

What Does it Mean to Call Upon the Lord?

“Whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved” (Romans 10:13).

Preface

God is at work motivating His people throughout the world to fulfill the Great Commission. We praise Him for this! Many books have been written to inspire and teach Christians in the work of evangelism. Styles and techniques vary. Some of these practices are fruitful and biblical. But there are millions of Christians employing techniques that are not biblical and in fact, detrimental. This article takes aim at one of those practices.

Someone might ask if it is appropriate for me to criticize how other people evangelize. As I begin, I want to answer this question. It is always right for me or any Christian to call attention to something that is wrong. Believers are to reverence God. One clear way to do this is to pay close attention to what He has said. If we are doing things that undermine what He has said, we must stop doing it. Otherwise, our love for Him is in question. We are not at liberty to make things up as we go!

If you are one of Christ’s Ambassadors, you have a duty to represent Him in a way He wants to be represented. How can we know how He wants us to represent Him? We must examine¹ closely what He has said and follow His instructions. If we are negligent to do this, we prove ourselves unfaithful, slothful and presumptuous. This article calls attention to some things He has made clear. If your current evangelism practices are in harmony with the things conveyed here, great. But if not, the burden is on you to justify your practices using the Bible as your authority. You do not have a license to operate in accordance with your own pragmatic thinking if that thinking conflicts with what God has previously made clear.

The point of this article

In their attempt to evangelize, many Christians instruct unbelievers to pray a “sinner’s prayer²” in order to be “saved.” By “saved,” they more accurately mean being justified (remission of sins) which takes place the moment a person first believes. Often, Romans 10:13 (shown above) is used to justify this practice. It is viewed almost like a recipe:

The act	The result
One-time sinner’s prayer	> justification/forgiveness
	(“salvation”)

This article will demonstrate that anyone who justifies this practice on the basis of Romans 10:13 is doing so based upon a distorted view of this verse. This article will use both context and syntax to help the reader see exactly what the Bible teaches about this matter.

¹ *Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth (II Timothy 2:15).*

² Such a prayer can be viewed on many tracts. The unbeliever is told to repeat a prayer that goes something like this. “God, I have sinned against you. You have given your Son Jesus to die for my sins. I ask you now Jesus to come into my heart and save me from my sins. Amen.” The people are often told that if they prayed this prayer and meant it, they are now saved from their sins.

Argument based upon syntax

Because the details of this argument based upon syntax are somewhat technical, I will only make a summary here. The details may be found in the **Appendix** if you would like to review them.

By “syntax,” I mean the structure of the New Testament Greek grammar as it relates to this subject. Sometimes, excellent clues are provided in the Greek text to help us understand more accurately what the authors were trying to communicate. There are some relevant syntax observations to consider that relate to the subject at hand but most of the case can be made from the immediate and overall context of the entire Bible. Put another way, most of what is relevant to this topic can be proven from the English Bible. This will be done in the section, **Argument Based Upon Context** which follows.

The syntax argument rests mainly on the tense of the Greek word ἐπικαλέω (to call, invoke) when it is used in the phrase “call upon the Lord.” Briefly, there is no situation in the New Testament that the tense chosen by the authors depicts a one-time act or prayer. In those verses that do convey tense aspect, the idea embedded in the verb is always a repeated act of calling or praying that does not cease. In other words, the Greek syntax suggests a lifestyle of praying (calling out) not a one time act. So, the New Testament speaks of calling upon the Lord as a way of life, not a one-time prayer. For the details of this argument, see the **Appendix**.

Argument Based Upon Context

9If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. 10For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. 11For the Scripture says, “Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.” 12For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. 13For “whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.” 14How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?

We are attempting to understand what Paul meant by the words, “Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (in verse 13 above). To support his overall argument in chapter ten, Paul directly quotes from Joel 2:32. Therefore, we must examine the Joel passage first if we stand any chance of properly understanding what Paul meant when he quoted Joel.

And I will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth: Blood and fire and pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, And the moon into blood, Before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord. And it shall come to pass That whoever calls on the name of the Lord Shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be deliverance, As the Lord has said, Among the remnant whom the Lord calls (Joel 2:30-32)

The first thing we notice is that Joel was talking about being saved from God’s wrath that will be poured out on the Day of Judgment (when Jesus comes back). Therefore, we know that when he quoted Joel, Paul was saying that those who “call upon the Lord” will be saved from God’s wrath that will be poured out on the Day of Judgment. He was not talking about justification and remission of sins that occurs when a person first believes. This point alone sufficiently proves that Romans 10:13 cannot be used to support the practice of instructing a person to pray a sinner’s prayer in order to be justified and forgiven (since Paul was talking about the salvation from God’s wrath on the Day of Judgment). But this is only one minor part of my argument.

The “sinner’s prayer” formula puts the cart before the horse. Notice what Paul says in verse 14 immediately after saying “whoever calls upon the Lord will be saved.” ***How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed?*** Clearly, Paul says that before a person can “call upon the Lord,” he must first believe, not visa versa. Verse 14 should confuse those who insist on instructing people to pray a sinner’s prayer. Verse 14 shouldn’t make any sense to them. But it makes clear sense to anyone who understands what the Bible means by the phrase “call upon the Lord.”

Calling on the Lord is a way of living, NOT a one time “sinner’s prayer!”

Abraham “called upon the Lord” often.

Genesis 12:7-8 Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your descendants I will give this land.” And there he built an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him. 8 And he moved from there to the mountain east of Bethel, and he pitched his tent with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; there he built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD.

Genesis 13:4 And there Abram called on the name of the LORD.

Genesis 21:33 Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and there called on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God.

These are just three instances that are recorded. In reality, Abraham called upon the Lord as a way of life because he believed God. He relied upon God and prayed all the time. This is what people of faith do. David’s testimony confirms this.

“To you I call, O LORD my Rock; do not turn a deaf ear to me. For if you remain silent, I will be like those who have gone down to the pit. Hear my cry for mercy as I call to you for help, as I lift up my hands toward your Most Holy Place” (Psalm 28:1-2). (See other examples in Psalm 50:14-15, 86:3-7, 145:18.)

The Bible is packed with testimonies of God’s people “calling upon the Lord” as a way of relating to Him for life. This characteristic distinguishes believers from unbelievers. The believers live life in dependence on God. The unbelievers live autonomously. The New Testament record is in complete harmony with these Old Testament passages. (See I Corinthians 1:2, I Peter 1:17 and Acts 9:14 which are examined in detail in the **Appendix**.)

“Calling upon the Lord” is a way of relating to God for life and NOT a one-time act of a sinner asking for forgiveness. We know from Scripture that before a man believes, he is a slave to his own desires and all of life is self-directed with the aim to gratify himself. As Isaiah says, *“All we like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way.”* Paul says that we were dead in our trespasses and sins and that no one seeks God. Thus, the natural man does not “call upon the Lord” or submit to His direction and provision. (This is why Paul said in Romans 10:14, *“How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed?”*)

When a person is born again and believes, there is an immediate turning (repentance) to God. Now, instead of a self-directed life, the person “calls upon the Lord” as a way of life. Instead of self-sufficiency, there is a heart-felt dependence on God for all that is necessary. This dependency on God and renunciation of self-reliance is evidence of the new nature. Without this evidence, there should be no assurance of salvation.

This article proves that Romans 10:13 cannot be used as a basis for instructing a person to pray a sinner’s prayer. The promise, “Whoever calls upon the Lord will be saved” may not be used for this purpose! This promise may only be used to comfort true believers who call upon the Lord as a way of living. Only these people will be saved in the end from the wrath of God that will be poured out on Judgment Day!

Instructing a person to pray a sinner’s prayer conflicts with the biblical record. There is not a single occurrence of anyone being instructed to pray a sinner’s prayer in the Bible. The Apostles instructed people to believe the gospel from the heart in order to be justified and receive remission of sins. They instructed people who wish to follow Jesus to show their allegiance to Him by being baptized. They taught that believing was not a one-time act of accepting a set of beliefs. Rather, it was a repeated act that never stops. If it stops, it is false belief.

Why this is important:

If you tell a person that he can have confidence about heaven as a result of praying a sinner's prayer, you are giving him false assurance. Biblical hope (assurance) is not based upon the mouthing of a sinner's prayer. It is based upon a changed life full of fruits of the Holy Spirit. If the Spirit of Jesus dwells in a person, he has reason to believe that he will be saved from the wrath of God that will be poured out at the judgment. "*Christ in you, the hope of glory*" (Colossians 1:27).

Millions of people have prayed a sinner's prayer and falsely assume that they are heaven bound. Not good! After reading this article, I hope you realize that this is not a matter to be taken lightly. You do not want to be the one who falsely assures a person that he is heaven bound if in reality, he is still headed for hell. Please stop instructing people to pray a sinner's prayer. It is not biblical. Therefore, it is irreverent to do so.

Appendix: Observations of the Greek syntax that convey a repeated calling/praying.

Note: Several passages are presented below that contain verbs that are participles. If the authors wanted to communicate that calling on the Lord is something done once to "receive Jesus," they would not have tried to incorporate the present tense time aspect into the verb. But they used the present tense form of these participles intentionally suggesting they wanted to convey repeated, ongoing calling/praying rather than a one-time act.

It must also be noted that present tense Greek participles do not always retain their aspectual force. So, when a present tense participle is examined, there must be good reason to conclude that it does retain its aspectual force. Often, the New Testament writers would use the aorist tense form of participles when they wanted to indicate no aspect concerning time. Sometimes, there was no aorist option available to the authors, so they were forced in some cases to go with the present tense spelling of the participle. But if they had both the present tense participle and an aorist tense option available, and they chose to use the present tense spelling, they were normally trying to indicate that they wanted the present tense aspect to be retained in the participle. So, since they had the aorist tense option to more precisely indicate a one-time calling, but chose instead to use the present tense option, it is highly unlikely that the present tense was aspectually flat. Rather, they were conveying an ongoing, repeated calling.

The Romans 10 Greek:

Romans 10:13 For "whoever **calls** on the name of the LORD shall be saved."

πᾶς γὰρ ὃς ἂν ἐπικαλέσῃται τὸ ὄνομα κυρίου σωθήσεται

In this verse, ἐπικαλέσῃται (calls) appears as a subjunctive verb, aorist tense. When using subjunctive verbs, New Testament authors gravitated to using the aorist tense as the go-to tense when they did not want to call attention to time or aspect. So, we cannot derive anything from this verse that speaks to aspect or time as it relates to the "calling." Rather, the attention seems to be on the verb's subjunctive nature which essentially indicates that **IF** the person is in the group of people who call upon the Lord, he will be saved (from God's wrath that will be poured out at the judgment). Since this verse does not convey anything meaningful about the time/aspect of the calling, we must expand our sampling. We don't have to look very far at all. (The prior verse.)

Romans 10:12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who **call** upon Him.

οὐ γάρ ἐστιν διαστολή Ἰουδαίου τε καὶ Ἑλλήνος ὁ γὰρ αὐτὸς κύριος πάντων πλουτῶν εἰς πάντας τοὺς ἐπικαλουμένους αὐτόν

In this verse, the verb appears as a present, participle. Also, Romans 10:12 utilizes a substantival (independent) adjectival participle. Because the referents are in a narrowly defined group (those who call upon the Lord), there is

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good reason to consider its verbal aspect remains in force. This combination of facts conveys the Greek customary present tense. In other words, it conveys an action that repeats and never stops.

The overall New Testament Greek

Here is another Pauline example:

1 Corinthians 1:2 To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all who in every place **call** on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours:

τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ τοῦ θεοῦ τῇ οὖσῃ ἐν Κορίνθῳ ἡγιασμένοις ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ κλητοῖς ἁγίοις σὺν πᾶσιν τοῖς **ἐπικαλουμένοις** τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐν παντὶ τόπῳ αὐτῶν καὶ ἡμῶ

In this verse, the verb appears as a present participle with no controlling verb. (It acts as a noun.) When acting as a noun, the participle tense remains in the indicative force. In other words, this verse also conveys an action that repeats and never stops (Greek customary present).

Here is one from Peter:

1 Peter 1:17 And if you **call on** the Father, who without partiality judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay here in fear;

καὶ εἰ πατέρα **ἐπικαλεῖσθε** τὸν ἀπροσωπολήμπτως κρίνοντα κατὰ τὸ ἐκάστου ἔργον ἐν φόβῳ τὸν τῆς παροικίας ὑμῶν χρόνον ἀναστράφητε

In this verse, this verb appears in the indicative mood, present tense. In other words, Peter, like Paul, is conveying an action that repeats and never stops. (Greek customary present).

Here is one from Luke:

Acts 9:14 “And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who **call on** Your name.”

καὶ ὧδε ἔχει ἐξουσίαν παρὰ τῶν ἀρχιερέων δῆσαι πάντας τοὺς **ἐπικαλουμένους** τὸ ὄνομά σου

In this verse, the verb appears as a present, participle. It is a substantival (independent) adjectival participle. Because the referents are in a narrowly defined group (those who call upon the Lord), there is good reason to consider its verbal aspect remains in force. This combination of facts conveys the Greek customary present tense. In other words, it conveys an action that repeats and never stops.

All of these samples convey an action that repeats and never stops. There are no examples (relating to the phrase “call upon the Lord”) in the New Testament that convey a one-time prayer. Acts 22:16 does use “calling” as a participle in aorist tense but it records Paul's testimony which includes something that Ananias told Paul to do in the past. Therefore, it is understandable that Luke would use the aorist tense in order to make the verb aspectually flat. So, it is not a good sample to form conclusions about the time aspect of calling on the Lord.

Appendix conclusion

The Greek syntax used when talking about “calling upon the Lord” cannot be used to support the practice of instructing a person to repeat a “sinner's prayer” as a one-time act that results in salvation. In fact, the Greek syntax used when talking about “calling upon the Lord” consistently conveys something believes do as a repeated, never ending practice. It should be noted that the New Testament Greek syntax witness is in complete harmony with the Old Testament testimony relating to this subject which is discussed in the ***Argument Based Upon Context*** section of this article.