

The Sinner's Prayer

Introduction

Most would agree that people constantly are looking for the “easy way out.” In both the business world and in our personal lives, corners often get cut in order to obtain quick results. The society in which we live has taken on a “fast food” mentality—I do not want to work (cook) and I want my food right now. So what happens when this idea of “I want it quick and I want it easy” seeps into the religious world? What corners are people willing to cut in order to obtain a “quick and easy” salvation? Rather than reading the Bible and then acting on the commands of God, individuals are opting for an easier method—a method that is being used by literally millions of people in an effort to obtain what they perceive as salvation. The idea, quite simply, is this: “Pray and ask Jesus to come into your heart” and you will be saved from your sins. This teaching, although quite widespread, is completely at odds with the Bible’s specific instructions regarding what one must do to be saved (see Lyons and Butt, 2007). In fact, in numerous sermons, books, and tracts within the religious world at large, it is not uncommon to hear or read what usually is referred to as the “sinner’s prayer.” Those who embrace this quick and easy method frequently suggest something like this:

Accept Christ into your heart through prayer and he’ll receive you. It doesn’t matter what church you belong to or if you ever do good works. You’ll be born again at the moment you receive Christ. He’s at the door knocking. . . . Just trust Christ as Savior. God loves you and forgives you unconditionally. Anyone out there can be saved if they accept Christ, now! Let’s pray for Christ to now come into your heart. (see Staten, 2001)

And the prayer that the alien sinner is urged to pray frequently goes something like this:

Lord Jesus, I need You. Thank You for dying on the cross for my sins. I open the door of my life and receive You as my Savior and Lord. Thank You for forgiving my sins and giving me eternal life. Take control of my life. Make me the kind of person You want me to be (see McDowell, 1999, p. 759).

Where, exactly, in the Scriptures does it teach that, in order to be saved, one should “pray to ask Jesus to come into his heart”? Through the years, we have asked many within various religious groups this important question. But we have yet to find anyone who could provide a single biblical reference to substantiate such a claim. The salvation that Jesus freely gives is not conditioned on prayer; rather, it is conditioned on the “obedience of faith” (Romans 1:5; 16:26). Truth be told, the alien sinner can pray for salvation as long and hard as he wants, but that prayer will not result in such. God has stated—in plain, easy-to-understand language—exactly what the alien sinner must do to be forgiven. And that cannot be accomplished through prayer. It is fruitless for the alien sinner to pray to God to “send Jesus into his heart.” God will not respond to such a request, and, additionally, salvation is not accomplished via prayer.

History of the Sinner's Prayer

Society has not always possessed a “fast-food” mentality toward religion. During the Reformation, many individuals truly were seeking to do God’s will, and therefore the Scriptures were consulted often. It was during this period that many denominations splintered in an effort to revive, or “perfect,” various branches of Christendom. However, even these reformers could not reach a consensus on many of the major issues (such as infant baptism and salvation) that still plague religious groups today. Many of these new denominations held on to traditional practices, even when they did not fully understand the significance.

During the early-to mid-1700s, preachers began stressing the need for repentance and confession. Although ambivalent on the practice of baptism, preachers began to “pressure” individuals into conversions—which eventually led to the mourner’s bench (or front pew) for sinners. The pressure intensified following a revival that took place in 1801 at Cane Ridge, Kentucky. This meeting lasted for weeks, and throughout it people were alleged to have become delirious from lack of food in the intense heat. The delusions that these individuals suffered caused weird vocalizations and people literally rolled in the aisles—a new, added “emotion” that would continue in various branches of religions for more than two centuries. It soon became expected for preachers to stir members into a frenzied state. J.V. Coombs witnessed such nineteenth century hysteria and stated:

The appeals, songs, prayers and the suggestion from the preacher drive many into the trance state. I can remember in my boyhood days seeing ten or twenty people laying unconscious upon the floor in the old country church. People called that conversion. Science knows it is mesmeric influence, self-hypnotism.... It is sad that Christianity is compelled to bear the folly of such movements (see Staten, 2001).

Capitalizing on this emotional revolution and the concept of the mourner’s bench, Charles G. Finney (1792-1875) developed the “anxious seat.” In describing it, he wrote:

The church has always felt it necessary to have something of this kind to answer this very purpose. In the days of the apostles, baptism answered this purpose. The gospel was preached to the people, and then all those who were willing to be on the side of Christ, were called out to be baptized. It held the place that the anxious seat does now as a public manifestation of their determination to be Christians (see Staten).

This “anxious seat” system, which Finney admits replaced baptism, became the backbone of the modern “sinner’s prayer” plan of salvation. Dwight Moody modified Finney’s system by eliminating the pressure of a public response. Instead of having individuals come forward publicly, he invited people to join him and his trained counselors in a room called the Inquiry Room. During their visit, prospective converts were asked questions, taught from the Scriptures, and then had prayers offered for them. By the late 1800s, this notion of praying at the end of conversions to “receive Christ” spread across both the United States and the United Kingdom. R.A. Torrey succeeded Moody’s ministry and then modified it to include “on the spot” street conversions to convey the idea of instant salvation with no strings attached. Thus the phraseology “receive Christ, right now, right here” was born.

Billy Graham played the next major role in the evolution of the sinner’s prayer. By the late 1940s, it became evident that Graham was becoming the “champion” evangelizer. His crusades found literally thousands of people who desired a faithful relationship with God. Following an “altar call,” individuals who responded were told to pray and “accept Christ as their Savior.” In the late 1950s, Bill Bright (of the Campus Crusade for Christ organization) convinced the “average believer” that he or she could experience the benefits of these evangelical crusades in any living room across America.

Further modifications were carried out, and eventually a Bible was printed with this theology inserted right into God’s Word. John 1:11-13 was retranslated to read:

Even in his own land and among his own people, the Jews, he was not accepted. Only a few welcomed and received him. But to all who received him, he gave the right to become children of God. All they had to do was trust him to save them. **All those who believe this are reborn!**—not a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan—but from the will of God (Living Bible Paraphrased, emp. added).

Thus, church auditoriums all over the world now ring out with the words “accept Jesus into your heart and you will be saved.” In defense of this manmade plan of salvation, believers point to Romans 10:13 which states: “For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

Calling on the name of the Lord

Is this correct? Are sinners simply to call upon the Lord and be saved? Many professed Christians seem to equate “calling on the name of the Lord” with the idea of saying to Jesus, “Lord, save me.” The key to correctly understanding the phrase “calling on the name of the Lord” is to recognize that more is involved in this action than a mere verbal petition directed toward God.

First, it is appropriate to mention that even in modern times to “call on” someone frequently means more than simply making a request for something. When a doctor goes to the hospital to “call on” some of his patients, he does not merely walk into the room and say, “I just wanted to come by and say, ‘Hello.’ I wish you the best. Now pay me.” On the contrary, he involves himself in a service. He examines the patient, listens to the patient’s concerns, gives further instructions regarding the patient’s hopeful recovery, and then oftentimes prescribes medication. All of these elements may be involved in a doctor “calling upon” a patient. In the mid-twentieth century, it was common for young men to “call on” young ladies. Again, this expression meant something different than just “making a request” (Brown, 1976, p. 5).

Second, when an individual takes the time to study how the expression “calling on God” is used throughout Scripture, the only reasonable conclusion to draw is that, just as similar phrases sometimes have a deeper meaning in modern America, the expression “calling on God” often had a deeper meaning in Bible times. Take, for instance, Paul’s statement recorded in Acts 25:11: “I appeal unto Caesar.” The word “appeal” (epikaloumai) is the same word translated “call” (or “calling”) in Acts 2:21, 22:16, and Romans 10:13. But, Paul was not simply saying, “I’m calling on Caesar to save me.”

Paul’s “calling” to Caesar involved his submission to him. “That, in a nutshell,” wrote T. Pierce Brown, “is what ‘calling on the Lord’ involves”—obedience (1976, p. 5). It is not a mere verbal recognition of God, or a verbal petition to Him. Those whom Paul (before his conversion to Christ) sought to bind in Damascus—Christians who were described as people “who call on Your [Jehovah’s] name”—were not people who only prayed to God, but those who were serving the Lord, and who, by their obedience, were submitting themselves to His authority (cf. Matthew 28:18). Interestingly, Zephaniah 3:9 links one’s “calling” with his “service”: “*For then I will restore to the peoples a pure language, that they all may call on the name of the Lord, to serve Him with one accord.*” (emp. added). When a person submits to the will of God, he accurately can be described as “calling on the Lord.” According to Colossians 3:17, every single act a Christian performs (in word or deed) should be carried out by Christ’s authority. For a non-Christian receiving salvation, this is no different. In order to obtain salvation, a person must submit to the Lord’s authority. This is what the passages in Acts 2:21 and Romans 10:13 are teaching; it is up to us to go elsewhere in the New Testament to learn **how** to call upon the name of the Lord.

After Peter quoted the prophecy of Joel and told those in Jerusalem on Pentecost that “whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts 2:21), he told them **how** to go about “*calling on the name of the Lord.*” The people in the audience in Acts 2 did not understand Peter’s quotation of Joel to mean that an alien sinner must pray to God for salvation. [Their question in Acts 2:37 (“*Men and brethren, what shall we do?*”) indicates such.] Furthermore, when Peter responded to their question and told them what to do to be saved, he did not say, “I’ve already told you what to do. You can be saved by petitioning God for salvation through prayer. Just

call on His name.” On the contrary, Peter had to explain to them what it meant to “call on the name of the Lord.” Instead of repeating this statement when the crowd sought further guidance from the apostles, Peter commanded them, saying, “*Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins*” (Acts 2:38).

Notice the parallel between Acts 2:21 and 2:38:

Acts 2:21	Whoever	Calls	On the name of the Lord	Shall be saved
Acts 2:38	Everyone of you	Repentance and baptism	In the name of Jesus Christ	For the remission of sins

Peter’s non-Christian listeners learned that “calling on the name of the Lord for salvation” was equal to obeying the Gospel, which approximately 3,000 did that very day by repenting of their sins and being baptized into Christ (2:38,41). But what about Romans 10:13? What is the “call” mentioned in this verse? Notice Romans 10:11-15:

For the Scripture says, “Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.” For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. For **“whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”** How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things!” (emp. added).

Although this passage does not define precisely what is meant by one “calling on the name of the Lord,” it does indicate that an alien sinner cannot “call” until after he has heard the Word of God and believed it. Such was meant by Paul’s rhetorical questions: “How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard?” Paul’s statements in this passage are consistent with Peter’s proclamations in Acts 2. It was only **after** the crowd on Pentecost believed in the resurrected Christ Whom Peter preached (as is evident by their being “cut to the heart” and their subsequent question, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?”) that Peter told them how to call on the name of the Lord and be saved (2:38).

Perhaps the clearest description of what it means for an alien sinner to “call on the name of the Lord” is found in Acts 22. As the apostle Paul addressed the mob in Jerusalem, he spoke of his encounter with the Lord, Whom he asked, “What shall I do?” (22:10; cf. 9:6). The answer Jesus gave Him at that time was not “call on the name of the Lord.” Instead, Jesus instructed him to “arise and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all things which are appointed for you to do” (22:10). Paul (or Saul—Acts 13:9) demonstrated his belief in Jesus as he went into the city and waited for further instructions. In Acts 9, we learn that during the next three days, while waiting to meet with Ananias, Paul fasted and prayed (vss. 9,11). Although some today might consider what Paul was doing at this point as “calling on the name of the Lord,” Ananias, God’s chosen messenger to Paul, did not think so. He did not tell Paul, “I see you have already called on God. Your sins are forgiven.” After three days of fasting and praying, Paul still was **lost in his sins**. Even though he obviously **believed** at this point, and had prayed to God, he had yet to “call on the name of the Lord” for salvation. When Ananias finally came to Paul, he told him: “Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord” (22:16). Ananias knew that Paul had not yet “called on the name of the Lord,” just as Peter knew that those on Pentecost had not done so before his command to “repent and be baptized.” Thus, Ananias instructed Paul to “be baptized, and wash away your sins.” The participle phrase, “calling on the name of the Lord,” describes what Paul was

doing when he was baptized for the remission of his sins. Every non-Christian who desires to “call on the name of the Lord” to be saved, does so, not simply by saying, “Lord, Lord” (cf. Matthew 7:21), or just by wording a prayer to God (e.g., Paul—Acts 9; 22; cf. Romans 10:13-14), but by obeying God’s instructions to “repent and be baptized...in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of your sins” (Acts 2:38).

This is not to say that repentance and baptism have always been (or are always today) synonymous with “calling on the name of the Lord.” Abraham was not baptized when he “called upon the name of the Lord” (Genesis 12:8; cf. 4:26), because baptism was not demanded of God before New Testament times. And, as mentioned earlier, when the New Testament describes people who are already Christians as “calling on the name of the Lord” (Acts 9:14,21; 1 Corinthians 1:2), it certainly does not mean that Christians continually were being baptized for the remission of their sins after having been baptized to become a Christian (cf. 1 John 1:5-10). Depending on when and where the phrase is used, “calling on the name of the Lord” includes: (1) obedience to the gospel plan of salvation; (2) worshiping God; and (3) faithful service to the Lord (Bates, 1979, p. 5). However, it **never** is used in the sense that all the alien sinner must do in order to be saved is to cry out and say, “Lord, Lord, save me.”

(TAKE THE TEST NOW)

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