The Sinner’s Prayer (Lu. 18:9-14)

Someone heard me mention “the sinner’s prayer” in one of my messages and said they didn’t know what that was or if they’d ever said it. I thought I’d say a bit about that and hopefully bring some clarity on the matter.

According to the Bible, all people are sinners, not just axe murderers or people like Stalin, Hitler, or Mao. All have sinned and all fall short of God’s glory and purposes for our lives (Ro. 3:23). There is not a single person on the whole earth or from all of history who has not sinned. We sin in thought, in attitude, in words, in actions, and even by omission sometimes (not doing something we should have done). All are sinners. Sure, there are people who commit more sins and others who commit less sins. There are those who commit more serious sins like murder or even mass murder, and there are those who told what we call a little “white lie,” like, “No, that dress doesn’t make you look fat.” The Roman Catholic Church divides sins into different categories like mortal (leading to death) and venial (not as serious), and there’s some truth to that concept.

But the main thing to know is just that all have sinned, and the wages of sin is death (Ro. 6:23). When Adam and Eve just committed one sin, eating a forbidden fruit, they were banished from God’s presence and began to die physically. They also suffered many other negative consequences. For example both suddenly felt guilty and fearful of God after their sin, so they hid from Him. All women were condemned to experience great pain in childbirth. All human beings have to work hard to live. Their first son murdered their second son, and on and on it has gone throughout human history. The recent theological survey showed most don’t realize how serious sin is. They think most people are basically good and will be accepted by God. But this isn’t biblical.

The Bible says we are all born sinners, having inherited some sort of “sinful nature” from Adam and Eve, our first parents. We are flawed and fallen. We don’t have the beautiful character we were supposed to have, the loving, selfless character we see in Jesus, for example. We fall short. We miss the mark.

The most basic concept of the Gospel is that Christ came as a human being to take the punishment we humans deserve for our sins upon Himself and die in our place. (Isaiah 53; 1 Jn. 2:2) He took all the sins of the human race upon Himself and was killed because of them, for the wages of sin is death. In that way, He was cursed for us so we could be forgiven and blessed, the barrier between us and God could be removed, and we could be reunited with our Heavenly Father and Creator. (2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 3:13, 14)

He then rose from the dead as “the” sign that God had accepted His sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the human race. He commissioned His disciples (and that includes all Christians alive today and the Church of which we are all a part) to go into all the world and proclaim that this atonement had been made. As a result of this sacrifice, human beings may come to God and receive forgiveness of their sins and a new life in Christ. So the most basic essence of the Gospel is this idea, forgiveness has been made available. Everyone can be forgiven and reinstated in right relationship with God.

So how does that work? Well, it’s quite simple. We proclaim the message, and then people must believe it and act upon it. They act upon it by recognizing themselves as sinners who have always and only lived for their own desires and wishes, irrespective of what God might have wanted them/us to do. They “see” this when they hear the Gospel, they “see” it by faith, meaning they believe it and agree with this assessment. They repent, which means, change their minds and the direction or orientation of their lives, change how they think about Jesus Christ as well, and purpose that they want to “turn around” and go a different direction, God’s way instead of their own way.

Then they pray “the sinner’s prayer.” You’ll see a prayer of this sort at the end of lots of different “tracts,” which are little pamphlets containing the Gospel message. The writers of these tracts often have a prayer you can pray at the end. My own mother found such a prayer at the end of a book she read years ago called “Come Help Change the World,” by a man named Bill Bright. He just wrote out a little prayer for people who wanted to be forgiven and start a new life in Christ to pray. He did this to guide people in the kind of thing they needed to say to God to receive His forgiveness.

You see, as someone once said, God forgives any and all sins. But even God doesn’t forgive those who don’t *ask* Him to forgive them! So it’s very simple and easy, but nevertheless, it’s a step we all have to take. We have to say to God that we have sinned. We should confess our sins to God, and of course, the greatest sin is not loving God with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength. It’s having other “gods” before the true God. Other things we find more important or that we center our lives around. The greatest sin is not seeking God out and trying to live as He wants us to. He is the center of the universe. He made us and has given us all we have. We owe our lives to Him. And the amazing thing is, if we give our lives to Him, we don’t lose a thing. Instead, we gain the whole universe and eternal life as well.

So I would urge you, if you’ve never actually said such a prayer to God, to do it right away. Just say something like this: Lord, I’ve sinned. I’ve lived for myself instead of for you. I haven’t even cared what you made me for or what you wanted from me. I’m sorry and I ask you to forgive me of this and the many other sins I’ve committed by living selfishly. I repent and want to change. I want to go your way now, instead of my own way. I believe Jesus died to pay for or “atone” for the sins I’ve committed. I understand that is your Gospel message to me. So I confess that He is Lord. I believe He has paid for my sins. And I want to ask you, Lord Jesus, to come into my life and live in me. I ask you to forgive me and make me new. I ask you to teach me your way of living, so that from this day forward, my life pleases you. In the name of Jesus, I pray, and I receive right now. Amen.

Now let me say a bit more about this that’s quite important. You won’t find any sort of prayer like this in the Bible. (There is a short prayer, Lord be merciful to me a sinner, Lu. 18:13 and 1 Jn. 1:9 says if we confess our sins He’ll forgive them, plus many psalms, like 32, 50 and other references to those who asked for forgiveness.) But you won’t read a story where Jesus or His apostles preached and then led people in prayers like this. All this sort of thing developed over centuries of time. It especially came about in the 19th century here in the US. Before that time, the concepts of repentance and forgiveness through Christ’s atonement were certainly taught. And people certainly prayed to God for forgiveness. Probably the way most of them responded was by being baptized in water publicly. But the ideas we have, which are so prevalent today, of preachers calling people forward to an altar and leading them in this sort of prayer are recent developments.

That doesn’t make them wrong. As I said, they were developed to help people. Some had taken a sort of passive attitude that God knew their address, and if He wanted to do anything in their lives, He certainly could find them and “zap them.” This was too passive, so preachers developed the idea of calling people to an “inquirers bench” where they could be counseled and prayed for, to promote a more active response. This gradually evolved into the idea of leading people in a “sinner’s prayer” to “accept Christ” as Lord and Savior. It was a good thing, because it showed people how to respond and act on what God had provided in Christ.

However, there is a negative aspect to it as well. The drawback to this approach, as I see it, was that you could get people to say this sort of prayer and think that was “all there was to it.” You’d see evangelists and pastors lead people in this sort of prayer after a rousing, emotional sermon, and then tell them they were all saved. I’ve often seen this sort of thing, where the pastor will even tell the audience to praise God that all these souls have been saved today, and the congregation cheers. Well, that may sound good, but there’s a problem with it.

You see, the prayer is a form. It’s kind of a tool, something we use to help people understand what they need to do. We do need to confess our sins to God and confess that Jesus is Lord. We do need to make up our minds that we’re going to repent, change directions, and start living as God would have us live. We do need to ask for forgiveness and we need to believe that God hears us and forgives. We need to ask Jesus to come into our lives by His Spirit and believe that when we ask Him to, He does. Having someone lead us in a prayer to do that can be very helpful, and I’ll dare say that probably millions of people have become Christians that way.

However, the outer form of this prayer doesn’t by itself save anyone! A prayer doesn’t save you; *Jesus* saves you!! He is the Author of Salvation and Life. So what saves us is coming to Him, interacting with Him, believing in Him, confessing Him, being touched by Him. Salvation, Christian life, is a relationship with God. So while the sinner’s prayer *can* be a start to that, it only *is* such a thing if your heart is really seeking that and willing to do whatever it takes for it to happen. The prayer only “works” if your heart is in the right condition when you pray it. In Luke 18, two men prayed, but only one man’s heart was right, so he was forgiven.

My own life is another good illustration of this. You see, my mother was the first in our family to pray this prayer, as I mentioned. She found it at the end of a book, and she prayed it sincerely. Her life was changed by praying that prayer, so she began telling others about her experience and urging them to come to Christ as well. She told me about it, because she knew I was smoking pot and drinking, and she was worried about me. She urged me to give my life to God. To help me do that, she took me to different Christian leaders, hoping they could lead me along the right path. These men all talked with me and tried to get me to do what my mother had done. After speaking with me, they all led me in saying this sort of prayer. To my recollection, I prayed that prayer three different times with different people over a period of a few years. But nothing really happened. I didn’t feel anything or experience anything. My life didn’t change. I continued on the same path, living the same lifestyle, using a variety of drugs, drinking, smoking, living in immorality, and so on.

However, looking back, I realize that after praying that way, I was “led” along a path of life that caused me to eventually grow tired of how I was living. I joined the Navy and got in trouble for my use of drugs and my lifestyle. Eventually, I was sent to a drug rehab program. I became tired of my lifestyle *and wanted to change*. Then I had an encounter with God at a small group meeting in a home, where I really saw a demonstration of the power of God. After that experience, someone led me in the sinner’s prayer again, and though I must confess, I didn’t “feel” anything special when I prayed that prayer, I really *did* want my life to change. I wanted God to help me, to forgive and change me, and so I prayed from the heart, sincerely. Looking back, I realize that the difference was, I was willing at that time to repent. This had not been the case before. So when I prayed that time, the fourth time, the prayer “took” in the sense that it was a point of contact between me and God, and my life hasn’t been the same since.

So the point is, repeating a sinner’s prayer, admitting one is a sinner and asking God for forgiveness, and at the same time surrendering one’s life to God and asking God to actually come into one’s heart and live in and through one’s life, this is a very important point of contact, a very important step. But always remember, the *prayer* isn’t what saves. *Jesus* saves, and He saves us when we truly make a connection with Him through faith and repentance. It happens when our hearts sincerely connect with His.