



No vain repetitions

Matthew 6.⁷

“When ye pray,” warns Jesus, “use not vain repetitions.”¹ If this means, as some suggest, that it is a warning about repeating the same prayer over and over, then an LDS sacrament service with its weekly repeated sacrament prayers is in serious violation of this prohibition—to say nothing of the temple with its, by now, hundreds of millions of repeated incantations in behalf of the living and the dead.

No, Jesus is not warning against repeating a prayer.

The Greek word, *battalogéō*, translated in the KJV as, “vain repetitions” means something like, ‘to babble.’ Its etymology is uncertain. But we do know that in both Greek and Jewish religious practice at the time, it was common to grow loquacious in prayer. This, it was felt, was necessary for at least two reasons.

The first reason was theological, revolving around the very nature of God. God was picky and prickly. He required a prayer to be just so. If one didn’t get it exactly right, he would not be inclined to hear and respond positively to the prayer.

But God is not picky and prickly. Therefore, anyone who prays—how ever often, for however long, with whatever variation—while viewing God in this way is certain to be praying in “vain” because they are praying to a god that does not exist! They are praying to a false god. An idol—

¹ Matthew 6.⁷

likely created after the imagination and image of their own heart.

The second reason to engage in long extended prayer was anthropological. Man was largely ignorant about God. Praying to him was like a shot in the dark. One could never be certain that they could formulate a prayer that would be acceptable to this prickly god. Thus, to increase one's chances of saying the right thing, one extended the word count of the prayer. If one went on long enough, one would surely trip across, even if by accident, the right words, phrase, tone, etc. that would convince God to act.

If anything, then, Jesus is warning about prayers that go on, and on, and on and on and on and on, in an attempt to twist the arm of a recalcitrant god.

Among the many things Jesus' model prayer taught his disciples, include both the misconceptions surveyed above.

First, Jesus teaches his disciples through the example prayer that God is Abba, daddy. His "Our Father which art in heaven" is not a prayer formula. It addresses, rather, the false theology that created a "vain" prayer. Just as one could know their dad and trust him to give his children the benefit of the doubt, so too could the petitioner know and trust God to give them the benefit of the doubt. In addition, there is no need to flatter God or stroke his ego by loading the prayer up with magnificent adjectives descriptive of God in the attempt to get on his good side. God is the most secure of all beings, and his children are always on his good side. He is happiest when he is called, "Daddy."

Second, Jesus' model prayer is short and to the point. No need to make the same request over and over in new and different words in the hopes of getting it right, formulating the request in just the right way.

Now, all of this is by way of introduction. My real objective is to suggest that it is entirely appropriate to "pray the Psalms." Doing so does not fall under either of the two errors discussed above.

In addition, “praying the Psalms” is not “repetitious.” The Book of Psalms is long enough that it could take quite some time to get through them all.

Then too, if one knows the Psalms well enough, one is able to identify plenty of passages that are appropriate to nearly any human concern or need. Thus, the Psalms can be prayed, or used in prayer with all sincerity without the fear of falling into the danger of “rote” prayer.

But, you need not take my word for all this. Just watch and listen to God, Himself. In the midst of a pain, stress, and need so intense that any other would have been annihilated both physically and spiritually under its onslaught, the Eternal God latched onto the words of the Psalmist and prayed them.

“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”²

If it is good enough and beneficial enough for him who is the “greatest of all,” it is good enough for any and all of us.

I will provide short passages from the Book of Psalms that one can pray. What might this look like? You will be the best judge. But, it is certainly appropriate to address Abba directly before reading or reciting the passage, and then expressing to him what the words mean to you and how they appropriately apply to your concerns and needs, the concerns and needs of your friends and family, and the concerns and needs of your society.

Over time, if you find that the current psalm passage is not appropriate to any concern or need that you or those around you have, there will be plenty of other passages available on this site. Of course, the best thing you can do is dive into the Book of Psalms yourself. Read them often. Pray about their meaning and import.

I hope this page and the passages from Psalms will be a blessing to those who utilize it and them. I have been blessed more than I can say by this most amazing and inspired book of scripture.

² Psalm 22.¹

We will end this devotional, not with a prayer from the Psalms, but by invoking the priestly prayer found in Numbers 6.²⁴⁻²⁶

“The LORD bless thee, and keep thee:

The LORD make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee:

The LORD lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.”

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!