting point. Would that have made a difference for the man I met? I don't know, but it would be a step in the right direction.

SONG: To God Be the Glory

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Father, teach me how to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with you today.

—Don Worden

BIBLE READING: Exodus 10:21-26

The last time Moses stood before Pharaoh, Pharaoh gave an interesting answer. "It's alright for you to go worship your God, but just don't go too far and don't get too carried away." Be calm, cool, and collected; stay prim and proper!

The problem is, placing limits on worship may not be what God wants! Eugene Peterson puts it this way: "You have to let us take our sacrificial animals and offerings with us so we can sacrifice them in worship to our God...we don't know just what will be needed until we get there" (vv. 25-26 *The Message*).

Moses might have overstated the case here. Yes, they wanted to take everything, and suggesting that they did not know what God would require makes a good story. And it makes an interesting point pertinent for us today. If we are going to worship God in spirit and in truth, we must be ready to offer him anything and everything he—God—might demand.

We might call that "full surrender" or some similar term. It means if we are to truly worship, we dare not hold anything back. When we sing songs with words like "all to Jesus I surrender, all to him I freely give...." And, "I surrender all...I surrender all...." Do we mean it?

If we do, it should go a long way toward reaching those who have—for whatever reason—rejected organized religion. May God help us be equipped to minister to such individuals.

SONG: I Surrender All

PRAAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, help me to be humble before you and give you the honor and glory due as a part of my personal and corporate worship.

—Don Worden

BIBLE READING: John 14:1-7

During college I worked at a wholesale furniture store. One of the other employees was a young college student. When we discussed the subject of religion, it was hard for her to understand that I, as a committed Christian, might be biased against other religions and other “roads to God....”

Tolerance and compromise are today’s virtues. I think my new friend might have been put off by perceived arbitrary intolerance and bigotry, or bias. It is easy to assume positive faith in Christ is arrogance, bigotry, or intolerance. Our modern world values tolerance and compromise above all else.

Misunderstanding about why I reject other “ways to God” sometimes results in awkward moments. I try to stay out of such arguments, and focus on Jesus and his message of love and salvation. Retired missionary Howard Moore said many years ago, “We don’t talk down or against Buddhism, or other Chinese religions. We exalt Jesus Christ, and let the Holy Spirit do the rest.”

The challenge we western Christians face: To present a clear and convincing message of Christ, without alienating the folks we are trying to reach! That’s why I chose not to argue with my weather-man friend. Hopefully, someday, if God so chooses, I may have the opportunity to raise the subject in a non-threatening way with him.

SONG: I Love to Tell the Story

PRAAYER SUGGESTION: Father, help me to always be ready with an answer for the hope that is within me. Prepare my heart and mind to be able to share it with love and compassion.

—Don Worden

BIBLE READING: 1 Samuel 5:1-8

In this passage, the Ark of the Covenant, as a symbol of God's presence, does some amusing things, like causing the image of Dagon to fall over and eventually lose its head.

We would never make an idol of something we have made—or would we? In the Old Testament, before the Babylonian captivity, the Israelites were prone to going after the gods of their neighbors, even to the point of human sacrifice and worse. We would never do that—or would we?

Those who seek a warmer climate in winter are sometimes referred to as “sun worshipers.” For some, the god is materialism in one of its various forms. We assume we are material beings with the possibility of a spiritual experience. In reality, we are spiritual beings, having a material experience. The void can only be filled with spiritual reality.

You have seen the bumper sticker, “He who dies with the most toys wins.” The real truth is in the one that says, “He who dies with the most toys—still dies.” I heard a man say that all he wanted was just the land that adjoined his. Think about that for a minute. Where would it end? How many of us spend our lives, our time chasing “toys” or just the land that touches ours?

Jesus said, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy...for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:19, 21).

SONG: Be Still, My Soul

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Father, may we realize anew and afresh that you are our source. Teach us to rely upon you for our direction and guidance today.

—Don Worden

Friday

January 14

Idolatry—in Our “Modern Society?”

BIBLE READING: Exodus 20:1-6

Webster's *New Collegiate Dictionary* defines idol as “a representation or symbol of an object of worship—a false god; a likeness of something—pretender, imposter; a form or appearance visible but without substance—a phantom, a lifeless idol; an object of extreme devotion—a movie idol; or a false conception—fallacy.” In short, anything that stands between the believer and God.

Anything between God and me is, or can be, an idol. The closer the object is to me or you, the more things it crowds out. Take a simple penny and move it toward your eye. The closer it gets, the more things it crowds out. The same can be said for possessions, a job, a hobby, or a sports team. The closer and more intensely we observe or become fascinated with it or them, the more danger of that thing becoming an idol.

I had a teacher who used a series of simple couplets or poems, one of which goes something like this: “*If you keep your nose to the grindstone rough, and keep it down there long enough; three things your world will soon compose: you, the grindstone and your blistered nose.*”

We smile, but there is a kernel of truth there. What has captured your imagination? What challenges might you face that force God to the sidelines of your heart and mind? With the coming of 24-hour TV news, cell phones, e-mail, iPods, and now, social networks, is there ever a time when you can “unplug” and wait quietly for God’s still, small voice?

SONG: In the Garden

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Father, help me learn to listen for your still, small voice, amid the noise and confusion of our world.

—Don Worden

BIBLE READING: Psalm 150

We started this week thinking about the gentleman whom I have watched and admired on TV for years, only to learn that he is an agnostic and seems bitter against “organized religion.” How do you get from there to worship that would be meaningful for someone like that?

I could point him to books like McDowell’s *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, or Lee Strobel’s *The Case for Christ*, but would he read with an open mind? Someone that bitter against religion—for whatever reason—probably has a closed mind on the subject. But I can pray and ask the Holy Spirit to work on his heart. Perhaps that’s the best course of action.

The point is to exalt Christ, and allow the Holy Spirit to begin to elevate the status of God’s own Son, Jesus Christ and his sacrifice. “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:14, 15). The song writer captured the truth when he wrote, “Jesus, Jesus, Jesus... there’s just something about that name....” The way to reach people is to put them in touch with Jesus. It’s not arguments or rhetoric, but something like “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so....”

God has used music—from the majesty of Handel’s *Messiah* to simple gospel songs—to soften the hearts of many. I pray that God will use whatever means would be most effective to help my new friend come to him.

SONG: The Love of God

PRAAYER SUGGESTION: Father, you are the hound of heaven. Thank you for your never ending love that continues to soften hearts today.

—Don Worden