Don’t Pray Like This, Either

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Jesus wanted to teach His disciples how to pray, but He also wanted to teach them how not to pray. In the Sermon on the Mount, He told them that they should not pray like the hypocrites (Matt. 6:5-6). For Jesus’ followers, prayer should never be offered in order to impress the people who might overhear it.

He also taught that His disciples should not pray like idolaters (Matt. 6:7-8). According to Jesus, idolaters pray in empty repetitions, believing that their verbosity will gain a hearing from their deities. The true and living God, however, is never impressed by pointless reiteration.

By forbidding empty repetition, Jesus was not forbidding all repetitions. Not every repetition is necessarily empty. Otherwise, it would be difficult to explain how certain biblical prayers could have been honoring to God. Perhaps the best illustration is Psalm 136, in which every verse ends with the refrain, “for His mercy endureth for ever.” This phrase is repeated twenty-six times in the space of a short psalm. That certainly counts as repetition. It is not, however, empty repetition. God’s mercy (His c*hesed* or covenant faithfulness) is the point of the psalm. The psalm is composed of couplets, each of which begins with some fresh focus upon or description of God’s c*hesed*. The result is that each repetition of the refrain reflects a slightly expanded or re-aligned understanding of divine mercy. In other words, the refrain means something slightly different each time it occurs. A congregation that prays this psalm thoughtfully is never simply repeating itself, because the refrain takes on fresh meaning with each new iteration.

Nor was Jesus forbidding the reading of prayers. Some have objected to the use of written prayers on the grounds that this practice represents vain repetition. Many of the psalms, however, were written as prayers that are meant to be used and reused by God’s people, whether individually or corporately. When we pray a psalm of David or Asaph, we are repeating someone else’s words, but the repetition is not empty. The opposite of vain repetition is not spontaneity (which may also be vain), but thoughtfulness.
Neither does Jesus’ teaching prohibit the recitation of memorized prayers. Which of God’s children has not learned the beauty of repeating His own Scriptures back to Him? Is not our adoration constantly interrupted with locutions drawn from texts such as Psalm 103 or Ephesians 1:3-14? In our confession of sin, do we not find ourselves drawn to phrases from Psalm 51 or Psalm 32? Do we not actually hide these words in our hearts so that, at the moment of need, we shall be able to speak such things as will ascend to the Lord our God as a sweetsmelling savor? Could it be wrong, in addition to the words of inspired Scripture, to learn and say words composed by the saints and martyrs who loved our Lord Jesus?

Whether our prayer is one that we extemporize or one that we have learned, what matters is that it is spoken with understanding and offered from our heart. We must never imagine that God is a kind of machine for which prayer is the on-off switch. Because God is not a mechanism, we must never offer prayers in a merely mechanical way.

We never have to attract God’s attention. The prophets of Baal worried that they might find that their god was asleep, absent in travel, or otherwise indisposed. They wailed and cut themselves in order to get him to notice them. Only after drawing his interest would they stand in a position to alert him to their needs.

The true and living God is not like that. All of His creation is ever before Him. He is aware even of a sparrow when it falls. He knows His children in such detail that He notes the number of hairs on their heads. He holds His elect in His unwavering and loving gaze.

We can never inform God of our needs. He already knows them. When we articulate our needs in prayer, God is aware of them before we ask. He has anticipated our petitions before we utter them.

Not only so, but God is already disposed to respond. He is not only aware of our needs, but also deeply concerned with them. As Jesus taught elsewhere, He cares even for the ravens and the lilies, feeding them and arraying them with bounty and splendor (Luke 12:22-35). God is so committed to the well-being of His children that He has delighted to give them His kingdom.

Consequently, the followers of Jesus have been liberated from the tyranny of the immediate. They are now free to devote their primary attention to the kingdom of God, knowing that temporal things will be “added unto” them. Their lives need not be dominated by anxiety over daily necessities. God is willing and able to supply these things while His children devote themselves to the things that matter most.

This confidence changes the way that we pray. While we certainly will wish to share our daily needs with our loving Father, our gaze should lift beyond our present little circumstances and our hearts should be quickened by His larger work in the world.

We have been set free from frenetic attempts to attract the attention of our God. We have been granted glorious liberty from cringing concerns about whether we have done enough to impress God with our needs. Those ways of praying are fundamentally pagan. The children of the true and living God are welcome in His presence, must become the subject of a separate discussion.

This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.