

The Potential Heresy of the Standard Sinner's Prayer Pt. 1

Salvation Talks

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Good morning, everyone. This is Pastor Sean Harris from Fayetteville, North Carolina, a beautiful Thursday morning. Pastor Bill has joined me again for another discussion. This time we want to talk about the “sinner’s prayer.”

It seems as though the issue just keeps coming up in our ministry and so we felt like in addition to the writings that we have done on both our blogs that we want to articulate a discussion of this.

Recently Bill and I were having a conversation with a missionary who made reference to being in 300 different churches in America and has yet to be challenged on the lack of biblical basis for a sinner’s prayer. And let’s just kind of unpack this a little bit, Bill. He was speaking a message testifying of his own conversation and he said something about the fact that the prayed the prayer before, but finally it came alive or... unpack that a little bit more.

Pastor Bill:

Well, he said it a couple of times while he was with us. He said that although he had prayed the “sinner’s prayer” many times, this time the Lord actually did it. So there was a particular time when, I surmise, a heart attitude, a level of faith, a level of repentance, a level of sincerity, something made the difference in this man or he felt like that this time he prayed the prayer it actually completed a business transaction, as it were, between he and the Lord.

Sean Harris:

And he readily admitted that he prayed it numerous times and as we are confident and those that will listen to this this week and in the months and years to come have prayed the prayer numerous times before as well and they are wondering: “Did it take? Aren’t they?”

Pastor Bill:

Of course they are. And really what it does is it fosters an environment where people are willing to get saved hundreds of times because they are just not sure if the last time they prayed it they

were sincere enough, had enough faith, or called on the right person of the trinity. I have heard it all.

Sean Harris:

Let's talk about this before we get into it. For those that might not be familiar with the sinner's prayer, give us a general idea of how the sinner's prayer goes and how it is used.

Pastor Bill:

Well, it can be found on a myriad of websites, gospel tracts, salvation booklets, periodical articles, billboards. Actually out on I-95 it says, "Jesus is the Savior of the World. Ask him to be yours today." And it is the idea that you can be saved by asking God for it. In other words, salvation is an answer to prayer. You ask God to save you and he saves you.

Now this differs in the amount of mechanical repetition from one camp, tract, or denomination to another; but the principle is the same: salvation is an answer to prayer.

Sean Harris:

So I am looking at a tract that John R. Rice wrote 50 years ago and there has been an addition to it on the back and this is kind of how it goes.

"You are saved when you trust Christ, but much of the assurance and joy that you get when you claim Christ and he claims you and sends the Holy Spirit to make you happy. If you are willing to claim him, then just say so today in the following statement."

And then let me read the statement.

"Dear Dr. Smith, realizing I am a sinner and believing that Christ died for my sins, I here and now trust him to be my personal Savior depending on him to forgive all my sins, change my heart, give me everlasting life as he promised to do. I am glad to confess him as my Savior and gladly mail this to you today."

And then you put the date, the sign and the address down and then I stick this in the mail and I am saved. That is the idea, isn't it?

Pastor Bill:

It seems to be. That is a somewhat innocent sort of confessional prayer of I have now trusted Christ or I am trusting Christ. I think our aim today, Pastor Sean, is as you have pointed out many times—first in your writing that is available on SermonAudio and then in numerous messages—not to combat a confessional prayer I am trusting Christ to save me, but rather this idea that I am now asking him to save me.

Sean Harris:

That is right and certainly we want to acknowledge the fact that there are many people who are truly born again who were nonetheless led by some type of a soul winner in a prayer. Wouldn't that be true?

Pastor Bill:

Sure it would. They have been saved by hearing the gospel in a worship service or what have you. And just like Cornelius and his household, while they were hearing the gospel the Holy Spirit fell on them as they believed. But at the end of the service an addendum was placed on the message that said, "If you want to be saved, then you must do the following steps." And they are somewhat fragile with how they handle it: Walk an aisle, fill out a card, talk to a counselor, get more questions answered. But there are many people that add these things with the idea that if you have this experience you can rest assured that you are saved.

Sean Harris:

And we would say that if anyone responds authentically that that response is the evidence that they have already been converted.

Pastor Bill:

That is the flavor of Romans 10:14 where it says, "How will they call on him in whom they have not believed?"

And Paul was good enough in 13 epistles—some say 14—13 epistles at least and many chapters of Scripture to say that salvation is by grace through faith. And so we know that whatever Romans 10:13 is speaking of, it is speaking of the salvation of a man or woman who has already believed on Christ and been saved.

Sean Harris:

Let's go ahead and quote Romans 10:13 in case there is a listener that is not familiar with that verse.

Pastor Bill:

Well, it is a quotation that Paul is doing of Joel chapter two. It says, "Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved."

Sean Harris:

And so that is kind of the crutch or the lynch pin or the cornerstone of this whole discussion, isn't it?

Pastor Bill:

It sure is.

Sean Harris:

The idea that whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. And so this idea is you must open you mouth and call on him and that if anyone does that, they will be saved. But the problem becomes people do it over and over again with no real assurance. Why is that?

Pastor Bill:

Well, it is easy. I can have an assurance that my three year old, eight year old, 12 year old, 73 year old or 99 year old relative has been saved if they say particular sets of words.

Sean Harris:

Now we are not suggesting that a person should not pray, are we?

Pastor Bill:

No. Prayer is a natural part of the believer's life.

Sean Harris:

In our paragraph on our contemporary issue page we actually have a discussion on the sinner's prayer. We believe prayer is an important part of the believer's life and that it is as natural as breath for a believer and that the will of God is accomplished through prayer. So we are not suggesting in any way, shape or form that we would stop someone from praying. But we are saying that you do not pray to get saved. We are not encouraging anyone to pray to get saved.

Let's unpack that some more.

Pastor Bill:

Well, there is a fine difference between the answer of Paul and Silas in a Philippian jail where the only time that the question is asked in Scripture: What must I do to be saved? You would think that if there was ever a time for instruction to be given, that it would be given there. And many will say, "Well, it is not given." I say it is given.

Sean Harris:

Well, it is Acts chapter 16.

Pastor Bill:

That's right.

Sean Harris:

For those that might not be familiar with that, we are reading from Acts 16.

Pastor Bill:

And it is around the midnight hour. Paul and Silas are in prison. They are suffering for their witness of Jesus and the Philippian jailer, after seeing an earthquake and ready now to take his life Paul and Silas say, "Do not harm yourself. We have not left. We haven't escaped. We are all still here." And the man coming and trembling says, "Sirs, what I must do to be saved?"

Sean Harris:

And that is when Paul says, "Ask Jesus in your heart. Pray this prayer." Isn't that what he says?

Pastor Bill:

No, that is not what he says.

Sean Harris:

Ok, but then why do we do it over and over and over again? That is what is so frustrating to me is the Scripture says, "Believe."

Pastor Bill:

"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved." It is very simple and yet we see that in the story of Nicodemus in John three, in the story of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts chapter eight, in the story of the conversion of Paul in Acts chapter nine and Cornelius in Acts chapter 10, the blind man in John chapter nine. Over and over again we see that there is an absence of the sinner's prayer in the conversion stories of the New Testament. That should bother the New Testament soul winner. But what we are finding is that this is an issue that is really never brought up. No one scrutinizes a gospel tract that says, "Pray now to receive."

Sean Harris:

It seems to have been just so much a part of our culture that we just can't seem to separate the Word of God from this tradition.

Pastor Bill:

Right. And what is disconcerting is that this is a heaven and hell issue. If this were just an issue of, well, our dear brothers down the road baptize babies or they don't believe in a millennium, but what we are dealing with here is an absence of the gospel from the plan of salvation. When you preach that Christ died for your sins according to the Scriptures and rose from the dead

according to the Scriptures, there is the gospel that is intrinsic to what should be New Testament preaching. A person should be able to hear the gospel, believe in the gospel, 1 John 5:13, if you believe in the gospel you know you have eternal life. If this is the way it is, then how does the sinner's prayer in any way give consideration to the gospel? A person can pray without believing on the Word of Jesus.

Sean Harris:

Sure, because their faith is in their prayer, not the person and work of Jesus Christ. And the soul winner often times creates unnecessary confusion into the scenario because he or she is not content to stop and say, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ."

They feel like they are on a boat with a fishing rod in their hand and it is their job to jerk the pole just the right way so that the hook seats properly in the mouth of the fish.

Pastor Bill:

Right. A good day is when you can come back and tell all your fishing buddies you got a fish.

Sean Harris:

And I know I got a fish because they said these words. If I just tell the person, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved," then I walk away going, "I wonder if they believed."

Pastor Bill:

Right. We are overlooking the entire idea of water baptism in the New Testament. Water baptism in the New Testament is not supposed to be this sort of thing a person does after they make a profession of faith, because we have this idea in our churches often when I hear it is that if you would like to join the church, come forward. If you would like to be saved, come forward. If you would like to make a public profession of your faith, come forward. If you need to be water baptized, come forward. What we have just done is we have added a step there that was not intended in the New Testament. We find that the primary way of confessing one's faith was being baptized by the community of Christ and joining them in attendance. That was the profession of faith. You could have a relative amount of confidence in a person's faith in Christ if they then started identifying with the community of Christ both in baptism and attendance.

Sean Harris:

But, again, that baptism wasn't because I am pulling a trailer behind my van and any time I get a chance I am dunking as many people as I can. I have been to evangelism conferences before, Pastor Bill, where they have encouraged us to have portable baptismal pools to make it as convenient as possible for the person to be baptized. If your goal is to make something as convenient as possible, as easy as possible, then you can probably get whatever desired effects you want. But in Acts chapter two we know that when Peter said, "Repent and be baptized," that

that baptism was, in fact, a turning away from Judaism and an embracing of Christianity. Would that have cost them anything in Acts two?

Pastor Bill:

It definitely would have. It would have cost them everything. And, by the way, maybe we should just point out here that they did not have a step of what we call it a step of obedience. We call it that, but baptism costs us nothing today, very little—a little embarrassment, maybe.

Sean Harris:

Sure. Now where... if we were in Nigeria, if we were in the Sudan, if we were in China, if we were in some of these North Korea, then baptism could, in fact, be a tremendous event that cost us something. But let's face it, when a Baptist Church is baptizing six year olds on a Sunday morning it doesn't cost that six year old a thing.

Pastor Bill:

No, in fact, he is pretty popular that morning.

Sean Harris:

And there is a good chance that mom and dad are going to take him out to dinner and it is almost like the tooth fairy has visited in some households.

So, again, this is the method by which we have changed everything with regard to Scripture. I want to take the time to read it so that we articulate carefully what we believe. "We reject the teaching that salvation is gained by one's asking God to save them or by asking Jesus into their heart. We further reject the notion that any particular prayer works like a sort of incantation or that there is a particular group of right words to get saved or to get one saved."

And this is what the dilemma becomes. Are these the right words? Did I say them well enough? And our missionary friends said, "Well, I finally said them and it took effect."

Well is that he 13th time, the 30th time? What was difference between this time and the previous time? And, you know, the person can't even identify it often times.

Pastor Bill:

And really why this is a difficult conversation to have with many people is that if they are wrong—how do you account for the last several years of ministry? How do you account for the hundreds of converts you have seen in youth rallies, in vacation Bible school, and youth and missions conferences? How do you account for your own salvation if, in fact, you are saying, "I am saved because I asked for it"?

And there is this hybrid. There are people who will meet you in the middle of the road and they say, “Well, it doesn’t matter what words you say, because God knows the heart. But what they are missing is that you are still leading the person to believe that there must be a request submitted for the heavenly granter to give you salvation and, again, this is devoid of the whole idea of salvation by faith alone in the gospel.

Sean Harris:

Right. And I want to further reinforce that that gospel is a promise from God. That is what that gospel is. Romans chapter one verse one and two Paul makes it abundantly clear that the gospel is a promise and so our faith is in a promise. And, Bill, I don’t have to ask you to keep your Word if I trust that you are a man of character. If you make a promise to me, I will be at your house Friday at five o'clock to help you put a new roof on your house, I don’t have to ask you then to be at my house if you have already made a promise. At this point all I need to do is have faith in the fact that Bill keeps his Word.

And that is what we want to help people understand that God has made a promise beginning in Genesis 3:15, a promise that he would crush a head, that he would be victorious, that forgiveness is available for all those who will trust in the finished work of Jesus Christ—not all those who will ask them to save them—but all those who will trust in him by faith.

Pastor Bill:

The reason this is such a passionate issue with me is that I struggled in the independent fundamental King James only preaching Baptist Church most of my days where if I doubted my salvation I would simply be led though the prayer again.

Sean Harris:

I saw it in this church of years and years. Bill, when I was a young soldier out on Fort Bragg we used to go out to the barracks. That is when you had open access to the barracks. We could go soul winning. We would go into the replacement detachments. We would wake soldiers up. We would ask them, “Do you know for sure if you died today you would go to heaven?” The person would say, “No, I don’t.” We would say, “How would you like to have assurance?” And they would say, “Oh, I would like to have assurance.” We would show them one or two verses from Romans and then we would say, “If you pray this prayer you can have assurance of your salvation.”

The guy would say these words. He would roll over and go back to sleep and we would report back that another soul was saved.

Pastor Bill:

Good heavens. And there is no way that you preached the gospel, and I know what you mean, because I have done that myself.

Sean Harris:

How... how in the world can you wake a guy up out of being asleep, let him say some words, and then but that was what I was taught to do. And it is really only until the Lord opened my eyes that this is not the way God intended for the gospel to be communicated that there is a necessity of the conviction of sin and that I can't do that. Only the Lord does that.

Pastor Bill:

What really bothered me at 15 years, 16 years old was that I could not go to John 3:16 and get assurance of salvation. How in the world can you know the world famous verse held up at sporting events: "Whosoever believeth in him will not perish, but have everlasting life"...? And I remember how clouded my mind was to that. I remember reading that. I remember being on a phone call with my sister as she would read this to me. My sister is nine years older than I am and she would say, "Don't you understand what that means?" And I was so dumbfounded because here I was in high school. I was preaching sermons just about every month. I wanted to be a preacher. I felt good when I preached. I loved leading people to what I called salvation when I myself had assurance of my salvation. I remember reading John 3:16, John 3:18, John 3:36, John 5:24, John 6:47, John 10:27 and 28. And I remember thinking: Why can't I see myself in those verses? What does it mean to "believe in Christ?"

Sean Harris:

Our paragraph continues. "We believe salvation is given to men and women because of their repentant faith alone in the person and work of Jesus Christ upon the cross without praying a prayer."

I think, Bill, you were reconciling this words that you were led in with the simple word believe in John 3:16 and you couldn't put those two together.

Pastor Bill:

No. Here is what I knew. If I wanted to be saved I had to pray. But that is not what John 3:16 said.

Sean Harris:

No. John 3:16 says "believe."

Pastor Bill:

That is right.

Sean Harris:

"Trust."

Pastor Bill:

That's right.

Sean Harris:

Rest in. Be assured of. Depend on. Lean on. Rely upon. Those are all words and we specifically put the word repentant faith in a means of communicating that this faith is faith toward God.

Pastor Bill:

That is right. And, furthermore, of course, every verse has a context, but John 3:14 is speaking about Christ being lifted up on a cross. We are not talking about believing that Jesus exists. We are not talking about trusting that he is going to make you wealthy. We are not saying trust him that he is going to keep America free. We are talking about being cured from the bite of the serpent in that allegory in John 3:14. We are talking about the Son of Man being lifted up on a cross and that whoever believes in him will not perish from that bite. They will be saved. And they will have everlasting life.

Sean Harris:

That is why I often say the person and work... That is very familiar language for me: the person and work. The person is all man all God. Pull away any of that and you are not trusting in the Christ of the Bible.

Pastor Bill:

That is right. John 8:24, "Except ye believe that I am you will die in your sins."

Sean Harris:

"I AM" was a reference to his eternality, his divinity, his existence before his incarnation. And this is precisely why we would say that a Mormon is not saved unless he or she departs from what we would consider orthodox Mormon teaching. They can't believe in orthodox Mormon teaching and be saved.'

Pastor Bill:

No and how could you when you believe that Elohim and Mary got together and the result was Jesus. How could you possibly say that you believe that Jesus is the only begotten Son of God?

Sean Harris:

And so we are emphasizing that faith must be in the person and work of Jesus Christ, the gospel,

the good news presented in 1 Corinthians 15 in that there is no need for anyone to articulate words in order to be saved, any words at all.

Pastor Bill:

That is right. There is no need. And at the same time reading more into our paragraph, we believe that saved people consequently profess saving faith in Christ both to God and man through baptism and verbal witness. And we have five or six Scriptures listed there that show and whosoever believed on him will not be ashamed. They will confess him. They will confess Christ. We are not dealing here with a faith that doesn't have works resulting from it. We are not dealing with a salvation that keeps a person a mute. We are not at all. We are saying that there will be a season where a person will have opportunity to put faith, to profess Jesus as Savior after their faith in Christ and that they will indeed confess it.

Sean Harris:

We are saying that is a natural outgrowth of being converted that we would see it exceptionally strange that a person said on January first, 2010 I put my faith in Christ and for the last two years I have never articulated anything about that. We would say, no. That wasn't authentic conversion. There is something wrong there, that people who are made new creatures in Christ, 2 Corinthians 5:17, are changed at that professing Christ becomes a routine part of who they are.

Pastor Bill:

Without question, The only person that I can remember being found in Scripture as being called a "secret disciple" is a man by the name of Joseph of Arimathaea and we find that, you know, Jesus' ministry was only three and a half years long if you could count four Passovers in the gospel of John. And you see that Jesus' ministry is three and a half years long and you are dealing with Joseph of Arimathaea and Nicodemus probably two of the 71 members of the Sanhedrin (if you count the high priest), probably the only dissenting voters and we find that in a moment of crisis they were willing to confess their allegiance and their faith in the Christ of God. They buried the Son of God. How can we possibly put ourselves in their spot? This we know: They did not remain secret disciples when the opportunity arose for them to serve their master.

Sean Harris:

Now we are not saying in any way, shape or form, that we would interrupt a person if they started praying. I would never interrupt a person. We are talking about very specifically leading someone in a prayer. If I was with someone and I was showing him the gospel here at my round table, and all of the sudden they just started crying and confessing sin before the Lord and communicating faith in Christ—I would just push away from my table and let the Lord do the work that only God can do.

Pastor Bill:

Yeah and there is a solid possibility that the gospel being proclaimed will not lead a person into a works salvation prayer. You know, they are not going to say, “Well, let’s get up and go get baptized so I can seal this thing, so I can get really saved,” any more than they would say, “Well, let me now ask God to save me.” No. They have just heard the promise of God through the gospel.

Sean Harris:

And the in working of the Holy Spirit may result in emotional outbursts. It may result in the desire to confess sin. It may result in Acts chapter two. What must we do to be saved? What we are suggesting is that the only appropriate response of the soul winner, the evangelist, the preacher is “trust in Christ, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, turn to God, put your faith in him, believe in the gospel.” That is what our position is, that we are never to lead someone in words to say or tell them you must ask Jesus in your heart or tell them that they must do anything other than faith in Christ, faith in the gospel.

Pastor Bill:

Very well. And you alluded to this Sunday morning in your message. I would encourage the listener to listen to that in a portion where the man asks for an increase in faith. We are not saying that a sinner can’t ask God for the faith to believe on him for salvation.

Sean Harris:

Yeah, that is really important. Let’s unpack that, because I think that is very, very important to distinguish between the idea of asking God to open your eyes to see who he is and asking God to save you. Those are two totally different ideas.

I had a man that we were dealing with a couple of years ago and he just could not confess “I believe.” And I said to him. I said, “You need to spend the next week calling out to God and saying, ‘Are you alive?’” I said, “Go get in the middle of a football field and just walk through the woods and just call out to God and speak to God and pour your heart out.” I was never encouraging him to ask Jesus in his heart. I was saying to him, “Ask God to reveal himself to you.”

Pastor Bill:

Right. And we have good reason to believe that the eyes of the Lord are in every place beholding the evil and the good. His ears are open to the cry of those who are seeking after him. And, to be quite frank, I am not convinced that Romans 10:13 is not speaking about that scenario right there, that the one who does believe on Christ, the one who is calling out to him in a form of worship will be the one who is born again. Yet we do believe that God hears the prayers of people who are desperate for him.

Sean Harris:

But if I have got someone who says to me, “How can I be assured of salvation? How can I know that I am born again?” I am never going to say to them, “Ask God to save you.” That is two totally different ideas. How can I know that there is God? How can I know that he is there? How can I know that what you are telling me is the truth? Then I will say to that person, “Ask God to show you,” because at this point I have shown him some Scripture. There is nothing more I can do to convince them. I am not the Holy Spirit. I can’t open their eyes. They are dead. They are in need of rebirth. They are in need of God confirming his existence to them and only God can do that. So I send them away from the office telling them, “Seek the Lord while he may be found.”

Pastor Bill:

That is right. And let’s fast forward to the objection, because we are going to have some listeners who are out there who are going to immediately beeline for the pet passages. So let’s mention a couple of those.

Luke 18, the publican in the temple. “God, be merciful to me a sinner.” Let’s talk about another one, the thief on the cross. “Remember me when you come into your kingdom or when you come as king.” Those are two, quite frankly, pet passages allegedly proving this doctrine. But what I would ask the listener to do is before you hang your hat, your eternal security upon two or three passages, consider that both those scenarios are devoid of the gospel. You find no confession of belief in Christ as Savior.

I am not saying they are two different gospels preached in the New Testament. I am saying that Paul is clear on what it takes to be saved. Peter is clear on what it takes to be saved. Luke is clear in his recording of Acts and what it takes to be saved. There is no reason—and I am not saying some books are for the reader and some are not. But what I am saying is when you have hundreds of passages in the gospel of John and in the writings of Paul and Peter and James and Jude dealing with the faith once delivered to the saints, putting faith in Christ, the promises of God, there is no reason to take two or three special passages and hang your eternal security upon them.

Sean Harris:

Well, this is very similar to our discussion that we had about the age of accountability and how many, many people go to the narrative about David.

Pastor Bill:

“I cannot go. He cannot come to me, but I will go to him.”

Sean Harris:

Right. And we said that we are not going to build an entire doctrine that all infants go to heaven because of a mere statement by David in a narrative form. And that is what you have in Luke. You have a narrative of a man asking God to be merciful to him. And we are saying that human

beings should ask God to be merciful to him, that that is the appropriate and right mindset to have that we are dependent on God, and that there should be a fear of God.

But why would you go there when you have passages like Acts 16 that clearly communicate salvation?

Pastor Bill:

The reason that I would if I were in that predicament and did when I was in that predicament is because it calls into the question not only my salvation, but the salvation of every little boy and girl, every adult at their screen door, every person on five day club that I have ever led through the prayer. It calls into question my salvation and the salvation of everybody else in whom I have had the opportunity to share such a thing.

Sean Harris:

Well, the fact of the matter is that there is nothing you can do about the past. You were operating with the knowledge that you had. I was operating with the knowledge that I had. But now that God has opened my eyes to what the true gospel is and how it should be communicated, I believe it is imperative that we do all we can to correct this in the church.

Pastor Bill:

Without question. You made allusion to the Romans 10:13 previously. In that verse, there is a phrase that is often used in the Bible, and we are reminded of the big word of “hermeneutics.” Some people out there know what that means and some don’t. It is the study of finding the interpretation Scripture and making it come alive or applicable to today. That “calling upon the name of the Lord” goes all the way back to the days of Abraham when he built an altar to “call upon the name of the Lord.” Surely we are not saying that Abraham “asked Jesus into his heart,” or Jacob “asked Jesus into his heart.”

The Church of the epistle of Corinthians was written to those who “in every place call upon the name of the Lord.” Certainly those Corinthian believers did not meet every first day of the week and ask Jesus to save them all over again. So sound biblical exegesis, sound biblical interpretation does not allow for us to take a phrase and run for the hills with our pet doctrine.

Sean Harris:

No, Romans 10 has to be interpreted within its entire context. And if we look at nine and 10 and 14 we see clearly that the focus is believing on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Pastor Bill:

Right. And the idea of being able to waltz on up to a judge and ask him for acquittal devoid of his sense of justice is a mockery to his holiness. Listen to what an author from Minnesota says. “Neither society nor the universe can hold together if judges simply say to every murderer and

rapist, 'Are you sorry? Ok. The state forgives you. You may go.' In cases like these we see that while a victim may have a forgiving spirit the state cannot forsake justice. So it is with God's justice. All sin is serious because it is against God. He is the one whose glory is injured when we ignore or disobey or blaspheme him. His justice will no more allow him simply to set us free than a human judge can cancel all the debts a criminal owes the society. The injury done to God's glory by our sin must be repaired so that in justice his glory shines more rightly. If we criminals are to go free and be forgiven, there must be some dramatic demonstration that the honor of God is upheld even though former blasphemers are set free and not merely asking a judge for acquittal."

Sean Harris:

And that is the idea of there has to be faith in the finished work of Christ, because the finished work of Christ is whereby God's justice is not compromised. According to the article that paragraph you just read, if all the judge has to do is hear you say, "I am sorry," and there isn't any justice served by a penalty being imposed on someone, then a mockery of justice has occurred. But when God punishes his Son because of my sin then my faith is not in my asking. My faith is in the fact that the offense has been punished in Christ Jesus.

Pastor Bill:

That is right. It is absurd, Pastor Sean, for us to be defendants on the stand and someone says, "I need to tell you that your penalty has already been served. Your debt to society has already been paid." And we insist on asking the judge for acquittal for a crime that has already been paid for.

Sean Harris:

Now at that point, once that good news has been communicated to me, what I must do at that point is trust the truth of the message and in trusting the truth of the message, I will get up from the court and I will walk out a free man. I don't need to say anything. I don't need to ask anything. I may communicate gratitude.

Pastor Bill:

Oh, I would.

Sean Harris:

I may communicate praise.

Pastor Bill:

Yeah.

Sean Harris:

But that is not to save me. That is an outpouring of the fact that I just heard good news.

Pastor Bill:

“Are you kidding me? You paid my debt?”

Sean Harris:

Exactly. I don't need to ask at that point. I can rejoice. And those are all evidences of the fact that I believe.

Pastor Bill:

Right.

Sean Harris:

If I would keep sitting on that stand and keep asking a judge over and over again: “Will you forgive me?” Obviously I haven't heard the good news, because the good news is your debt has been forgiven.

Pastor Bill:

That is glorious.

Sean Harris:

And so this is what we are trying to help people understand is that we want to direct evangelists, pastors, soul winners, Sunday school teachers to teach the person that their faith must be in the gospel, in the message, in the promise, in the person and work of Jesus Christ, not in the articulation of words or the fact that they asked.

And let me see if there is anything more we want to wrap up here.

“Although praying eventually results from true belief in the person and the work of Christ, and many that are converted will of their own initiative express this repentance and faith in prayer, we believe that faith in prayer is still a work of man and is therefore not effective to save one's soul.”

So what we are trying to in this final second to final sentence, we are trying to separate, Bill, that our acknowledgement that many people will communicate words upon being born again, but these words are not what saves them.

Pastor Bill:

That is correct. It is just an acknowledgement of what has been done for them and their acceptance of it.

Sean Harris:

And there is really no need for me to lead them in any words. In fact, if I lead them in words, it often confuses them because it reinforces the idea that these are the right words because the evangelist, the preacher told me to say these words. And then really, Bill, what is even more puzzling is I don't know whether they have actually put faith in Christ because I have prompted them through this entire process. So how do I know that God has done a work?

All right, finally, "We believe that it is unbiblical for tracts, websites or people to communicate that one can be assured of salvation if a prayer is voiced sincerely." Why are we saying this idea of sincerely?

Pastor Bill:

Well, because that is usually the asterisk by the statement. People who understand that decades of sinners' prayers have left churches empty and society godless have come now to the understanding that you have to add addendums to their plan of salvation. Well, if the sinner's prayer of simply asking God to save you, then what does? Well, it must be that you need to pray more sincerely.

Sean Harris:

You weren't sincere enough, Bill. See, the difference between last time and the time before and the time before was God knew that you weren't sincere. And so now the question becomes how sincere is sincere?

Pastor Bill:

Right and it is deceptive, because they can add shades to this requirement such as did you repent enough, did you turn from this sin? Were you a rebel still in your heart? Did you turn over your life to him? Did you give Jesus your heart? Did you turn your life over to him? Did you give your heart to Christ?

These are all synonymous with the idea that you do not accept what Christ has done on your behalf.

Sean Harris:

In this way, ultimately the problem is we are robbing God of the glory of saving people by grace.

Pastor Bill:

You are exactly right. If I can finally quit being a jerk and a rebel and disobedient to the Lord, if

I can find it within myself to quit being such a disobedient, ornery so and so, then maybe, maybe I will get saved and then I will give credit for not being so stubborn.

Sean Harris:

Well, finally, I got to the point where I was sincere enough. You see, God was looking for a point where I was sincere enough and then once that level occurred, glory to God, I got sincere enough and so what we are doing here is we are robbing God of the glory of salvation. If we are saved by grace and grace alone and all I am doing is trusting in Christ, it is all of God.

If we communicate... man, I prayed that prayer, I prayed that prayer, but this time I was finally sincere enough, then the reason I am saved is because I got sincere enough. And it sure is a good thing that I got sincere enough, because if I hadn't got sincere enough I wouldn't be saved. And God was really on the edge of his seat waiting for me to get sincere enough and then when that happened he could save me.

Pastor Bill:

Yeah. I thank God if my prayer was sincere enough as if it is kind of a joint effort.

Sean Harris:

Sure and that ... ultimately that is what it goes down to. What I find ironic is the very churches that are just anti baptismal regeneration or anti sacramental in their understanding of the gospel are the churches that would blast the pope (as they should). They would blast the church of Christ for baptismal regeneration, and they are the same ones that are adding to the gospel through the articulation of words.

Pastor Bill:

That is right. We are glorified Catholics, most Baptists are glorified Catholics. The gospel made it possible for you to be saved, but it is not a done deal until you pray to receive.

Sean Harris:

Not much different than a confirmation in a Lutheran Church at 12 years old or any of the other actions that are necessary to be saved. And what we are saying is that the only thing you must do is believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. You can unpack that and unpack it and unpack it. And what I mean by unpack it is I mean make sure you understand what we mean by Jesus the Christ. Make sure you understand those things, who He is, His person, His work. But once you unpack that, there is nothing to add. There is no more to do. Just communicate who Jesus is, what He has done for you and then turn it over to the person by saying, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ."

If they believe, they are born again. If they don't, you walk away praying of them. There is nothing more you can do, Bill.

You must trust that God will save them according to his will. And that is the end of it. You can't get them saved for them and pushing them to say words only complicates and confuses the matter so don't do that. Just push them to put their faith in Christ and then watch God do a work.

When they come up to you and say, "Well, man, I need to be baptized," you are going to be excited about the fact that they got it. If you push them to get baptized then you are going to wonder, well, what else? What else am I am going to have to push them to? Push them to come to church, push them to read their Bible and then the whole time what is really suspect in the back of everyone's mind is their own conversion.

Pastor Bill:

Right. And you might remember in Hebrews chapter four, you have preached though that recently. Is that the gospel is mixed with faith. And that is what makes the difference. That is how people enter into the rest of God is the gospel is mixed with faith; not faith and prayer... faith!

Sean Harris:

Right. Romans 10:17. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God. All I can do as the evangelist, the soul winner is communicate the Word of God. And then trust that the Lord is working.

Well, this wraps up our discussion on the sinner's prayer. We hope it has been profitable and helpful to you. We want as many people as possible to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. We want to pull people away from putting their faith in a prayer and give them true assurance of conversion and that assurance of conversion is only going to come if they put their faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Once I understand that my sincerity is not what God measures, once I understand that the words I say is not what God is looking for, once I understand that faith, trust, leaning on the gospel of Jesus is what saves souls, then I can conclude that is what I am doing. I am doing it today. I am doing it tomorrow. I am going to keep doing it until God calls me home and that is where I get my assurance of salvation.

If this has been helpful, send us a note at pastor@bereanbaptistchurch.org. And we will be sure to respond to you, either Bill or myself. Bsturm.bbc@gmail.com or pastor@bereanbaptistchurch.org. Thanks for listening.