

October 15  
Lesson 7 (NIV)

# OBEYING

## GOD'S LAW

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 119:49-64

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Exodus 20

### EXODUS 20:18-26

<sup>18</sup> When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance <sup>19</sup> and said to Moses, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.”

<sup>20</sup> Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.”

<sup>21</sup> The people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was.

<sup>22</sup> Then the LORD said to Moses, “Tell the Israelites this: ‘You have seen for yourselves that I have spoken to you from heaven: <sup>23</sup> Do not make any gods to be alongside me; do not make for yourselves gods of silver or gods of gold.

<sup>24</sup> “Make an altar of earth for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, your sheep and goats and your cattle. Wherever I cause my name to be honored, I will come to you and bless you. <sup>25</sup> If you make an altar of stones for me, do not build it with dressed stones, for you will defile it if you use a tool on it. <sup>26</sup> And do not go up to my altar on steps, or your private parts may be exposed.’”

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### KEY VERSE

*Wherever I cause my name to be honored, I will come to you and bless you.—Exodus 20:24*

### LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Describe the Israelites' reaction to God's presence at Sinai.
2. Explain what a proper fear of the Lord signifies.
3. Write a prayer that confesses disobedience to God and asks him for strength to resist the temptation that leads to such disobedience.

### LESSON OUTLINE

#### Introduction

- A. Unwelcome Guest
- B. Lesson Background

#### I. Fearing the Lord (EXODUS 20:18-21)

- A. Appealing to Moses (vv. 18, 19)  
*“John Thomas Smith . . .”*
- B. Answering the People (v. 20)
- C. Approaching the Lord (v. 21)

#### II. Hearing the Lord (EXODUS 20:22-26)

- A. False Gods (vv. 22, 23)  
*No Other Gods?*
- B. True Worship (vv. 24-26)

#### Conclusion

- A. Words That Still Ring True
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

## Introduction

### A. Unwelcome Guest

On September 19, 2014, Omar J. Gonzalez, an Iraq War veteran with post-traumatic stress disorder, jumped over the White House's fence and entered the building's front door. He was quickly stopped by security officers and arrested. Gonzalez was carrying a knife, and he had two hatchets, a machete, and 800 rounds of ammunition in his vehicle nearby. In June 2015, when he was sentenced to 17 months in prison, Gonzalez said, "I never meant to harm anyone." At the time of his arrest, he said he wanted to warn the president that the atmosphere was collapsing.

We would never presume to barge into the presence of a world leader in such a way. We would want our meeting to communicate the respect the office deserves. The same is true with God.

### B. Lesson Background

Our lesson text today covers the Israelites' response to God's declaring the Ten Commandments in [Exodus 20:1-17](#). (You may also have heard the Ten Commandments called The Decalogue, meaning "ten words.") Our passage is part of the record of God's covenant with the Israelites. He had told them previously through Moses, "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" ([Exodus 19:5, 6](#)).

Within the Ten Commandments are the fundamentals concerning how the people of God were to obey him. Obedience is required of God's covenant people; in fact, a disobedient covenant people is a contradiction in terms—now as then.

## I. Fearing the Lord

([EXODUS 20:18-21](#))

### A. Appealing to Moses (vv. 18, 19)

**18. When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance**

The printed text for today begins the same way last week's text from [Exodus 19](#) began—with an impressive display of sounds and sights including *thunder* and *lightning* and the sound of *the trumpet*. The presence of smoke on Mount Sinai was also a part of that description. The people's reaction here is similar to what it was then; they "trembled" earlier (compare [Exodus 19:16](#)), and here they move away from where they have been standing and stand *at a distance*.

Having just heard the Lord's voice followed by the manifestation of his power on the mountain, they are terrified. We are not told exactly how far the people move, but it must be enough that they feel less threatened.

#### What Do You Think?

In what ways have you seen dramatic presentations of the gospel to be most effective?

#### Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding Good Friday programs

Regarding Easter programs

Regarding Christmas programs

Other

**19. and said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die."**

One gets the impression that the people's tone at this point is one of pleading with Moses that he become their intercessor or mediator. They cannot handle the intensity of hearing God speak so directly with them; they fear for their lives if he should do so. Of course, they have already heard that voice—and survived. But the experience has overwhelmed them with a feeling of absolute dread.

## HOW TO SAY IT

Assyrians Uh-sear-e-unz.

Decalogue dek-uh-log.

Deuteronomy Due-ter-ahn-uh-me.

Emmanuel E-man-you-el.

Israelites Iz-ray-el-ites.

Leviticus Leh-vit-ih-kus.

Sinai Sigh-nye or Sigh-nay-eye.

### "JOHN THOMAS SMITH . . ."

"Once upon a time," as stories go, two-parent families represented the norm. Typically, fathers would go off to work in the morning and come home at night, while mothers stayed home to care for the house and the children. Many fathers found that their after-work tasks included administering discipline to the children for whatever trouble they had been into during the day. During the day, if a child misbehaved, he might hear his mother say, "Johnny, just wait until your father gets home!" If the misdeed was moderately serious, the child's middle name might be added: "John Thomas . . ."

If the misbehavior was very serious, or if the mother had become exasperated by a series of minor misdeeds, Johnny might hear, "John Thomas Smith, you just wait till your father gets home, and then you will be in *real* trouble!" The child would have time to contemplate what that threat could entail. The child's fear of the father's wrath could be a sign of respect, if the father was a just father. It could also be a sign of terror, if the father was prone to excessive discipline.

The Israelites who stood before Moses at the base of the mountain seem to have thought of God as a terror-inducing tyrant. Perhaps, like errant children, they realized their behavior did not measure up to the divine standards that had so recently been set before them. Fear was an appropriate response for them.

—C. R. B.

## B. Answering the People (v. 20)

**20. Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.”**

There is a practical reason for God’s speaking so directly to the people, as Moses notes. They should not *fear* in the sense of thinking that God has come to destroy them. Whatever fear has been engendered by this experience at the mountain is *to test* the people so that they have the proper attitude toward the God who is entering into a covenant with them. A healthy or proper fear of God will motivate them so that they are kept *from sinning*.

Even in the New Testament, Christians are told to maintain fear or reverence toward God in a way that impacts their daily conduct. The writer of Hebrews encourages us to “worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our ‘God is a consuming fire’” (Hebrews 12:28, 29 [lesson 12]). Paul tells the Corinthians to work on “perfecting holiness out of reverence for God” (2 Corinthians 7:1).

Ironically, and tragically, this experience will not keep the people from sinning. By the time we come to Exodus 32, the people become convinced that Moses (who has gone back up the mountain to meet with God) is not returning. They build a golden calf and worship it, giving it credit for what the Lord has done (Exodus 20:1, 2; 32:1-4). At the point recorded in our text, the people are terrified at God’s voice and presence; but that fear does not sustain them enough to affect their behavior when another type of “testing” occurs with Moses’ absence.

### What Do You Think?

What should be the outcome when we incorporate respect for God’s holiness with gratitude for His grace?

### Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Effect on use of the tongue
- Effect on behavior
- Effect on prayer life
- Other

## C. Approaching the Lord (v. 21)

**21. The people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was.**

The presence of a *thick darkness* has not yet been mentioned as part of what the people have witnessed. One gets the impression that, since thunder and lightning are also mentioned (v. 18), something like a storm is present on the mountain. Such a scene is associated with the Lord’s presence in Isaiah 28:2; 29:6; and Nahum 1:3.

For the Israelites, the darkness is part of what frightens them about drawing near to the Lord. They remain afar off, hesitant to come any closer. Moses, however, sees beyond the darkness to God himself. He understands that the Lord, who has just given his commandments by which his people are to live and has called them to be his covenant people, has only their best interests at heart.

## II. Hearing the Lord

(EXODUS 20:22-26)

### A. False Gods (vv. 22, 23)

**22. Then the LORD said to Moses, “Tell the Israelites this: ‘You have seen for yourselves that I have spoken to you from heaven:’**

After Moses draws near, the Lord conveys to him a message to pass on to his people. The message is couched in terms of what they *have seen*, but just as crucial to their understanding of God is what they have *not* seen.

The people have not seen any visible form of God. He has simply spoken to them. This spotlights his distinctiveness from other deities, those worshipped by other peoples. Their gods have visible forms (idols, images)—but they cannot speak or do anything (Psalm 135:15-17). Israel’s God speaks and reveals to his people his will for them and his desire to make them his covenant people. This is what no other god can do.

Later, in the book of Deuteronomy, Moses will address the second generation of Israelites to prepare them to enter the promised land. At that time he will recall the significance of the Sinai encounter: “You came near and stood at the foot of the mountain while it blazed with fire to the very heavens, with black clouds and deep darkness. Then the Lord spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice. He declared to you his covenant, the Ten Commandments, which he commanded you to follow and then wrote them on two stone tablets” (Deuteronomy 4:11-13).

As Christians we recognize the importance of the Word of God since we have the complete Scriptures. But even for these Israelites, who are just beginning a new relationship with God, it is vital that they understand what it means to hear his words spoken to them—specifically the words that comprise the Ten Commandments. This leads to the prohibition against images and idols that follows.

**23. “Do not make any gods to be alongside me; do not make for yourselves gods of silver or gods of gold.**

Essentially God is repeating the contents of the first two commandments: have no other gods before him and make no graven images (Exodus 20:3, 4). But here the focus is on the importance of heeding God’s law, or God’s voice from Heaven, and not being seduced into making and worshipping gods that can be seen and touched. Yes, they may look impressive, and the images representing them may be quite costly since they are made of silver or gold—but they say and do absolutely nothing. What is their true worth?

One of the supreme tragedies in Old Testament history is how often God’s covenant people stray from the first two commandments and embrace idol worship. Warnings and declarations against this sin saturate the words of the prophets and the psalms in particular. Consider Isaiah’s challenge to the false gods of his day: “Tell us what the future holds, so we may know that you are gods. Do something, whether good or bad, so that we will be dismayed and filled with fear. But you are

less than nothing and your works are utterly worthless; whoever chooses you is detestable” (Isaiah 41:23, 24).

The psalmist’s words in Psalm 115:4-8 are equally as contemptuous: “Their idols are silver and gold, made by human hands. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see. They have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but cannot smell. They have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but cannot walk, nor can they utter a sound with their throats. Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.” As one writer puts it, the fact that God is *I Am* means that idols *are not*.

### ***NO OTHER GODS?***

Christians of different traditions have long debated whether the Ten Commandments prohibit using statues or pictures in worship. The early church discouraged making portraits of Christ and other biblical figures. During the eighth and ninth centuries, the Eastern (Byzantine) church wavered in its practice, sometimes allowing such icons, sometimes not. The veneration of images and pictures later became common throughout the Western (Roman Catholic) church.

The Protestant Reformation brought the issue to life again. Some reformers, such as Martin Luther, saw nothing wrong with using images as “helps to devotion.” They viewed the commandments “You shall have no other gods before me” and “You shall not make for yourself an image” as a single commandment. (They split the commandment on coveting into two, thus maintaining a total of ten.) Others, such as John Calvin, saw the prohibition against image-making as a separate commandment, forbidding the creation of images.

Some of us who have no tradition of icons, either painted or sculpted, may be tempted to look down on those who do, accusing them of getting close to worshipping idols. However, our pride may be misplaced. Various forms of idolatry abound, including valuing our pleasure, our possessions, or other things above God.

—C. R. B.

#### *What Do You Think?*

What are some ways to guard against the influence of cultural idols?

#### *Talking Points for Your Discussion*

- Regarding celebrities
- Regarding things
- Regarding philosophies
- Other

### **B. True Worship (vv. 24-26)**

**24. “Make an altar of earth for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, your sheep and goats and your cattle. Wherever I cause my name to be honored, I will come to you and bless you.**

God proceeds to instruct his people as to how proper worship of him is to be carried out. He will later give specific instructions about *burnt offerings* and *fellowship offerings*, found within the book of Leviticus (Leviticus 1, 3). The people already know something about offerings and altars since these are part of their history (Genesis 8:20; 12:7, 8; 13:18; 22:7). Now God will direct them as to how to conduct these in a manner pleasing to him.

Some altars from this period of history are made of mud bricks. That may be what the command to make *an altar of earth* describes. Some suggest that making such an altar is meant to remind the people of God’s creation of man from the dust of the earth (Genesis 2:7). This appears to be how altars should be prepared until the time when the tabernacle is constructed and set up. The altar of burnt offering for that structure is to be made of wood (Exodus 27:1).

God also instructs Moses about the places of sacrifice. Offerings are not to be done in a random, haphazard fashion. God states that *wherever I cause my name to be honored, I will come to you and bless you*. Later, in his instructions to the people, Moses will specify that at “the place the Lord your God will choose from among all your tribes to put his Name there,” the people must bring their offerings, sacrifices, and tithes (Deuteronomy 12:5-7). Worship carried out according to God’s instructions will bring his blessings to his people.

Again, consider the contrast: idol worshippers can fashion their idols and worship them however they desire, but their gods have no power to bless them as the Lord does. God’s promise in this verse also addresses the earlier fears of the people. They have been hesitant to come near him, but here he promises to come to them to show his favor. But they must come on his terms, not theirs.

#### *What Do You Think?*

How do we recognize the warning signs that indicate attempts to relate with God on terms other than his?

#### *Talking Points for Your Discussion*

- Regarding the form and content of prayers
- Regarding the form and content of worship
- Other

**25. “If you make an altar of stones for me, do not build it with dressed stones, for you will defile it if you use a tool on it.**

Some altars in the Old Testament are made of stones (example: the one that Elijah set up on Mount Carmel in 1 Kings 18:31, 32). Here God states that if the people desire to make for him *an altar of stones*, it is not to be made *with dressed*, or cut, stones. The use of any tool in shaping the stones pollutes the altar, making it unfit for ceremonial use.

Exactly why this is the case is not explained; perhaps a certain pagan practice (such as one linked to the religion of Egypt, from which the people have recently come) is involved with this prohibition. By the time of Solomon, “dressed [cut] stone” was used in laying the foundation of the temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings 5:17, 18).

**26. “And do not go up to my altar on steps, or your private parts may be exposed.”**

Whether earthen or stone, the altar is not to have steps in order to approach it. Otherwise, the worshippers below might see under the officiating priest’s robe.

Ritual nudity was often a part of pagan worship; here God indicates his desire to preserve modesty. Prohibiting steps seems also to have been temporary, similar to the requirement of uncut stones. It appears the brass altar for Solomon's temple must have had steps, since it was 10 cubits (15 feet) high ([2 Chronicles 4:1](#)). By then God had prescribed certain undergarments, for the priest to wear ([Exodus 28:42, 43](#)), which was another way to maintain modesty.

*What Do You Think?*

What are some ways to encourage modesty without using legalistic dress codes?

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

- In the church
- In the home
- In the example we set
- Other

Some Bible students have suggested symbolic meanings behind the stipulations we read in this passage. For example, the fact that the altar is to be made of uncut stones is believed to signify that no human effort can achieve forgiveness of sin; this can be granted by God alone. The possibility of indecent exposure when going up the altar to make a sacrifice would counter the message of the sacrifice, which provides a covering for man's sin. But such interpretations are not really grounded in the Scripture itself, so one must exercise caution in presenting or accepting them.

## Conclusion

### A. Words That Still Ring True

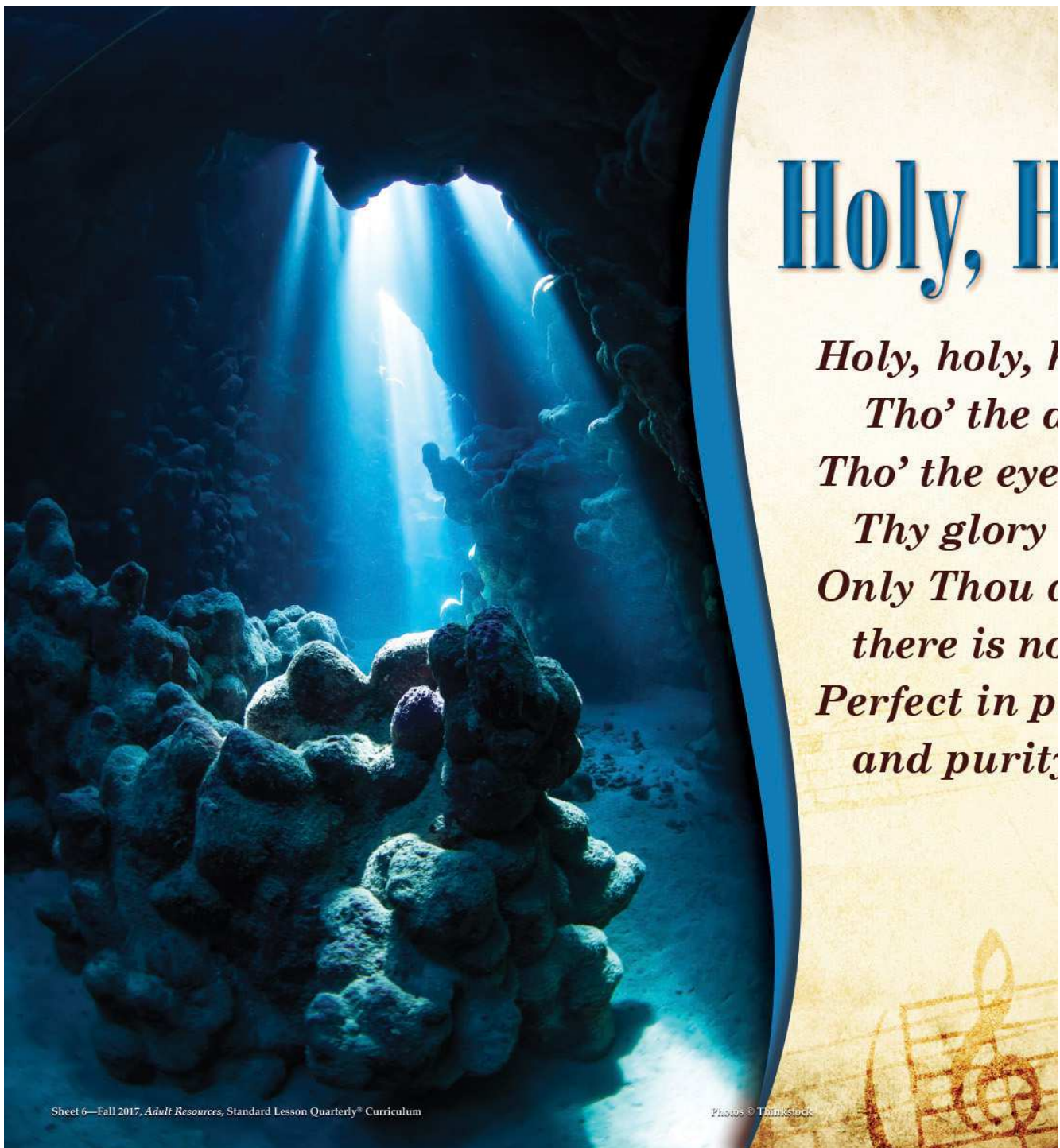
When I was growing up, revivals were an important part of church life. My home church in Indiana usually held two revivals, one in the spring and one in the fall, and for a number of years each of those revivals consisted of two weeks of nightly services, Monday through Friday.

It was at one of those services in the spring of 1964 that I went forward at the preacher's invitation and voiced my desire to become a Christian. The invitation hymn that was sung that night was "Trust and Obey." The words of that song, particularly the chorus, came to mind while preparing these lessons on the subject of obeying God's voice: "Trust and obey, for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey."

Those words remain as true today as they were over 50 years ago when I decided that I would become a follower of Jesus. They were also true for the Israelites who stood at the foot of Mount Sinai and heard God's voice amidst all the overpowering sights and sounds that were a part of that unforgettable experience. Of course, being "happy in Jesus" was not an issue for those Israelites at Sinai. But in order to fulfill their responsibilities as God's covenant people, to "trust and obey" was essential.

Obedience—that is what God has always required of his people, in both Old and New Testaments. To foolish, disobedient King Saul, the prophet Samuel gave this rebuke: "To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams" ([1 Samuel 15:22](#)). The northern kingdom fell to the Assyrians "because they had not obeyed the Lord their God" ([2 Kings 18:12](#)).

Jeremiah confronted the people of the southern kingdom of Judah with a review of their history and of what God had demanded of their forefathers: "Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people" ([Jeremiah 7:23](#)). The present reality facing Jeremiah was a far different story: "Say to them, 'This is the nation that has not obeyed the Lord its God or responded to correction. Truth has perished; it has vanished from their lips'" ([7:28](#)).



Sheet 6—Fall 2017, *Adult Resources*, Standard Lesson Quarterly® Curriculum

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Visual for Lessons 6 & 7. Point to the third and fourth lines of this hymn as you simply ask “Why?” in discussing [Exodus 20:22](#).

Christians are of the new covenant. With that new covenant, God has not come with all the phenomena that we have seen displayed at Mount Sinai in today’s lesson text. Instead he has come to be with us in Jesus, or Immanuel, meaning “God with us” ([Matthew 1:22, 23](#)).

We do not deal with issues such as preparing burnt offerings and constructing altars on which to sacrifice them—matters covered in today’s text. However, what God requires of us remains exactly what was required of the Israelites. That requirement is captured in one word: obedience. “Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’” asks Jesus, “and do not do what I say?” ([Luke 6:46](#)). He also tells us, “If you love me, keep my commands” ([John 14:15](#)).

In other words, trust and obey.

### B. Prayer

Father, forgive our halfhearted obedience. Restore our sense of passion and purpose so that a broken world can see Christ in us. In his name, amen.

### C. Thought to Remember

Obedience to God brings true freedom.

## INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with NIV® Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at [www.standardlesson.com](http://www.standardlesson.com) or in the back of the NIV® Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

### Into the Lesson

To begin class, have your group imagine that the president or some other prominent figure has promised to be in class in two weeks. Discuss what preparations would need to be made for that visit. Your discussion might include:

- What classroom changes need to be made?
- What should we wear?
- What should we offer our guest in terms of special refreshments, a commemorative gift, etc.?
- What security precautions do we need to take?
- What special lesson or program should we present, if any?

*Alternative.* Distribute copies of the “Properly Addressed” activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Use this as an individual, small-group, or whole-class activity. Students match a dignitary’s title with the accepted address.

After either activity, lead into Bible study by saying, “Most of us would not prepare for a meeting with a head of state casually or haphazardly. We would want our meeting to communicate respect due the position. The same is true with God. Let’s learn about how we are to approach him.”

### Into the Word

Divide the class into two groups, giving each group paper and pens. Each group should read its assigned text as a basis for making the requested contrast. Anticipated responses are in italics; do not distribute those.

#### Group 1—Contrast godly fear with ungodly fear (Exodus 20:18-21).

Godly Fear=Respect and Awe

*Seeks God’s approval (v. 20)*

*Wants to meet God’s standards (v. 20)*

*Draws nearer to God (v. 21)*

Ungodly Fear=Terror and Panic

*Withdraws from God (v. 18)*

*Dreads what God would say (v. 19)*

*Keeps distance from God (vv. 18, 21)*

#### Group 2—Contrast godly worship with ungodly worship (Exodus 20:22-26).

Godly Worship=Reverence

*Recognizes that God reveals his will for us (v. 22)*

*Admits sin with sacrifice (v. 24)*

*Approaches God with simplicity (v. 23)*

Ungodly Worship=Ritual

*Tries to make God manageable by making images of him (v. 23)*

*Tries to make sin prettier with decorated altars (v. 25)*

*Symbolic degradation, such as exposing oneself (v. 26)*

Allow groups to share their research. Comment using the suggested responses and content from the commentary as needed.

### Into Life

Draw these three scales on the board:

