

Bible Questions and Answers

(By Robert C. Veil, Jr.)

Question: I understand that Jesus commanded not to use “vain repetitions.” Does this mean we should not repeat things in our prayers?

Answer: In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gave some very practical instructions concerning prayer, as well as many other matters. One of the things he directed against is the use of “vain repetitions,” which are positively forbidden. “And in praying use not vain repetitions, as the Gentiles do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking,” (Mt. 6:7).

Note that the command does not forbid repetitions, but *vain* repetitions. The word “vain” means empty, useless, done without proper thought. The restriction is against the use of repeated words or phrases in a ritualistic, thoughtless manner. Our prayers should be sincere, and we should understand and think about what we are saying each time. There is no place in our prayers for memorized, “canned” language, uttered without thought. Such was characteristic of some of the prayers of Jesus’ day. He said they think there is some value in their “much speaking.” Does this sound familiar in our day?

Repetition itself is not bad. In fact, Jesus told the parable of the unrighteous judge in Luke 18:1-8 to emphasize the need for Christians to be persistent in prayer, and not to “faint” or grow weary. There is nothing wrong with repeating certain requests in prayer, so long as we are sincerely conscious of what we are saying, and doing so in Jesus’ name (i.e. by his authority).

This teaching of Jesus appears in a context, which helps explain the meaning. He began this chapter by emphasizing the need to not seek the attention of people in our worship, but rather to seek only to please God. He said, “Take heed that ye do not your righteousness before men, to be seen of them: else ye have no reward with your Father who is in heaven, (Mt. 6:1). He then applied this principle to 1) Doing alms (gifts); 2) Praying; and 3) Fasting. None of these things should be done in a vain, “showy” manner.

Praying is not a time to “show off” with flowery words or ornate phrases, repeated over and over to gain attention. Prayer is an avenue of worshipping God. It is the means by which we speak to God, through Jesus, as a child would talk to their parent. If we remember that God is like our heavenly father, and he wants us to approach him with sincerity and humility, we should have no trouble avoiding “vain repetitions.”

Robert Veil, Jr. has been a gospel preacher with the Church of Christ for over 35 years. He currently preaches monthly for the Broad Top Church of Christ. Submit your Bible questions to him at Central Church of Christ, 90 Waverly Court, Martinsburg, WV 25403.