

# Does God hear a Sinner's Prayer?

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## Introduction

Many people spend much time in prayer. We see images of professional athletes kneeling in prayer before and after sporting events, millions of people faithful to Islam bowing down several times daily, we hear the "Lord's Prayer" recited from memory, controversy abounds regarding prayer in schools. The act of conversing with God plays a large role in the lives of many people. Certainly if we are going to be Christ-like in our behavior, prayer will always be a vital part of our lives. However, it's no mystery to any of us that our conversations with God are unlike those we have with our fellow man. We have the auditory and visual messages sent our way by other people that we don't have when we speak with God. When I am engaged in conversation with another person, my eyes see and my ears hear their responses to my words, and such clues reveal to me their degree of interest in our conversation and understanding of the words I speak. But I don't see or hear God with my physical senses in prayer. How do I know He hears me? In an earlier study (entitled "Who is a Christian?") we showed from the scriptures how many people use the name "Christian" but fail to demonstrate the needed characteristics in their lives to properly claim the name. Many people are depending on God to respond in a positive fashion to their prayer indicating their willingness to allow Jesus to come into their hearts. Does God grant the salvation they desire after having said these words? If one is to base their salvation on God's positive response to such a prayer, one would certainly want to know that God does hear one's prayer and does grant what one asks. What can we learn from the scriptures as to how God looks at the millions of prayers sent His way every day? In this study we will examine God's Word with the goal of answering this vital question.

Before we begin to answer our question, I want to make sure we all understand the question we're

asking. Notice the title of this lesson, "Does God hear a Sinner's Prayer?" Let's look at the words which could possibly cause confusion within this question, so we all have a like understanding of the usage of these words. The two words which I feel are most likely to be misunderstood are "hear" and "sinner." First, we'll look at each of these words, after which we'll consider the account of Cornelius as recorded in Acts chapter 10. Let's begin our study.

## First, the word "hear"

The principal word translated "hear" in the NT is *akouo*. When we use the word "hear" in the English language, to what do we often refer? The word is often understood as the physical sense used to experience sound. However, it is infrequently used to communicate an idea dealing with what happens to the sound heard within the mind of the hearer (understanding). Modern English vocabulary contains other words used to express understanding. However, NT usage of the word "hear" may refer to either the physical sense or the understanding of the words spoken. Which is which depends upon the way the word is used in the Greek. For example, Paul tells us in Acts 9:7 that the men which journeyed with him on the Damascus road "stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man." However, Luke's recording of the same event in Acts 22:9 states that "they heard not the voice of him that spake to me." ("they" referring to the ones who were with him on the Damascus road). Isn't this a clear contradiction within the scriptures? How could they have heard the voice in 9:7, but not hear the voice in 22:9? Vine's Expository Dictionary offers a detailed explanation of the words used by Luke to convey these ideas. In essence the key difference is the case of the noun used in the Greek text. In 9:7 the case indicates a sensory process (i.e. hearing the sound), but in 22:9 the case indicates per-

(Continued on page 2)

(Continued from page 1)

ception (i.e. understanding the sound heard). So, we learn from these two verses that the men with Paul heard a voice with their physical sense of hearing, but their mind failed to understand the words being spoken by the voice.

Let's look at another example. We've considered John 9:27 in an earlier study. Briefly, we see the man blind from birth who tells the Pharisees how he regained his sight. When they asked a second time how he regained his sight, he tells them, "I have told you already, and ye did not hear: wherefore would ye hear it again?" Clearly he is referring to their unwillingness to believe the sounds they heard through the words spoken by the formerly blind man. In a similar vein, Jesus tells the Pharisees in John 8:43 and 44 that they did not understand His speech because "ye cannot hear My word." Why was it not possible for them to hear His word? He tells us in verse 44: They were of their father, the devil! (For those of you who were wondering, the Greek word used in verse 43 for "cannot" is *ou*--the word indicating an absolute negative. See our study on Baptism, under the section dealing with Baptism for the Dead for further information). So Jesus tells the Pharisees that they were absolutely unable to "hear" His word, since they were children of the devil. Was there something wrong with their ears? No! There was something wrong with their hearts! Being children of the devil they were incapable of understanding His words and applying them to their lives. Does the 8th chapter of John seem familiar? If you've gone through our study on "Who is a Christian" it will. Remember how we spent quite a bit of time dealing with Jesus' statement that "If ye continue in My word, then are ye my disciples indeed;"? This is recorded in John 8:31. John 8:43 is contained within the same discourse between Jesus and the Pharisees! What did we conclude any word spoken by man as religious doctrine but which differs from Jesus' word constitutes? We showed how such a "word" is born of the devil, and practicing such worship is in vain. How do people today differ from the Pharisees of old in this regard? They don't! Jesus summarizes this in verse 47 of the same chapter: "He that is of God heareth God's words: ye therefore hear them not, because ye are not of God." Jesus told us in verse 43 that he is not speaking of

the physical sense of hearing. So, in verse 47, those who are of God understand, believe, and apply His word to their lives (He that is of God *heareth* God's words). Any one who fails to do any one of these three is not of God. Do we read of a third option in these verses? No! Jesus tells us that we are either of God, or of the devil. There is no in-between mentioned by Jesus in this discourse. If we understand, believe, and apply His words to our lives, we are of God. If we believe the words of man rather than those of Jesus, we are not of God. If we are not of God, we are of the devil. If we are of the devil, what is our eternal fate? Jesus tells us in Matthew 25:41: we will spend eternity in everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.

Jesus shows us again in Matthew 13:13 how we can hear words, but not understand the meaning of the words spoken. The disciples asked Jesus why he spoke in parables. He replied that he did so "because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand." Were these people capable of hearing the words spoken by Jesus (that is, was their sense of hearing intact)? Yes. He said that "hearing they hear not." If their physical sense of hearing was impaired Jesus would not have used such a phrase. However, their *understanding* of the words He spoke was lacking. For this reason He spoke to them in parables. Let's continue through the next few verses. Jesus continues His thoughts on hearing but not understanding. Verse 14: "By hearing ye shall hear, and not understand;"; verse 15: "For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them." Clearly their problem was one of the heart, not of the physical sense of hearing.

### **Next, the word "sinner"**

We must understand what the word "sinner" means in our question before proceeding any further. Let's begin our examination of this word in Romans 3:23. Here we read words familiar to most, if not all, of us: "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;". Before we go

(Continued on page 3)

*(Continued from page 2)*

on, we must understand the word "all" used in this verse. We have examined in detail the doctrine of original sin, and shown it to be a false doctrine (please see the section dealing with infant baptism in our study of baptism). Does Romans 3:23 refute our earlier study? Well, let's see. First, we must discover the reason(s) we sin. God has not left us "in the dark" when it comes to answering these issues. His word tells us all we need to know to be complete in Him (2 Tim 3:16,17). James shows us what is necessary for one to sin (James 1:13). First, one is tempted. But what must one have in order to be tempted? Lust (verse 14). Is lust alone enough to sin? No. Lust must "conceive" in order to bring forth sin. So, if one resists temptation and does not allow their lust to "conceive", they have not sinned. But Romans tells us that no one (other than Christ) has been successful in preventing completely the lust within them from conceiving, so all have sinned.

But are children included in Paul's statement in Romans 3:23? If they are, then they must have lust which they have allowed to conceive, bringing forth sin. If children have sinned, will they enter heaven should they die as children? No. Recall from our prior studies how those who die in their sins are absolutely unable to enter the kingdom of heaven (John 8:21). Did Jesus teach that children would enter the kingdom of heaven should they die? Yes. Consider Matthew 18:3. Jesus tells the disciples that "except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." Here Jesus tells us who will fail to enter the kingdom of heaven--those who fail to become as little children. What does this tell us about little children? They will enter the kingdom of heaven should they die! If adults must become as little children to enter the kingdom of heaven, those who are already little children WILL enter heaven should they die in that state. Now, since we know little children will enter heaven should they die, are they sinners? No. Those who die in their sins are absolutely unable to enter the kingdom of heaven. Since they are not sinners, are they in a clean state because they were washed of their sin, or do they not yet have sin? Again recall from our prior studies what one must do in order to have their sin forgiven: They must hear the word, believe the

word, repent of sin, confess Jesus' name before men, and be baptized for the remission of sin. Does the word "hear" in the preceding sentence refer to the physical act of hearing, or to the understanding of the word spoken? Both. We see in example after example recorded in Acts that those being converted were taught the truth by other men. However, once they heard the word with their ears they had to understand, believe, and apply the word to their lives. Understanding the word taught leads to the type of belief necessary to achieve forgiveness of sin (again, the word is *pisteuo* and is comprised of three components: a firm conviction, producing a full acknowledgement of God's revelation or truth; a personal surrender to Him; a conduct inspired by such surrender. This is not mere credence that Jesus walked on this earth as a man 2000 years ago. It is a total surrender of one's will to His will. See Vine's for additional information.) How can a child be expected to fulfill these requirements if they cannot understand the word spoken, and are incapable of confessing from the heart their belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God? They can't. Therefore, is a child washed of sin or yet to commit sin? They have not yet committed sin. Since they have not yet committed sin, do they have no lust or have they not yet failed to prevent their lust from conceiving, bringing forth sin? I cannot say from the scriptures. It is a moot point anyway. We know a child has not committed sin; why they have not committed sin is irrelevant. We know they will eventually commit sin as they allow their lust to conceive and bring forth sin. It is only common sense that one must have lust before one can allow it to conceive, so the lust must come before the failure to prevent its conception. But what time lapses between the appearance of lust and the conception of such lust is unknown to me.

So we see from the scriptures that Romans 3:23 does not refute our prior study regarding original sin. Original sin is a man-made doctrine with no support within the Word of God. Romans 3:23 tells us that all who are of age to have lust and to allow such lust to conceive have done so, and thereby have committed sin. But we know that not all of these sinners will spend eternity in hell. So let's return to our evaluation of the word "sinner." We know that all have sinned, but are

*(Continued on page 4)*

(Continued from page 3)

all "sinners"? You're probably asking "What does this question mean, are all those who have sinned sinners?" Of course, all who have sinned were at one time sinners, but do they remain so? This is the question I wish to address now.

You recall how I decided to title my web site, "So you want to go to heaven...". Since you are reading these words I'm sure that is your desire. God in His mercy and grace has provided a way for sinful man to enter heaven and enjoy its glory for eternity. But we cannot pass through the gates into heaven with unforgiven sin. In our Sunday morning Bible class we are currently studying the book of Romans. The past two weeks we've discussed Jesus as the propitiation for our sins. "Propitiation" is a word I'm sure few of us have ever used in every day conversation outside a Bible study dealing with this word. The Greek word is *hilasterion*, and simply means "mercy seat." Remember from the old covenant how the high priest would enter the holy of holies once every year, carrying blood which would be sprinkled on the mercy seat (the lid covering the ark of the covenant) for atonement of the sins of the people? However, one great limitation to the old law was the fact that the blood of bulls and goats offered year after year could never achieve the forgiveness of sin (Hebrews 10:4). So Jesus, by the will of God and His own sacrifice, laid down His life for the sins of the world. His blood was sprinkled on the mercy seat for us. This precious sacrifice was so much superior to that of bulls and goats--by it we have true forgiveness of sin. What happened to the veil separating the sanctuary of the temple from the holy of holies at Jesus' death? It was torn in two, from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51)! No longer was access to God restricted by the veil. We now have access directly to the Father through the flesh of Jesus Christ which he offered for our forgiveness (Hebrews 10:18-20). See the powerful meaning of "propitiation"? Why would anyone wish to return to the religious practices of the old law with its manifold limitations? Each and every one of us may approach the throne of God, but only if we have submitted our lives and wills to Him!

Let's return briefly to Acts 22:16. Paul is recounting the events which took place on the Damascus road, and after he met Ananias. Ananias

told Paul to "arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord." In an earlier study we've seen how Paul was still a sinner when he entered Damascus, blind from the glory of the light which shone round about him. Not until he submitted to the commandments of God were his sins washed away. Was Paul different after his baptism? He most certainly was! All the sins he committed prior to his baptism were washed away! Did he never again sin? Yes he did. Please turn to 1 John 1:8-10. John clearly states that the people to whom he was writing would sin. He went so far as to say that if they stated they have not sinned they make God a liar! But was John writing to Christians or non-Christians? To Christians! What pronoun did John use in 1:8? "We." Would John sin again? Yes! He included himself among those to whom he was writing when he said that "if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves,". Turn now to verse 7 of chapter 2. How does he refer to the recipients of his letter? "Brethren." These were fellow Christians to whom John was writing this epistle. Clearly, John and those who had submitted to the will of God in obedience would continue to sin. But how did they differ from those who had never been obedient? They ceased committing "willful" sin. What is "willful" sin? Willful sin is that sin committed voluntarily or willingly. For example, if I as a Christian know it is wrong to steal but steal anyway, I have committed willful sin. I have voluntarily submitted my actions to serve the purpose of Satan. We read in Hebrews 10:26 that there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins for those who sin willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth. Since there no longer remains a sacrifice for such sin, these sins are not forgiven unless repented of. But, for those who don't sin willingly the blood of Jesus "cleanseth" us from all sin (1 John 1:7). The word "cleanseth" is a powerful statement of the magnitude of grace given to those who are obedient to the commandments of God. "Cleanseth" indicates an active and ongoing cleansing of sin committed by the Christian. Since these brethren continued to sin, but there remained a sacrifice for them, what can we say about the sin they committed? It was not voluntary (willful). None of us can live our lives free of sin. However, we can live our

(Continued on page 5)

*(Continued from page 4)*

lives free of willful sin. If we have been obedient to the will of God the blood of Jesus actively washes us clean of the involuntary sin we commit.

Let's return to a consideration of the word "sinner." We see from the scriptures that there are two general groups of people living today who have passed the "age of accountability" (i.e. the age at which one is capable of understanding right from wrong): Those who have been obedient to the will of God and have had their sins washed away, and those who haven't. However, the group of obedient people consists of those who remain faithful, and those who resume committing willful sin. Those who never have been obedient and those who were obedient but resumed willful sin do not have access to the cleansing blood of Christ. They are "sinners" in the purest form of the word. However, those who are obedient and remain faithful have their sins continually washed by the blood of Jesus. In our original question "Does God hear a sinner's prayer", the word "sinner" refers to the group of people who have never been obedient, or who were obedient but resumed voluntary sin.

### **Cornelius!**

So far in our study we've considered the words "hear" and "sinner". Through the scriptures we understand that we may be either righteous or unrighteous, depending upon our response to the will of God in our lives. Any discussion dealing with God and His hearing a sinner's prayer must include Cornelius. I'm sure Acts chapter 10 is used as evidence of God's general acceptance of prayers offered by anyone, irregardless of their willingness to obey His commandments. Is this valid? Let's examine the scriptures dealing with Cornelius as we seek to answer our question.

Who was Cornelius? All we know about Cornelius is revealed in Acts chapters 10 and 11. He was a man who served as a centurion in the Roman army (10:1). He was a Gentile (11:18). Religiously, he was devout and feared God with all his house, praying to God always (10:2). The Bible records that he was just (10:22) He was generous (10:2) and had a good reputation among all the Jews (10:22). What unusual event happened

to Cornelius? As he was praying about the ninth hour one day he saw a vision. An angel (10:3) dressed in bright clothing (10:30) appeared to him and stated, "Thy prayers and thine alms are come up for a memorial before God. And now send men to Joppa, and call for one Simon, whose surname is Peter: He lodgeth with one Simon a tanner, whose house is by the sea side: he shall tell thee what thou oughtest to do." (10:4-6) What did Cornelius do? We see that Cornelius obeyed the instructions given by the angel. Cornelius told two of his servants and a devout soldier of the vision and sent them to Joppa (10:7,8). What was happening as the men traveled to Joppa? The Lord was preparing Peter for their arrival. It was unlawful for Peter, being a Jew, to go in to Gentiles and eat with them (10:28, 11:3). Some preparation was necessary before Peter could go with the messengers. The Lord showed Peter how He is no respecter of persons (10:34) through a vision. In this vision Peter saw a great sheet fall from heaven. The sheet was bound at the four corners and contained all manner of animals. A voice told Peter to "Rise, kill and eat." Peter responded by saying, "Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." The voice responded, "What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common." These events occurred three times, after which the sheet was drawn back into heaven. (10:9-16) As Peter pondered the vision the messengers from Cornelius arrived (10:19). The Spirit tells Peter to go with them, doubting nothing, because He sent them (10:19,20). The messengers tell Peter of Cornelius and his vision (10:22). The next day they left for Cesarea (10:23).

What did Peter tell Cornelius? He began by reminding Cornelius how it was unlawful for him to be there, but that God had shewed him that he should call no man common or unclean (10:28). He then asked Cornelius why he sent for him (10:29). Cornelius proceeds to tell Peter of the vision he saw and the instructions he was given (10:30-32). Peter tells how God is no respecter of persons but accepts everyone who fears Him and works righteousness (10:34,35). Peter reminded him of things Cornelius knew already (10:37), regarding Jesus and his mighty deeds (10:37,38),

*(Continued on page 6)*

*(Continued from page 5)*

and how the ones who ate and drank with Him after His resurrection served as witnesses chosen of God to preach to the people (10:39-42), and how whosoever believes in Jesus shall receive remission of sins (10:43).

What happened to Cornelius and those who heard the word spoken by Peter? As Peter was still speaking the Holy Ghost fell on those who heard his words (10:44). They spake with tongues and magnified God (10:46). The Jews present were astonished because the gift of God was poured out onto the Gentiles also (10:45,46).

What was Peter's response to these events? He asked a question which should make every Gentile alive today grateful beyond measure. He states, "Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we?" (10:47) He then commanded they be baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (10:48).

What did the Jews in Jerusalem think of Peter's journey to Cesarea? They were displeased. We see that they contended with him (11:2), saying "Thou wentest in to men uncircumcised, and didst eat with them." (11:3) Peter knew this would happen, so he had rehearsed what he was going to say (11:4). He proceeds to tell them of his vision (11:5-10), the messengers from Cesarea (11:11), how the Spirit instructed him to go with them (11:12), of Cornelius' vision (11:13), his preaching to Cornelius (11:15), and how the Holy Spirit fell on them (11:15). He summarized his defense with the statement, "Forasmuch then as God gave them the like gift as He did unto us, who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ; what was I, that I could withstand God?" (11:17) Those in Jerusalem then held their peace and glorified God, acknowledging that God had granted repentance unto life to the Gentiles (11:18).

**What can we learn from Cornelius?** Has God always been no respecter of persons? Yes. God doesn't change (Malachi 3:6). The fact that Peter acknowledged God as no respecter of persons means He has never been a respecter of persons. But men often perceive God as a respecter of persons because of His relationship with the Jews and the old covenant. But we see from the scriptures

how the Gentiles were always included in the promise given to Abraham. Paul outlines this clearly in Galatians 3:7-17. Paul states that the Gentiles were included in the promise of God when God told Abraham that, "In thee shall all nations be blessed." (3:8) When was the promise given, before the old covenant or after? Before! Paul goes so far as to tell us exactly how long before the law of Moses was given Abraham was given the promise that all nations would be blessed through him: 430 years! (3:17) This was a promise given to Abraham by God, which means that the coming of the law of Moses could not nullify it. (3:17) So, both Jew and Gentile were included in the promise that through the seed of Abraham they would be blessed. But who was this seed through which they would be blessed? Jesus Christ (3:16). Here we see the coming of Christ prophesied well before the old law was ever given. God always included the Gentiles in his promise to Abraham. When Jesus came to the earth and died on the cross, the old covenant ceased to be valid and the new went into effect.

But what about the Gentiles during the time of the old covenant? Let's turn to Romans as we consider this period of time. Paul makes a distinction between the Jews with reference to the law: It's not enough to hear the law but not apply it, the ones who do the works contained within the law are just before God (3:13). It's not enough to simply be a descendant of Abraham. This alone will not make one just before God. One must do the works of the law to be just. Well, if being a descendant of Abraham is secondary to obeying the law, what if one obeys the tenets of the law but is not a descendant of Abraham? They will be considered righteous before God! Let's turn to verses 13-15 of chapter 2. Again, the doers of the law shall be justified (13). Notice the first word in verse 14: *For*. This word serves as a conjunction. It is connecting the thoughts in verse 13 with verse 14. What does Paul say in verses 14 and 15. When the Gentiles do by nature the things contained within the law, they are a law unto themselves, their conscience bearing witness. So a Gentile who obeys his conscience and doesn't commit adultery, murder, steal, etc. will be considered righteous before God. Even though he/she

*(Continued on page 7)*

(Continued from page 6)

is not a descendant of Abraham, they are doing the works written in the law. Since obedience to the commandments of the law takes precedence over genetics when making one righteous before God, a Gentile who is faithful to the commandments of the law will be considered just. Paul states this again in a different way in verse 26. "Therefore if the uncircumcision keep the righteousness of the law, shall not his uncircumcision be counted for circumcision?" Why is the "therefore" in verse 26? It is connecting the thoughts of verse 25 with those of 26. In verse 25 Paul tells the Jews that those who are descendants of Abraham (the circumcision) who fail to keep the law are made uncircumcision! They are no different than the Gentile who doesn't have the law! But, in verse 26, Paul turns the coin over. What about the uncircumcision (Gentile) who keeps the law? Their uncircumcision is counted for circumcision! They are no different than the Jew who keeps the law. They are just before God as well! So we see from the book of Romans that the Gentile who was obedient to his conscience and did by nature the things contained within the law was just before God. Even while the law of Moses was in effect God was no respecter of persons!

Can we use Cornelius as proof that God hears all prayers? No. Let's turn to 1 Peter 3:12: "For the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and His ears are open unto their prayers: but the face of the Lord is against them that do evil." The face of the Lord is against them that do evil. Only those who are righteous have the ears of the Lord open to them. What does this tell us about Cornelius? Since his prayer was heard by God (Acts 10:31), he must have been righteous in the sight of God. Peter confirms this in 10:34 and 35 when he states that "God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth Him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with Him." Peter records two requirements before one is accepted in God's sight: One must fear God, and one must work righteousness. The Greek word *phobeo* is translated "feareth" and means "to be in awe of, to reverence." *Phobeo* is a verb, a word which reflects an "act, occurrence, or mode of being" on the part of the subject. To be accepted by God

one must have awe and reverence for Him, and act in a manner consistent with such reverence. If one truly reverences God, they will be obedient to His every command. If one refuses to obey His commandments, what can we say about their attitude toward God? They do not reverence Him and are not in awe of Him. God has told us what we must do to be saved, and has warned us of the consequences should we fail to obey. If one refuses to heed these warnings and submit to the will of God, they don't fear Him. In addition to the idea of reverence, "fear" also refers to "terror." If we fear God we should be terrified of the day of judgment should we be found unfaithful. Hebrews 10:30 and 31 reminds us, "For we know Him who said, 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' and again, 'The Lord will judge his people.'" It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." The one who fears God will be in awe and reverence of Him, but also in terror of His wrath should they be found unfaithful.

Along with fearing the Lord, one must work righteousness to be accepted by Him. Again, we see action involved in this phrase. What did Paul say about the Jews in Romans 10? We read in verses 2 and 3 that they, "have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God." The Jews tried to become just before God through works, and not by faith. Was the righteousness they set about to establish truly righteousness? No! God did not accept the "righteousness" they manifested. However, in their minds they were righteous before God. So, one can appear to be zealous for God but in actuality be rejected by Him! Paul tells us that the Jews had a zeal of God, but not according to righteousness. Only when we submit ourselves to the righteousness of God will we be accepted by Him. How many people today manifest a zeal for God and have an inward feeling of righteousness, but the righteousness they've established is not according to God's righteousness? Have you submitted to His righteousness, or are you following the righteousness of men which eventually leads to destruction?

So what can we say about Cornelius? His

(Continued on page 8)

(Continued from page 7)

prayer was heard, so he must have been just before God. He must have revered Him and have been working righteousness to be accepted by Him. But Cornelius was a Gentile! What righteousness could he have been working? I'm sure you all know the answer after going through our earlier discussion of Romans 2. He was obedient to the righteousness available to him as a Gentile. Cornelius knew of Jesus (Acts 10:37). However, up to that time, only Jews had had the message of salvation preached to them. We can judge from the response of the Jews at Jerusalem that they would almost certainly have resisted the word being preached to Gentiles unless something unusual had happened. What did Joel say would happen in the last days? Joel records in chapter 2 verse 28 that the Lord would, "pour out My spirit upon all flesh." Peter reminds the listeners at the day of Pentecost of these words spoken by Joel, and confirms the events which took place as being part of the fulfillment of that prophecy (Acts 2:17). I say part, because had His spirit yet been poured out upon "all flesh?" Turn to Ephesians 2. In verse 11, Paul shows us how the Gentiles and the Jews were considered to be two different flesh. However, in Jesus the two are made one (14-16). In Cornelius and his household we see the completion of the prophecy made by Joel. Now His spirit was poured upon all flesh. Peter in his defense of his preaching to Cornelius reminds the Jews of this fact in Acts 11:15-17. Look at the Jews' response: "When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life." (Acts 11:18) Something miraculous occurred to indicate God's acceptance of the Gentiles. Until the Jews heard these things they contended with Peter because of his preaching to the Gentiles (Acts 11:2). So, up to this point in time the Gentiles could be accepted by God by being obedient to the righteousness available to them.

But what happened after Cornelius' conversion? The Jews and the Gentiles were both subject to the same righteousness of God. Now the Gentiles had to be obedient to the same commandments of God as the Jews in order to be accepted by God. No longer could a Gentile's prayer be heard simply

because they feared God, working the righteousness available to them and were obedient to their consciences. Now both Jews and Gentiles are required to work the same righteousness of God to be accepted by Him. For us today the words of Peter still apply: To be accepted by God we must fear Him and work righteousness. If we are one of the untold millions with an ignorant zeal of God working that which appears to be righteousness but is of men, we will not be accepted of God. His face is against this multitude and their prayers are not heard (1 Peter 3:12). However, if we are of the number who is truly in awe of God, reverences Him, and submits to His righteousness while rejecting the righteousness of men we will be accepted by Him and His ears are open to our prayers.

**Summary:** Cornelius is often quoted as an example of a sinner's prayer being heard by God. However, we have seen in this study of Cornelius that we cannot apply his situation to ours today. Only when one has subjected themselves to the righteousness of God will their prayers be heard. It is beyond the scope of this study to address fully the righteousness which is of God. However, I would like to briefly mention a couple of key points which are markers of the righteousness of men that often lead zealous people astray:

1. One is saved before being baptized. I have addressed this false doctrine in detail in my study on baptism. For an in-depth study of this important topic, please log onto my website and review the study, or review the copy you've been given.
2. Faith only is sufficient for salvation. Please turn to Romans 3:22. Here Paul uses both faith and believe in the same sentence. The Greek word for "faith" is *pistis*. This word serves as a noun when used in the NT. The Greek word translated "believe" is *pisteuo*, a verb. So we see in Romans 3:22 that faith (*pistis*, a noun) combined with works (*pisteuo*, a verb, translated "believe") are necessary in order for one to practice the righteousness which is of God. *Pistis* and *pisteuo* are not interchangeable. They are two different parts of speech. *Pisteuo* describes the action mani-

(Continued on page 9)



(Continued from page 8)

festated when one has *pistis* in their life. One with *pistis* in their life will completely surrender their life to His will and will manifest conduct inspired by such surrender. James summarizes this point succinctly in chapter 2 verse 18 of his letter when he states, "Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works." Here he clearly shows the relationship between *pistis* and *pisteuo*. So one must be subject to the entire will of God to be working His righteousness. Part of His will is that we demonstrate our devotion to Jesus through the act of baptism, by which we are buried and rise again to walk in newness of life. Faith without works is dead (James 2:26). As I continue our studies I'll address more indicators of the righteousness which is of men. I pray you will consider the things we've studied and prove them to be true for yourselves through your own private Bible study. My only purpose is to bring these things to your attention. I don't want anyone to take my word only as truth. Please confirm for yourselves the truths contained within this study.

### Conclusion

We've considered the use of the word "hear" as it relates to man, but can we say the same about God? We know that God is omniscient (all-knowing), so He is aware of the words being spoken by the obedient and disobedient alike, but does He respond differently to the prayer of a sinner than to that of a Christian? Turn again to 1 Peter 3:12. Peter quotes a passage from Psalm 34. Note what he says: "For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their prayers; but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil." Jeremiah records the response of the Lord to the children of Israel when they pray to be delivered from their times of trouble. In chapter 2:26-28 Jeremiah records the idolatry of Israel and how the Lord would let them fruitlessly appeal to Him for help during their time of trouble. The Lord would say to them "Let your gods arise, if they can save you in the time of your trou-

ble." Notice where the faces of Israel were directed: away from God (verse 27). Jeremiah again records in 32:33 how Israel turned their back to the Lord. If we were having a conversation and suddenly I turned my back to you, what would you think? I doubt you would think I had any regard at all for your thoughts and ideas. We see clearly in the book of 1 Peter how the eyes and ears of the Lord are open to the prayers of the righteous, but His face is against those who do evil! Are those evildoers in 1 Peter only those who commit murder, adultery, etc.? Notice what Peter says in verses 10 and 11: "He who would love life and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips from speaking deceit. Let him turn away from evil and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it." Notice the last sentence: "Let him turn away from evil and do good." Certainly those who commit wrongs such as murder and adultery are included in the group who does evil, but what can we say about the "good" mentioned in verse 11? Notice James 4:17: "Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin." What?! It's not enough to keep from murder, adultery, lying, stealing, etc? No! If I know to do good and fail to do it, I have sinned! Let's consider this passage in light of obedience to God's word as we answer our question. If I know that I must hear the word of God, believe in Jesus as the Son of God, repent of my sins, confess the name of Jesus before men, and be baptized to receive the forgiveness of sin. What have I done if I fail to obey these commandments? Are these acts good, or evil? Obviously they are good! Therefore, if I know to do that which is good but fail to act, what have I done? I've sinned! I've committed evil by failing to do that which I know is good! Now reconsider Peter's words in 1 Peter 3:12. If I know to do good by obeying God's plan of salvation but fail to act, where is the Lord's face turned? It is against me! If God's face is against me because of my unwillingness to submit to His will, is my prayer heard? No! Peter clearly states that the ears of the Lord are open to the prayers of the righteous, not those of the unrighteous!

Someone is going to say, "But I know God hears my prayers! I have received so many bless-

(Continued on page 10)

(Continued from page 9)

ings from Him! The things I've prayed for I've received!" This person is absolutely right in that they have received so many blessings from God. However, they are not right in assuming these blessings are a result of answered prayer. Many people attribute good things which happen to them to their prayers being answered by God. But is this a proper conclusion to make? As we continue our study I would like to examine a few scriptures which deal with blessings and see if we may correctly claim that the good things which happen in our lives are a result of God's answering prayer. All good things come from God. James tells us that, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning." (1:17) However, he doesn't state that every good gift which comes from above does so because we asked God for them. We see the degree of God's goodness recorded elsewhere in the New Testament. Paul and Barnabas were in Lystra, where they met a man impotent in his feet, being in such a state from birth (Acts 14:8). Paul healed him (verses 9-10). When the people of Lystra saw what Paul had done they cried, "The gods are come down to us in the likeness of men" (11). They proceeded to rename Paul "Mercurius" and Barnabas "Jupiter" (12). The priest of Jupiter brought oxen and garlands, with the intention of doing sacrifice to Paul and Barnabas (13). Paul and Barnabas proceeded to rent their clothes in anguish over these actions (14). Paul's words to these people tell us much about the goodness of God. After rebuking them for their attempted sacrifice Paul tells them that, God "in times past suffered all nations to walk in their own ways. Nevertheless He left not Himself without witness, in that He did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness" (15-17). Were these people obedient to the commandments of God? No! They were idolatrous people who would not have been considered righteous even under the old law (recall the first commandment, thou shalt have no other gods before Me). Could they have prayed to God in an *aiteo* fashion? Absolutely not! Did they fear God and work righteousness as we've seen we must in

order to be accepted by God? Again, absolutely not! Was God's face turned towards them? No! But what did they receive? God in his goodness blessed them with all they needed to sustain physical life. These things serve as witnesses for God. In Romans we see how all of us will be without excuse in the day of judgment. In verse 20 of chapter 1 Paul tells us that, "the invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse." What effect should the goodness of God have on us? Again in Romans, chapter 2 verse 4 we see that, "the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance." If our heart is tender, the good things all of us receive from God should lead us to repent of our sins and submit our will to His. But this goodness is not a result of answered prayer. It is simply God providing for us what we need to sustain physical life. In the sermon on the mount Jesus again teaches us of the goodness of God. In verse 45 of chapter 5 He states that God makes, "His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust." Here again we see those who are evil and unjust receiving the same physical blessings as the just. However, they do not receive them because of answered prayer. It is only because of God's goodness that these people receive what they need to sustain life.

What we've considered so far are physical blessings. Are there other types of blessings? Yes. In Ephesians 1:3 we read of spiritual blessings. Paul tells us, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ:" We see in these verses that some group of people (the "us") have been blessed with all spiritual blessings. Does "us" refer to all of mankind, or to only certain people? Paul tells us later in the same sentence: "us" have been blessed with all spiritual blessings *in Christ!* So, in order to receive these spiritual blessings one must be a member of the group which is *in Christ*. But how does one get "in Christ?" In Galatians 3:26-28 Paul tells the Galatian Christians, "For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ

(Continued on page 11)

(Continued from page 10)

have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.” When we put on our clothes every morning, aren’t we “in” our clothes after they are put on? So you can see the relationship between putting on something and being in something. In order for us to be *in* Christ, we must *put on* Christ. We aren’t in Christ until *after* we’ve put Him on. In order to put on Christ we must be baptized. So, those who haven’t yet been baptized for the right reason have not put on Christ, are not in Christ, and have no access to all spiritual blessings. So we see that in order to get into Christ we must be baptized.

But what must we do after being baptized? We must *stay* in Christ. Paul tells the Romans, “Let us walk honestly, as in the day; not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying. But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof.” (chapter 13:13,14) Once we’ve *put on* our clothes how long are we *in* our clothes? As long as we keep them on! Once we take them off, we are no longer in them. Just as one must be baptized to put on Christ, one must be faithful to Him in order to remain in Christ. Once we’ve resumed committing willful sin we have taken off Christ. So, one must be faithful to Him in order to continue having the promise of access to all spiritual gifts. However, those who have never put Him on have never had the promise of access to all spiritual gifts! Praying for salvation (a spiritual gift) will be fruitless for the one who has failed to obey the commandments of God! They haven’t put on Christ and are not in Christ! Only once we have obeyed fully the instructions given us will we have any hope of having this prayer answered. However, the promise of salvation is given only as long as we are faithful! Once we take off Christ in disobedience, we lose the promise of salvation.

Before we conclude this study let’s consider one more thought regarding God’s hearing the prayer of a sinner. Jesus teaches in John 16:23 that “And in that day ye shall ask Me nothing. Verily, verily I say unto you, whatsoever ye shall ask the Father

in My name, He will give it you.” It sounds reassuring, doesn’t it? If I ask the Father for something in the name of Jesus, He will give it to me. I’m sure those of you who have studied with me so far realize that I often look to the original language when I wish to more completely understand what the writer is saying to us. I was studying this verse recently and I asked myself “Is there any difference between asking something of Jesus and asking of God.” I pulled out my Greek concordance and was surprised to learn that 6 different Greek words are translated “ask” in the New Testament. In John 16:23, two different Greek words are used by Jesus when He tells the apostles that they would eventually ask Him nothing, but that whatsoever they ask the Father in Jesus’ name He will give it them. The first use of “ask” in this verse is the Greek word *erotao*. The second time Jesus uses “ask” the Greek word is *aiteo*. Vine’s dictionary gives a meaningful discussion of the difference between these two words. *Erotao* indicates the one asking is on an equal plane with the one being asked. For example, if I ask another person for assistance who is a member of the same social status as I, a writer recording my life would state that I had asked them in an *erotao* fashion. However, if I am a member of a monarchal society and I petition the king for assistance, the one recording my life would state that I asked in an *aiteo* fashion. When I petitioned the king I recognized his greater status than mine and was willing to submit to his authority as a requirement for his consideration of my petition. Now, let’s say I’m praying to God. I know His will but I haven’t obeyed His will. What am I saying to God? In essence I’m saying, “God, my will for my life is just as valid as Your will for my life. I know you said I must be baptized to receive the forgiveness of sin, but I just don’t see how that is important. However, I know I’m limited in my abilities and I need your help with something. I’ve recently been told I have a serious illness. I’ve read in the Bible how Jesus was able to cure those with incurable diseases and I’m asking for your help with mine.” Which Greek word would the one recording my life use in this situation? He would use *erotao*. If I truly recognize God’s superior status to mine, I will be obedient to the commands He gives. One

(Continued on page 12)

*(Continued from page 11)*

who approaches God in prayer but who fails to acknowledge God's greater status through obedience is approaching the throne of God in an *erotaio* fashion. Does Jesus state such a one will have their petitions granted? No! Jesus clearly states that the one who asks God in an *aiteo* fashion will have their petitions granted. Therefore, only those who have been obedient to the will of God and approach His throne with an *aiteo* attitude have any promise of having their prayers answered.

I'm sure most if not all of you have heard of the "sinner's prayer". It goes by different names and is prayed in different ways, but the end result is the same: some preacher on television, radio, or in an assembly instructs the listeners to say a few words indicating their willingness to have Jesus come into their hearts. According to these preachers, those who follow through with this simple act will have their prayer answered and Jesus will come into their lives, forgiving their sin. Based on the word of God, is this valid? No! We have revealed to us in simple language what God requires of us in order to receive forgiveness of sin. Nothing else will do. Any other "method" is not of the truth. Remember what we learned in our study "Who is a Christian"? Any teaching other than that contained within the Bible is not a part of the truth. Since it is not part of the truth, it is a lie. Who is the father of lies? Satan. To follow any teaching other than that contained in the scriptures is placing man's will on a plane equal to the will of God. God will not respond in a positive fashion to the prayers of one who refuses to acknowledge God's authority.

I hope this study has been valuable to you. It in no way is meant to intentionally inflict hurt. But apply James 4:17 to one who sees another failing to follow the teachings of God. If such a one fails to point out the error, what has he/she done? Committed sin! Therefore anyone who is made aware of the error of another's way and fails to try to instruct them in the right has failed to perform an act of good and will be judged a sinner because of it. If I know another is in need of food or clothing and give it to them, I would likely be commended by someone for the love I've shown. But if I fail to teach that person what they need to know in order to be saved, have I really shown

much love for them? Jesus asks a profound question in Mark 8:36: "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" Of what profit has my gift of food or clothing really been if I fail to instruct them in the way which leads to eternal life? Of course they have enjoyed physical comfort, but Jesus tells us that such comfort is of no lasting value. I could give him all the world has to offer, but really not profited him at all if I fail to teach him what he needs to know in order to be saved. Each soul is worth more than all the world's gold, silver, jewels, etc! I pray that you will thoughtfully consider the things we study together and determine to be obedient to the will of God.

*The information in this study was taken from my website. The domain is [www.noeo.net](http://www.noeo.net). I am always in the process of writing and publishing new studies to the site. Please log on and continue your consideration of God's word through the internet. I have provided an e-mail link and will be happy to answer any questions which may arise. This material is not copyrighted. It is free for anyone to use. However, I require it be used to the glory of God, be provided to others free-of-charge, and not be associated with any man-made doctrines or creeds. My sole purpose for writing this article was to teach my fellow man of God's word, with the sincere prayer that by this material His name might be glorified and that many may come to know and obey the truth.*

*David H. Lasseter*