

The Sinner's Prayer

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It's not an overstatement to claim that most folks in American evangelical churches have been invited to "ask Jesus into their heart" to be saved. Many sincere, well-meaning believers in Jesus, convicted by their sin and seeking the grace of God, have offered the sinner's prayer in response. But, upon closer examination, it becomes clear that the sinner's prayer is a very late development in the history of Christendom -- no one was saying the sinner's prayer before the 1950s. If it is indeed a late development, this leads to an important question: is the sinner's prayer in the Bible?

We can trace the history of the sinner's prayer back to a few influential American preachers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the mid-eighteenth century, Eleazar Wheelock developed a technique he called the "Mourner's Seat." He reserved the front bench of the church for sinners who became the subject of his attention throughout his sermon as "salvation...(loomed) over their heads." In the nineteenth century, Charles Finney promoted the use of an "Anxious Seat," a pew on the front row of a church meetinghouse where penitent sinners would sit during the sermon as they awaited baptism. Finney's method was criticized for its manipulative nature, so Dwight Moody developed the "Inquiry Room." Penitent sinners would meet with counselors privately to study about salvation, after which they would pray together.

In the early 20th century, a preacher from Chicago, Billy Sunday, developed his spin on these techniques. First, he popularized what has become called "crusades" — preaching to large crowds in a tent or other venue. At the close of a fire-and-brimstone, "come-to-Jesus message," Billy Sunday would extend salvation to sinners and offer a prayer. Sometimes he would invite the penitent to walk to the front of the assembly. Later on, Billy Sunday began shaking the penitent's hands, claiming that shaking his hand signaled their intent to follow Christ (the idea of extending the "right hand of fellowship"). Billy Sunday also developed an influential tract entitled "Four Things God Wants You to Know."

Billy Sunday connects us to Billy Graham, the famous crusader of the 20th century, who was converted by a Billy Sunday type crusade in 1935. As he began implementing the crusades pattern popularized by Billy Sunday, Billy Graham also adapted Sunday's tract "Four Things God Wants You to Know" — Graham's formula was called "Four Steps to Peace with God." After the "Four Steps" was a prayer:

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 the throne of my life. Make me the kind of person You want me to be.

This is the origin story of what we now call the sinner's prayer, a history lesson that illustrates -- and what will become more apparent in a moment -- that the sinner's prayer is a tradition developed and popularized in the last one hundred years in the American evangelical community.

However, the sinner's prayer is also a tradition without Biblical precedent. **Revelation 3:20** is a passage quoted by many to invite sinners to "ask Jesus into their hearts": "*Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come into him and dine with him, and he with Me.*" Billy Graham's website tells me, "You cross the bridge into God's family when you receive Christ by personal invitation." It goes on to tell me to, "RECEIVE, through prayer, Jesus Christ into your heart and life." The instructions quote **Revelation 3:20** to justify praying the sinner's prayer.

But here is the problem with **Revelation 3:20**: Jesus is talking to Christians, not to sinners in need of salvation. The church at Laodicea had grown lukewarm -- materialism and affluence had made them apathetic. Jesus "*knocking at the door*" is an invitation to these lukewarm Christians to repent. They have

already received salvation, but their sins have placed their souls in danger. So using **Revelation 3:20** as an invitation to sinners to receive salvation through prayer takes the passage out of context.

In addition, the sinner's prayer is found in no conversions in the book of Acts. When Peter was asked, "*What shall we do to be saved,*" in **Acts 2:37**, prayer is noticeably absent from the apostle's command in **verse 38**: repent, be baptized, be filled with the Spirit. As Philip preached Jesus to the Ethiopian eunuch in **Acts 8:35**, they happened upon some water; the eunuch expressed his desire to be baptized, so Philip baptized him, and the convert "*went on his way rejoicing.*" Paul baptized both the household of Lydia and the household of his jailer in Philippi when they believed. And when Paul discovered the Ephesians had never heard of the Holy Spirit, he urged them to be re-baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. In all of these conversion examples from the book of Acts, prayer, let alone the sinner's prayer, is never mentioned. The pattern laid out for us in Scripture is to believe, repent, be baptized, and receive the Spirit.

Even the conversion of Paul -- whose teachings on faith and grace are liberally quoted by practitioners of the sinner's prayer -- even he had a remarkably different conversion experience. Paul had his "come to Jesus" moment on the road to Damascus; blinded by the light, he was led by the hand to Damascus, where he spent three days fasting and praying. Then, a disciple living in Damascus, Ananias, received a message from Jesus by a vision:

Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying. And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting his hand on him, so that he might receive his sight (Acts 9:11-12).

When Ananias found Paul -- who had been praying for three days -- here is what he said to him: "*And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord*" (**Acts 22:16**). Paul had been praying for three days, but Ananias told him to stop waiting. Paul had been praying for three days, but he still had sins to wash away. Paul had been praying for three days, but he had not yet "*called on the name of the Lord.*" If prayer is how one "receives Jesus into one's heart," why did Ananias say all these things to Paul? And remember: **Acts 22:16** is Paul's account of his conversion in his own words. So Paul's conversion experience is remarkably different from the practice modeled by Billy Graham and others who have adopted the sinner's prayer. Based on what I can see, the practice of "asking Jesus into your heart" appears to be a very recent manmade tradition without Biblical or historical precedent.

My final objection to the sinner's prayer is it teaches receiving salvation by a work while claiming it avoids teaching salvation by works. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus confronts three "works" used by the Pharisees and scribes to demonstrate their righteousness: charitable giving, praying, and fasting. It is clear from the teachings of Jesus here and elsewhere that he considered prayer a work. If prayer is a "work," and one tells others to receive Jesus by the sinner's prayer, isn't the sinner's prayer, by definition, a "work?"

Many people who teach and practice the sinner's prayer are very concerned about receiving salvation by works and so they adopt a critical view of the role of works in salvation, specifically baptism. However, the troubling part about the sinner's prayer is the internal inconsistency. In an earnest attempt to avoid preaching salvation by works, the work of prayer has been adopted by man to be the mechanism to receive salvation. How can one claim we are not saved by works while preaching "we must ask Jesus into our hearts" through prayer? If works do not save me, why am I told to pray the sinner's prayer? Thus, the sinner's prayer promises salvation based on two assumptions our neighbors believe are mutually exclusive: "we ask Jesus into our hearts because works do not save us."