

THE GOSPEL MESSAGE

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DO YOU THINK YOU ARE THE ONLY ONES GOING TO HEAVEN?

Rick Sparks

We don't know how far God's grace will extend on the last day; only that His judgments will be "true and righteous altogether" in a perfect balance of justice and grace. Our business is to make all things according to God's New Testament pattern and to love Him by keeping His commandments. He means every word He says on every topic He addresses. We are a breath away from an eternity that can never be changed.

The title question generates strong emotion. It can be asked with such an attitude as to be a "foolish" question, which we are to avoid because they cause strife. What difference does it make what I think? Does my opinion change reality?

However, it is a Bible question. The disciples asked, "Who then can be saved?" We should be ready to give an answer about our hope. It is appropriate to discuss, investigate, and reason together concerning matters of the soul. How else can we prove all things and hold fast that which is good?

God wants everybody to be saved. He does not favor any nation, group, gender, or individual. He loves all equally and completely. Jesus died for all to be saved.

Grace is available to all. Heaven has room for all. The Lord knows those who are His. Not a single person who is in a saved condition on the last day will be lost.

As Savior, Christ is the one who declares who, when, and where He saves. Jesus will judge on the last day. The house of God will be judged, as well as those who do not obey the gospel. While we inevitably make judgments, we must not judge unnecessarily, unfairly, or unlovingly.

God's word is the sole soul guide, our blueprint for church building, and the final authority in religion. Scripture is open to all to read, understand, obey, and be saved. Private

opinions did not go into it. Private interpretations must not be taken from it. What it says to one, it says to all.

It is possible to draw the circle too small. We must not shut others out of the kingdom. We must not require more than Jesus requires. We must not bind anything the apostles did not. We must not take away others' Christian liberty. In matters of opinion, we must follow after the things which make for peace.

It is possible to draw the circle too big. Salvation is not universal. Many believe all religions are just different roads to the same place. This appeals to a culture where toleration is a chief virtue. It is wrong to believe that a civil right to believe anything makes every belief equally true. Jesus taught us to stay in bounds, not to untie what the apostles tied, and not to think of men above what is written.

The Lord's church is divinely assembled. God puts every saved person in it, and it's impossible for a saved person to be anywhere else.

The church must conform to God's pattern.

There are not a thousand ways to heaven. There are not even two ways to heaven. Jesus is the exclusive route—the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Neither is there salvation in any other, for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.

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Jesus will separate the righteous from the unrighteous, as a shepherd divides sheep from goats, using obedience to His words as the standard. Not all who claim allegiance to Him will make it.

The crucial question is: where does God draw the circle? Whatever His word says is right. Ultimately, nothing else matters, no matter how much we debate it. God's immutable counsel will stand, though the whole earth set themselves against him.

Who does God put in the circle? The body of Christ will be saved. Baptized into Christ, we put on Christ. He is the savior of the body. This shows who the Savior is and where He saves. God placed all spiritual blessings in one location—"in Christ". We are saved by His blood in His body.

Can people obtain salvation in some other place, too? All who were in Noah's ark were saved. All who were out were lost. To be saved, we must enter into Christ.

God puts each person he saves in the same place—the church. He puts no one else in the church. It is impossible for a saved person to be anywhere else. The church is the saved, all the saved, and none but the saved. One cannot be saved outside the church. The church is not the Savior, but it is the saved.

Christ established only one church. There is one body, and but one body. Those in Christ are in His body. Those in His body are in the church.

The Lord's church is not a denomination, nor is it all denominations combined. The Lord's church is divinely assembled. God puts every saved person in it, and it's impossible for a saved person to be anywhere else. The church must conform to God's pattern. It must be a franchise of the original church.

How do we identify Christ's church today? Compare any church to the Bible. Is it organized as the New Testament church was? Does it use a Bible name or description? Does it worship scripturally? Does it accurately teach salvation? Does it follow the scriptural mission?

Who is going to heaven? Those who follow the Bible will make it. Let's all go to heaven together!

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IMPROVED PRAYER

Michael Eldridge

In a recent Bible study, a group of ten Christians did what many humans do at the end of the year: they reflected, they made goals, and they planned. They worked individually, and then they came together to share their thoughts. In looking back at 2025, they were tasked with summarizing it in a single word, and many arrived at "blessed," "challenging," or something similar. As they moved into making goals for 2026, an unsurprising thread appeared. As one person said, "I want to get better at prayer", several soft "amens" floated around the room, and ultimately, half of the participants revealed that this was their goal too.

The ten who gathered in 2025 will take some comfort knowing that they are not alone in wanting to "get better at prayer." In fact, God's children have been yearning for better prayer lives for at least the last 2,000 years, and certainly beyond.

Luke 11 starts, "*It happened that while Jesus was praying in a certain place, after He had finished, one of His disciples said to Him, 'Lord, teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples.'*"

That simple request, "*Lord, teach us to pray,*" reveals that prayer is not just a raw instinct. It is something we can learn, and thus, something we can practice.

Prayer is meant to be a refuge - a grace-filled gift and an invitation to approach the Creator. In prayer, we praise Him, confess our sins, express gratitude, pour out our hearts, and even (what by all rights should be audacious) bring our requests before Him. Furthermore, He supplies the means by which this is all accomplished! We pray through the mediation of HIS Son, given to us as a perfect high priest. We pray with help from HIS Spirit, who actively works to interpret the groanings of our hearts that words can't yet describe. There is no downside to this arrangement. Mathematically speaking, the formula is perfect, yet humans still fail to work it.

Luke 18:9-14 tells a story of two men,

one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!'

Even our human eyes can see what's going on here. The Pharisee is strutting into the courts of God, offering a sacrifice of arrogance, pride, and conceit. If prayers have an aroma, this one stinks! (Perhaps this one has more of a stench?) We don't want to hear this prayer, and God surely wouldn't either. Jesus confirms our analysis, "I tell you, this tax collector went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."

His conclusion tells us what we could have already surmised: The Pharisee's prayer wasn't good, and the tax collector's was. But there's a little more to it than that, isn't there? Jesus gives us the word that wraps it up perfectly: Justification. One man left justified before God.

Justification is one of those big, beautiful Bible words that sometimes makes us stumble in our understanding. Let's try to put it simply here and really understand Jesus's parable. To be justified is to be made right, and we are justified with God when our relationship with God, which was previously broken, is made right again. Jesus teaches that our prayers - the heart we present to God - have something to do with us being "right" before God. Perhaps we could paraphrase the end of Jesus's parable by saying it this way: The tax collector went home having a strong relationship with God, and the Pharisee went home with the delusion that he did. What David observes in **Psalm 51** is what we see played out here: *"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise."*

If we truly want to "get better at prayer," then it would seem a wise first step is not by simply refining our words or speaking more of them, but examining our hearts. Scripture consistently points us there. **Proverbs 4:23** instructs us,

"Watch over your heart with all diligence, For from it flow the springs of life." The implication is clear: what flows out of us in prayer is inseparably tied to what is springing up within us.

When pride takes root in the heart, prayer becomes performance. When bitterness is harbored, prayer becomes accusation. When anger is left unattended, the springs are poisoned. And does God want to be served water drawn from poisoned springs? Too often, the problem is not that we pray too little, nor even that we don't have the right words at our disposal, but that we pray from hearts unwilling to be humbled.

The tax collector went home justified not because he had mastered the discipline of prayer, but because he came empty, honest, and dependent. The Pharisee, for all his religious fluency, left unchanged. Jesus' warning is gentle but unmistakable: God is not impressed by polished prayers offered from hardened hearts. He is drawn to humility, repentance, and truth.

So perhaps "getting better at prayer" begins there, not with more words, longer prayers, or greater confidence, but with a heart laid bare before God. When the heart is right, prayer will naturally follow. And when the springs are clean, the water offered to God will be pleasing to Him.

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Blessed Are the Dead

Jackie "Jack" Bucher, 88, passed away December 26, 2025. Brother Jack was a member of the church in **Bloomfield, IN** and a dear friend of your editor. Mr. Bucher was a beloved educator in the community for 38 years. He leaves behind three sons and several grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.

I Thessalonians 4:14



Please check your expiration date!

Glory to God!

On Monday, December 23, the angels rejoiced with the saints in **Nixa, MO** when **Shea** and **Velvet Estep** were immersed for the remission of sins and added to the congregation. Again, on December 28, the brethren had reason to rejoice as **Jeremy Onstott** was reborn through the waters of baptism and added to the number meeting in **Nixa, MO**.

The brethren meeting on **Prince Rd in Alton, IL** praised God on January 6, 2026 as **Evelyn Tutterow** chose to submit herself to her Lord through immersion.

The congregation in **Bloomfield, IN** gladly welcomed **Ian** and **EJ Staggs** who placed membership on November 16, and again rejoiced with **Charles Grey** when he joined the congregation on December 28.

May the Lord bless and watch over all of these souls as they seek to serve and please him.

Let all those who seek You rejoice and be glad in You; let such as love your salvation say continually, 'The Lord be magnified!'

Psalm 40:16

Special Meetings

2026

- March 7.....Ladies Day, Smart Rd, Greenwood,MO
- March 22.....Gardner, KS
- June 29-July 3.....Midwest Bible Campout
- July 26-31.....One-Week Meeting, Riverside Rd, Ozark, MO

Additional details for these and other upcoming meetings can be found by visiting the Gospel Message website. You can use the QR code below to navigate to the relevant page.



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