

Don't Always Pray the Same Prayer

Some people always pray the same prayer, whether they pray it just once a day or repeat it many times. They may use words straight out of Scripture, even praying one of the prayers of the Bible word for word, or they may speak sentences of a merely human origin. Either way, in Heaven their prayers must sound like an unchanging voicemail recording.

But one prayer does not a prayer life make. Prayers without variety eventually become words without meaning. Jesus said that to pray this way is to pray in vain, for in the Sermon on the Mount He warned, "But when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words" (Matthew 6:7).

What, then, about Jesus' teaching in the Lord's Prayer? Don't His introductory words to the prayer in Luke 11:2, "When you pray, say . . ." indicate that He wants us to repeat the words of this prayer verbatim? And if so, how can doing this involve "vain repetitions" since these are inspired words Jesus specifically told us to pray?

While it's true that this command of Jesus in Luke 11:2 justifies praying the exact words of the prayer, remember that when He taught this prayer to His hearers in Matthew 6:9 He began by saying, "In this *manner*, therefore, pray" (emphasis added). That's why, even though the prayer has been recited in unison by worshipers since the second century, it has been called the "Model" Prayer, because in it Jesus models all the elements we should include in our prayers. Not even the apostles understood the Lord's words here to be the exact and only words we're to use in prayer, for we never read in the New Testament of the apostles repeating them nor of their teaching others to do so. The other prayers of the New Testament follow the *model* of this prayer, but not its *form*. Any prayer in the Bible consistent with the Model Prayer may also be prayed sincerely and/or used as a model, but none should be considered merely a script to be repeated ritualistically.

Jesus also taught the importance of perseverance in prayer (Matthew 7:7-8; Luke 18:1-8), meaning that it's often necessary to pray many times (maybe even years) for the same thing. But frequent prayer for the same thing is very different from vain repetition of the same prayer. We should never think that we have found "just the right words" and make them the sum total of our prayer life.

It may seem simpler to pray only one prayer all the time rather than learning to pray in accordance with all that the Bible teaches on prayer. But in reality such praying is an oversimplification that reduces prayer to a magic formula designed to get God to do our bidding. The entire Bible is our guide to prayer, and to willfully neglect what God says about it throughout Scripture in order to isolate our attention on one prayer is a waste of breath. Besides, talking to God is too great a privilege to settle for "vain repetitions" when the Bible invites you to "pour out your heart before Him" (Psalm 62:8).

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