

Is the “Sinner’s Prayer” Essential to Salvation?

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Gospel presentations often conclude with a prayer. You may have heard it called the “sinner’s prayer”. In that prayer, the person trusting Christ acknowledges he is a sinner placing his faith in Christ to save him. Some prayers have clearer terminology than others. The question is, “Is that prayer essential to salvation?”

Let’s back up. What did Christ accomplish on the cross? He satisfied the wrath of a holy God against our sin. As He died as our substitute, He declared, “It is finished.” (John 19:30) Through His death and resurrection, He paid for all the wrongs we have done. Our sin account was paid in full. That is why God can now extend eternal life as a gift – completely free of charge. Christ did not make the down payment for our sins. He made the full payment.

A gift though can be rejected or received. So how does one receive the gift of eternal life?

The answer to that question can be found in the book God specifically wrote to tell us how to receive eternal life – the book of John. We are told in John 20:31, “But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.” Ninety-eight times in the book of John, the word “believe” is used. John 1:12 reads, “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’s best known verse reads, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” (John 3:16)

The word believe means to trust. Acknowledging that I am a sinner, I must come to God recognizing that His son took the punishment for my sins and rose again, and trust in Christ alone to save me. A person who deeply impacted my life with the clarity of the gospel said, “The message behind the gospel is: ‘Be satisfied with the thing that satisfies God.’” Only when I am satisfied that His Son’s death and that death *alone* accomplished my salvation, am I eternally His. I acknowledge to God, “If you cannot take me to heaven, I am going to hell. You and you alone are my only way to eternal life.” At that second, we are as certain of heaven as though we are already there. Eternal life begins at that moment and will culminate in His presence. Jesus’ promise was, “He who believes in Me has everlasting life.” (John 6:47)

So what part does saying a prayer have to do with salvation? Absolutely nothing. We are not saved by saying a prayer. We are saved by trusting Christ. That’s why Christ could look at the thief on the cross and say, “Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in paradise.” (Luke 23:43) Nothing is ever said of the thief “saying a prayer”. There on the cross as he hung alongside of the Savior of the world, he believed in Christ as his Savior. Hence Christ said to him, “Assuredly, I say to you, today, you will be with Me in paradise.” (Luke 23:43)

That does not mean saying a prayer at the moment one comes to Christ is wrong. Such a prayer has two advantages. One is that it cements in the person’s mind what he is doing (and probably did at least 30

seconds before he prayed) – trusting Christ. Secondly, having verbalized it to God, such a prayer encourages one to verbalize it to others. God does not need to be informed. He is fully aware of what the person doing – trusting Christ. But having expressed his decision to God encourages the new convert to now express it to others.

Several things are important though. One is that in leading people to Christ, we need to make clear that saying a prayer does not save. Explain to them that it is trusting Christ that saves. Prayer is only how they tell God what they are doing. That is why if I sense the non-Christian is prepared to come to Christ I ask, “Would you like to pray right now and tell God you are trusting Christ?” If they respond positively, I then say, “Now before we pray, let me explain something. Saying a prayer does not save; it’s trusting Christ that saves. Prayer is only how you tell God what you are doing. But if right now you want to trust Christ, here is how you express that to God. Why don’t you pray aloud with me as I pray?” I then lead them in prayer, phrase by phrase as they tell God what they are doing.

If you have made it clear that saying a prayer does not save, after they have verbalized to God what they have done, here is what should happen. Suppose you ask them, “If you stood before God and He were to ask you, ‘Why should I let you into heaven,’ what would you say?” They ought to respond, “I have trusted Christ to save me,” not, “I said a prayer.” Also, it is important not to confuse the gospel or a clear presentation of it with an unclear prayer. If you lead them in prayer, here’s the kind of prayer to use.

Dear God, I come to you now. I know I’m a sinner. Nothing I do makes me deserving of heaven. I now understand Jesus Christ died for me. He took my place and punishment and rose again. Right now I place my trust in Christ alone to save me. Thank you for the gift of eternal life I just received. In Jesus name, amen.

The “sinner’s prayer” is not essential to salvation. Trusting Christ saves. If you use a prayer in leading people to Christ, make certain you use it in a way that enhances and not confuses their understanding of salvation.