

## Does God Hear A Sinner's Prayer?

If one turns on the TV and listens to a modern "televangelist" he will most likely note that the broadcast is concluded with lost souls in the audience being encouraged to simply "pray the sinner's prayer," and that those who thus respond are assured of having been saved at that moment. Lost souls in the television audience are also often encouraged to pray the sinner's prayer "with" the "televangelist" who words the prayer. Billy Graham, who was famous for his "crusades," would encourage lost souls who responded to his invitation to "pray the sinner's prayer." A typical "sinner's prayer" at a **Graham Crusade** went like this: *"Dear Lord Jesus, I know that I am a sinner, and I ask for your forgiveness. I believe You died for my sins and rose from the dead. I turn from my sins and invite You to come into my heart and life. I want to trust and follow You as my Lord and Savior. In Your Name, Amen."* In very similar fashion people who responded to the message proclaimed by those involved in the **Campus Crusade for Christ** were also encouraged to pray "the sinner's prayer." The prayer went like this: *"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."* And Presto! At that moment the person who thus prays is assured of eternal salvation! He then may be advised to "join the church of your choice," at which time he will likely be encouraged to be baptized (not to be saved, but as an "outward sign" of the salvation he supposedly received when he prayed "the sinner's prayer." Depending upon the Denomination he chooses, his "baptism" might be by sprinkling, or pouring, or immersion, even though the word "**baptize**" is a verb translated from *baptizo* (Greek) which literally means to immerse. Hence, we read of those who were "buried with Him (Christ, bw) through baptism..," Rom. 6:4; cf. Col. 2:12. Incidentally, one can repeatedly read the Bible in its entirety and never read of an "alien sinner" being told to simply "pray the sinner's prayer!"

So we return to our question, "Does God Hear A Sinner's Prayer." In reply, it would be easy to simply answer by citing John 9:31 wherein the formerly blind man whom Jesus healed replied to the Pharisees, saying, *"Now we know that God does **not hear** sinners, but if anyone is a worshipper of God and does His will, He hears him."* Or we could note the words of Jesus in Matt. 7:21: *"Not everyone who says to Me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven."* Or we could read the words of Jesus in Luke 6:46, wherein He asked, *"But why do you call me Lord, Lord, and not do the things which I say?"* For that matter, we could note Prov. 28:9 wherein God said *"One who turns away his ear from hearing the law, even **his prayer** is an abomination."*

By no means would I want to diminish the force and implication of the scriptures just cited. But this question deserves a more exhaustive answer. On the one hand, I must admit that if God hears the prayers of **any** person he hears the prayer of a sinner! Romans 3:23 is an all-inclusive verse; it says that *"all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."* One might, however, want to distinguish between a child of God (who became such upon obedience to the gospel) and an "alien sinner," one who has never obeyed the gospel, and thus apply Rom. 3:23 to the latter. However, I John 1:8 contextually addresses God's children; it says *"if we say **we** have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."* So "the bottom line" is this: we are all sinners!

Therefore in view of the aforementioned facts, the question "does God hear a sinner's prayer" deserves a more extensive answer.

Replying to the question, “does God hear a sinner’s prayer,” we first observe that much depends on the meaning of the word “**hear**.” If by that question we are asking “is God aware that a sinner is praying,” then the answer is yes. God’s “*understanding is infinite*,” Ps. 147:5. All of us must “*give account*” of ourselves unto God, Rom. 14:12, but God could not hold us accountable for our actions if He were unaware of our actions. Indeed, “*all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account*,” Heb. 4:13.

Hence, the scriptures are clear on the fact that God is **aware** of the prayers of sinners. After all, the prayers of those who turn away their “*ear from hearing*” the law of God could not be “*an abomination*” (Prov. 28:9) if God did **not know** they were praying! For that matter, we think of Cornelius who, even before he obeyed the gospel, the record states that an angel of the Lord said to him, “*your **prayers** and your alms have come up for a memorial before God*,” Acts 10:4. In fact, when the Lord sent Ananias to Saul of Tarsus, He instructed him, saying, “*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***,” Acts 9:10. The indications are that he had been praying (and fasting) for “*three days*,” Acts 9:9. Incidentally, if anyone could be saved by simply “praying through” then Saul would have thereby been saved. No one could be more sincere and penitent than he was at that point in time, and, yes, he was “**praying**!” For that matter, I must agree with the late David Lipscomb who said, “when a man believes in God and realizes that he is lost, he cannot help praying,” Gospel Advocate, 1963.

However, if we define “**hear**” as that of granting an “alien sinner” the forgiveness of sins and assuring that person of eternal salvation, then it is evident that God does **not** “*hear*” that sinner’s prayer. Prayer, important as it is, must never become a substitute for obedience! Jesus is “*the author of eternal salvation to all who **obey** him*,” Heb. 5:9; He does not offer salvation to those who simply **say** “*Lord, Lord*” while refusing to “*do the things which*” He commanded, Luke 6:46! As was just stated, prayer must never be used as a substitute for obedience unto God. A case in point which illustrates this fact is Saul of Tarsus. As we have already noted, he was fervently praying, Ananias went to him and said “*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. As noted, Saul evidently had been praying for three days, but he was still a lost sinner; hence, he was commanded to “*Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins...*”

By no means would I want to discourage **any** person from sincerely praying to God! Jesus, in His famous sermon on the mount, said “*Ask, and it will be given to you, **seek**, and you shall find, **knock**, and it will be opened to you*,” Matt. 7:7. I strongly believe in divine providence, and that if one continues to sincerely “*ask*,” “*seek*,” and “*knock*,” while possessing a genuine, fervent desire to obtain divine forgiveness, that a way will be provided. God was aware of the sincere prayers of Cornelius; He was aware of the genuine prayers of Saul, and a way was provided for them to learn the truth of the gospel, whereupon they eagerly and immediately obeyed.

In a real sense what may be said of the prayers of an “alien sinner” may also be said of the prayers of those who are children of God. A child of God who prays for forgiveness, while refusing to repent, and confess (Acts 8:22; I John 1:9), is in essence merely saying “*Lord, Lord*,” he, too, is “*turning his ear away*” for “*hearing*” (in the sense of obeying); hence, even “*his prayer is an abomination*,” Prov. 28:9. Yes, “there is power in prayer!” “*The effective fervent prayer of a **righteous** man avails much*,” Jas. 5:16. However, “*a righteous man*” will not allow prayer to become a substitute for doing the will of God.

Before leaving this subject, I would observe that the prayers which God answers are prayed by those who “*keep His commandments and do those things which are pleasing in His*

sight,” I John 3:22, and which are in accordance with the “will” of God, I John 5:14. More specifically, prayer assumes a Father-child relationship (we pray to “our **Father** which is in heaven,” Matt. 6:9), and it must be in the “Name” of Jesus (John 14:14), Who is our “Advocate with the Father” (I John 2:1), who is also “High Priest over the house of God,” Heb. 10:21, which is “the church of the living God,” I Tim. 3:15. That being the case, we don’t read in the New Testament of “alien sinners” being commanded to pray; to the contrary they were commanded to obey the gospel (I Peter 4:17; 2 Thess. 1:7-9), whereupon they were washed from their sins (Acts 22:16), and “added to the church” (Acts 2:47), which Jesus built and purchased with His own blood, Acts 20:28. Upon so doing they became children of God and then, from a scriptural perspective, could truly pray to “Our **Father** in heaven.” However, whether one is “in Christ” (2 Tim. 2:10), or out of Christ, prayer must never be used as a substitute for obedience! Remember the apostate Jews in Isaiah’s day; they were God’s children, but they had “rebelled against” God (Isa. 1:2), and while they thus conducted themselves God said to them, “Even though you make many **prayers**, I will not hear...,” Isa. 1:15.

As Christians, prayer should be a part of our lives. We are commanded to “pray without ceasing,” I Thess. 5:17, but we “ask amiss” (Jas. 4:3), if we live ungodly lives while trying to make prayer a substitute for genuine repentance and scriptural obedience to the will of God!  
—Bobby Witherington

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