

PRAYING TO RECEIVE CHRIST, HUH ?
WHAT IN THE WORLD IS "A SINNER'S PRAYER?"

Is "praying to receive Christ" biblical?

Well, no, but is it anti-biblical? No, just confusing to many.

Someone once asked me why I never use the phrase "pray to receive Christ." I simply asked him what he meant when he used that special little phrase. He quoted John 1.12. "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name."

I asked him whether he believed we were saved by faith in Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection for us, or whether he thought we could be saved by a special prayer. Of course he agreed that we could only receive eternal life by believing in Jesus substitutionary atonement for sin. He was absolutely correct. As a matter of fact the figure of speech "received Him" is lucidly explained with the clear phrase "believe on His name."

Then I asked him at what millisecond did he think an individual passed from "death unto life?" He affirmed that it must be that moment when he "believed." That of course, might be known only to God, so I asked him what did any part of a prayer have to do with faith? If, instead of a prayer, the soul-winner or pastor giving the invitation simply said, "Right now, are you trusting in your good works to give you eternal life, or are you trusting in what Jesus did for you on the cross?"

Each individual could quietly say in his heart,

"I'm trusting in Jesus alone as my Savior."

or

"I'm sure God will save me because I'm a genuinely good person."
or anything else.

Then the one explaining the Gospel could assuredly say, "If you're trusting only in Jesus Christ, God has made a promise that you have eternal life. 'for God so loved the world. . .eternal life.' "

Now, the above statement is a radically different statement than, "If you just prayed that [*special*] prayer **and really meant every word**, the Bible says you're saved."

Notice, the speaker didn't say "**and really understood every word**," just "meant every word."

Unfortunately, I told my friend, I have talked to adults who sincerely prayed the "receive-Jesus-into-my-life" prayer, and by their own admission still believed that it was necessary to be good to go to heaven. Sincerity [*really meaning it*] does not assure us that the person understands. "Praying to receive Christ" makes no more sense than "letting Buddha into your throat" in order to become a Buddhist.

God's two favorite words for salvation are faith and belief. He uses them 196 times in the New Testament to refer to salvation. *see my blog, God's 2 favorite salvation words*

Ask him a series of questions until you are positive that he knows what he believes. Here are nine suggestions.

1. "What did Jesus do **for you** when He died on the cross?"
2. "What is His promise in John 3.16 about eternal life if you **trust** Him?"
3. "If you believe that He died instead of you, do **you** have eternal life?"
4. "What does the **Bible say** about very nice people who believe they are good enough to go to heaven?"
5. "What **are you** believing in right now?"
6. "What happens to very bad people who believe Jesus died for them?"
7. "**Where** will you go when you die? Heaven Hell And why?"
8. "**How** do you know?" (*he must explain with a whole sentence, not just a yes/no answer*)
9. "Tell me what the **Bible says**?"

Those who hold firmly that a person can be saved by praying are adding prayer to faith. Many even say, "This prayer doesn't save you, but **if you really mean this prayer**, you can know that you are going to heaven and have the forgiveness of sins." Then the pastor repeats a two-paragraph summation of theology which ends with "and thank you for giving me eternal life." When the supplicant opens his eyes, he is sure he will go straight to heaven because the pastor or soul-winner just told him so.

“Now raise your hand if just now you sincerely prayed that prayer.” Nonsense. You are about to give assurance of salvation to any “hand-raiser” who nodded his head to everything he was told to pray—newly saved as well as muddled.

I challenge you to simply add before the hand-raise thing, **“Right now you are either depending on your good works to save you in the same way you were when you walked in this building, or you are depending solely in the death of Jesus as the payment for your sin. Which are you trusting in?”**

Go ahead, ask any of the nine questions I listed above.

“Are you certain,” I ask, “that the one who prayed that special prayer understood everything he just uttered to God?” Yes, many people certainly do understand what they just “prayed,” but absolutely not all; however, they all come away with the speaker’s blessing that they have just been saved. The speaker asked if they really meant it, not if they understood everything in that prayer.

I have friends who often say, “If you just prayed that prayer and **really meant it**, you are saved and God has a home in heaven for you.”

False.

Of course he “meant it.” The drunk in the rescue mission “really meant it this time.” The drug addict has prayed it many times and was truly sincere. He is still depending on his sincerity for his salvation because somebody said, “If you really mean it.”

Catholics pray for God’s forgiveness and mean it every day and are not forgiven. My father-in-law, Chuck Zeman a pilot for Pan American Airways, prayed for forgiveness faithfully for years every night. He wasn’t saved until he understood salvation was by faith in Jesus, not by sincere prayers. In the same way any unbeliever can pray anything he’s told to without understanding.

A person who has just trusted Jesus Christ as his Savior should be able to go home and explain these 5 things to his spouse or friend, not just “I got saved!”

1. **“God never did anything wrong in His life.**
2. **God said He would punish our sin.**
3. **Everybody sins.**
4. **I can’t do anything to earn a place in heaven.**
5. **Jesus loves us all and died for every bit of our sin.**
6. **The Bible says since I believe Jesus died for me I have eternal life.**

“Will you believe this, please?”

The still-unsaved guy was not trying to fool you. He was not a hypocrite. He was not dishonest as he followed your directions—he simply did not understand the heavy theological message in that prayer. He was praying because he meant whatever the preacher told him to say.

In my experience in dealing with unsaved adults, many people were very sincere and “really meant it” when they “prayed to receive Christ” and were told they were “saved.” They weren’t faking anything, but they did not pray theologically. The one leading them in the “sinner’s prayer” was cramming a lot of theology into the 2-paragraph prayer which this lost soul couldn’t process. They weren’t saved at all. They said what the person encouraged them to pray. The person who encouraged them to be saved did not ask them to explain what **they meant** by their prayer.

WELL, WHEN SHOULD THEY PRAY?

It is only after a person is certain of his salvation and knows he has a home in heaven, do I encourage him to

pray, not a “sinner’s prayer to become saved,” but a “prayer of thanks that he has just become a child of God.”

* THIS IS THE POINT AT WHICH TO ENCOURAGE ANYONE TO PRAY IN THANKFULNESS.

* No one has to request to be saved, he only has to believe that Jesus personally died for the sinner’s own individual sins.

* This comes only after you are quite sure the child is already saved and is trusting Jesus!

* “Why don’t you **thank Jesus** right now for dying for you and giving you eternal life.”

* Never give anyone the assurance of his salvation by saying:

“Today is your spiritual birthday because you said that prayer.”

“You now have a home in heaven!”

“You’re saved!”

. . . unless he can explain salvation simply to you in his own words. Otherwise he is not saved. So ask him.

* No one has ever been saved by praying a prayer.

An adult is not saved by being good.

An adult is not saved by asking Jesus to forgive him. *Unsaved people do it every day.*

An adult is not saved by praying a special prayer.

No one receives salvation by “praying to receive Christ.” We believe to receive Christ.

An adult is not saved by asking Jesus to come into his heart.

An adult is not saved by opening his heart to Jesus or giving his heart to Jesus.

An adult is not saved by telling Jesus how sorry he is for bad things he’s done.

An adult is not saved by confessing all the sins he can think of.

An adult is not saved by taking communion which puts Jesus in his heart.

An adult is not saved by confirmation, confirming his *belief* in 100 answers he’s memorized.

There is no such thing as being saved by means of a “sinner’s prayer.” *If an individual is not trusting in Jesus before he prays, he is not trusting in Jesus just because he said any kind of prayer.*

“Praying to receive Christ” is not a biblical doctrine. Yes, many people have prayed, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” Well then, leave it at that. That’s might be the sinner’s prayer.

A child or adult is **saved by believing** something very specific. It’s our job to know what he is believing.

* Even children are only saved by believing. A child stops believing good works will save him and starts believing that only Jesus can save him. He used to trust that by being good he could earn eternal life. Now he trusts in Jesus as the one who paid for his sin. He can’t earn his eternal life. Just as adults are only saved by believing, so the child is never allowed to think he is going to heaven by repeating your special prayer while his eyes were closed.

Before he closes his eyes he should know

[and you should be pretty sure you know]