

The Sinner's Prayer

The sinner's prayer has been used verbally by preachers in leading someone to the Lord and has been put into print in a myriad of Christian publications. Below is an example of a typical sinner's prayer:

Dear Jesus: Thank You for dying for me. I confess that I am a sinner and in need of salvation. Please forgive me of my sins. I believe you died on the cross and rose from the dead. I ask you right now to come into my heart and be my savior. Amen!

Does this sound familiar?

With every head bowed and every eye closed. Is there anyone here that would like to come to Christ? If so, raise your hand; just slip it up real quick. There, thank you, thank you, over there in the back, thank you.

We hear of the sinner's prayer often enough that it's easy to see why people think of it as being from the Bible. The fact is, there is neither any specific formula found in Scripture for a Sinner's Prayer nor is there any biblical example of such a prayer being recommended in the salvation experience. The modern usage of the Sinner's Prayer originates in the 19th Century and was popularized by the experience-oriented evangelistic style of Charles Finney. As Scripture presents it, men should repent, believe, and be baptized. There is no mention of "altar calls" or "sinner's prayers" or requesting for Christ to enter one's heart. Source of information on this paragraph:

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What does Scripture Say?

I don't want to split hairs when it comes to words, however we must be careful what we are communicating. The idea of asking Jesus to come into one's heart or to "accept Christ" maybe confused with the Biblical concept of receiving Christ. *He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name. John 1:11-12* Many people recite this scripture when witnessing as well; *Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me. Rev. 3:20* The context is the lukewarm Church, but nevertheless it is a Church that Jesus says He loves. (Verse 19) You could say these were believers he was addressing, although he is standing on the outside of the Church knocking to get in. I don't see anything wrong with using this verse in evangelism.

A biblical sinner's prayer; *And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!'* **Luke 18:13** The Lord said he was the one who went away justified.

Look if you will at some other sinner's statements from the Bible. There are many examples of how people in the Bible came to Christ. I want to just point out a few. The first one that comes to mind is the thief on the cross. **Luke 23:39-43** The one criminal confesses that he is under condemnation and then simply says, "Lord remember me when you come into your kingdom". The Lord promised the thief to be in paradise with Him. As a side note, the thief did not say a formulated prayer, nor did he have opportunity to come down from the cross and be baptized before he died. It was also impossible for him to make any restitution or show "fruits of repentance". However correlated with the other Gospel accounts both of the thieves were mocking Jesus at first, therefore there must have been some change of heart/mind at some point. I think this is a great occasion where we can see that the Lord knows the heart. We do not know a person's heart, therefore we can not deem them saved based solely on a repeat after me sinner's prayer.

In Acts chapter 2 after Peter preaches the Gospel message to the crowd, they responded by saying, *“Men and brethren, what shall we do?”* (Verse 37) They were then told by Peter; *Then Peter said to them, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.”* **Acts 2:37-39**. The instruction was to repent and be baptized. Needless to say that upon doing so, it showed that one believed. If you notice here the instruction was not to repeat a prayer, come to the front, walk an aisle, or sign a decision card.

The Philippian Jailer asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” The response was; “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household.” **Acts 16:30-34** Once again there was no instruction for him and his family to go through a specific prayer. However they were given the Word of God. (Verse 32) and the jailer’s faith was evident by the fact that he washed Paul and Silas’ wounds and gave them something to eat. He and his family were also baptized. It concludes the passage by saying that they believed God.

These are just a few examples. If you look at the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament you will not find the practice of a formulated prayer method anywhere. Does this mean that if someone goes through a sinner’s prayer or responds to an altar call they can’t be saved that way? The answer I would say is no of course not. You may think I leave people hanging and not “seal the deal” as it were. I want to mention a few instances in the Bible when Jesus Christ ministered to people. First there was the scribe who asked Jesus what was the greatest commandment. After the scribe grasped the answer that Jesus gave, Jesus said to him that he was not far from the kingdom of God. **Mark 12:28-34** That is how the Lord left him. I am sure that we, on the other hand, would have tried to lead him in a prayer to receive Jesus. Remember the rich young ruler? **Matt. 19:16-22, Mark 10:17-22, Luke 18:18-23** after Jesus pinpointed the man’s obstacle to coming to Him, it says he went away sadly. Notice that Jesus didn’t chase him down and say, “wait, what can I do to make you come to me?” Sad to say many of us would have still made it easy for the man and said, just repeat after me...

I have a friend who, in my opinion, tries to get people to say “the sinner’s prayer” all too often when witnessing. Before I go any further I should mention that I use to minister in such a fashion as well. That is why I am writing this article. We should really look close at our practices. I think we all too often want to downplay the repentance and commitment aspect of following the Lord. It has become sort of the “fine print” or disclaimer we must tack on the end of our presentation. Then we hurry it, as not to lose the person so to speak. One time my friend and I were out witnessing. As I preached, he talked to this lady who claimed she was interested in what we were talking about. My friend tried to lead her in a prayer for salvation. She stopped him and said she wasn’t ready. Now he was sorely disappointed, but I asked him, would it have been better for her not to say anything and just repeated your words as not to embarrass herself? Or sometimes I wonder if people feel hounded and go through the motions just to get us off their back. I have learned to allow the Holy Spirit to do the work at that point. I urge them not to put it off. Now is the accepted time, today is the day of salvation. Nevertheless, it is between them and God.

The Universal Call

I believe in giving an invitation to come to Jesus Christ before it is too late. *Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.* **Matt. 11:28**. Our humble Lord and Savior gave this heart felt plea as the invitation to come. *And the Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let him who hears say, “Come!” And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely.* **Rev. 22:17** I give invitations to come to Christ, but it is just that, “come to Jesus Christ” not come to me, or come to a church, or come forward to the altar. Bye the way, there is no altar on the sidewalk or a park where my evangelism takes place.

Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God. **2 Corinthians 5:20**. I have pleaded and even begged people to come to Christ. This is for their own good. It should be explained to people that it is to their benefit that they repent and

believe. I do not however coerce, deceive, trick, or promise them anything outside the realm of scripture. In other words, you will not here me say come to Christ and you will be rich etc.

Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, Acts 17:30. I have commanded people to come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

What's the Big Deal?

There is nothing wrong with the content of the prayer itself. Most sinners' prayers contain doctrinally sound phrases. For example; *that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. Romans 10:9*

The problem with leading someone in a "sinner's prayer" and then because of that prayer, deemed them saved, is problematic for many reasons. I think the biggest problem is in the solicitation of such a prayer. In looking through the book of Acts, the response to the Gospel was always initiated from the recipients. It was never prodded by the preacher saying, now if you want to receive Christ come forward or repeat after me... etc. In a broad sense, I think the aspect of leading someone to Christ, in most cases; dumb downs the elements of sin, repentance, and commitment. Perhaps you could say an "easy belief" Gospel message, which is no Gospel at all.

Often in "altar calls" or "invitations to accept Christ", in an evangelical setting, there is the assumption that the audience knows all about the biblical Jesus and the Gospel message. So although there may be a sermon or personal testimonies given, there often is no clear presentation of whom Jesus Christ is, why we need Him, or what He has done. It is most often assumed they know. In our day and age of apostasy, doctrines of demons, bad theology, and a distorted view of Christ, we should give a clear presentation of biblical truth concerning the Gospel and salvation. My question is; who and what are these people accepting by coming forward and praying a prayer? They may very well be accepting a Jesus they have contrived in their mind, but not Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God. Paul says in **2 Corinthians 11:1-4** that there is a different Jesus, a different spirit, and a different gospel.

If you or I were to find ourselves in the position of leading someone to Christ, at the very least we should let the person verbalize the confession or prayer on their own accord. This idea of "repeating after me" does not give the true sense of what is going on. If you were to ask me to tell you about wiring a jet airplane, I would have nothing to say on the subject. But, if you said to repeat some phrases after you and then say, "now you are a wiring expert", it wouldn't make sense. Romans chapter 10, Believe in your heart and confess with your mouth... Also what is in the heart overflows into speech. *He who believes in the Son of God has the witness in himself; 1 John 5:10.* Look, if the person cannot confess something about what they are doing on their own accord, it is my opinion that in most cases, they are not ready. This could be for a number of reasons. Let's look at a few below:

It is a work of man (or the flesh) *Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit."* **John 3:7-8**

They are not truly being drawn by God but are either responding by emotion or pressure from the person ministering to them. *And He said, "Therefore I have said to you that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father."* **John 6:65.**

They do not understand or are not ready for the commitment. In **Luke 14:25-33** Jesus tells us to count the cost. *So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple. Luke 14:33.* Perhaps they are not told about this part.

When sharing the Gospel I tend to motivate people by sharing the benefits of eternal life in heaven and the warning of eternal damnation in hell. I think these are biblical truths that certainly should be told. However, sometimes a person wants “fire insurance” if you will, and doesn’t plan on anything other than that. Eternal life is more than heaven to gain or hell to escape. *“And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. John 17:3*

Professions - True or False

Many years ago in my evangelism, several of us at the Church I was attending went out into the community sharing the faith. There were many occasions that I or someone else had “led someone to Christ”. This was very exciting. If we led someone to the Lord, our strategy was to go back the next week and follow up with them rather than searching for new people to witness to. This follow up, which by the way, was stressed very much for those who did evangelism, in fact the evangelist was somewhat negligent if they did not follow up. The problem was that in most cases the follow up was very difficult because, looking back; I don’t think all those professions were authentic, although some probably were. For example; after someone came to Christ, when we would go back to their house a week later, they didn’t want anything to do with God or us. Also the in-between time during the week the person would not come to Church or any gatherings and would avoid any contact. This, as you can imagine, was very frustrating. Sounds much like the seed that the devil came and stole. What I saw over that period of time was all four soils of the seeds in the parable of the sower. I can say that even in leading someone to the Lord through a specific prayer is still just a seed sown. Wait and see how it grows. *He also spoke this parable: “A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. Then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, ‘Look, for three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?’ But he answered and said to him, ‘Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it. And if it bears fruit, well. But if not, after that you can cut it down.’” Luke 13:6-9*

In our modern times when everything is fast and instant we bring this into the things of the faith. It could be that because we are not willing to wait and see what happens after planting the seed of the Gospel that we rush into “picking fruit that is not ripe” for the sake of chalking another one up to our ministry. This I must say has affected me over the years, as it has been the status quo in the evangelical world for so long. The more I involved myself in serving the Lord in evangelism and reading what God’s Word has actually said concerning these things, I began to see that we were not really doing what the Bible says. This usually produces either no results or undesirable results. I have found that many of these practices I am discussing in this paper are Church traditions that have been contrived by man. The question is; has the modern day evangelical world become like the Pharisees of old, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men?

Conclusion

My supposition is this; the more accurate and faithful we are to the Word of God in our practice of ministry, the more chance of desired results or outcome, assuming those desires are the same as God’s. I am not a pragmatist in regard to preaching the Gospel. I think of it in this way; if we do it the way the Bible says and we don’t get results, at least we are using the pattern given. I think we stand on uncertain ground when we stray from the instructions in God’s Word. My advice is to stay away from unbiblical practices and methods when presenting the Gospel and dealing with the recipients of your message. We all could certainly pray to remain close to Jesus. *“I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. John 15:5*