

Vain Repetitions?

Often one hears people complain that some Christians either say the same thing over and over again in prayers, or sing the same line over and over again in worship songs and choruses. I came to a personal commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ in a large gathering of worshippers, described as a "Charismatic Convention", that is to say a gathering from across many denominations of people who accepted the biblical concept of the so-called "Charismata" or Spiritual Gifts given to His people by God through His grace, which were recorded first on the Day of Pentecost meeting described early on in the book of Acts, where at that time some two thousand souls were added to the number of those believing in the Lord Jesus Christ. Subsequently Paul (the apostle) describes these in greater detail as regards to the usage of them in worship in one of the letters he wrote to the Corinthian church. Gifts are not the subject of this homily, but we shall look at repetition, which is probably more noticeable among those who people who like to put others into boxes would describe as "charismatics" or "pentecostals", or those who have trod that path and then come to a more disciplined view of what scripture is really saying.

Those who are critical, as described in the first line, often point towards a scripture from Matthew's gospel, in chapter 6, which refers to "vain repetitions", and the scripture is reproduced here, in context...

6 But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.

*7 But **when ye pray, use not vain repetitions**, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking.*

8 Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him.

9 After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name...

The Greek word used in this context means to "repeat idly", and its origin is thought to be Aramaic. The Sinaitic Syriac text of the New Testament renders it (in translation) "*Do not be saying 'battalatha', idle things*" - that is to say meaningless and mechanically repeated phrases, referencing pagan rather than Jewish forms of prayer - the latter which often appear repetitious to onlookers. I don't believe that someone praying at a time of peril, and repeating the words "Protect me, O God" would fall into this category, nor I would imagine, someone meditating on the Lord who said repeatedly, "I love You, Lord" while doing so.

One should notice from verse 8 that God knows what we need, before we ask Him; this is because He is the only one we cannot exclude from our innermost, often nasty, thoughts. Why then, you may ask, are we encouraged to pray to Him for these needs? Perhaps a good answer would be to ensure that we maintain a communication path with Him. If anything is designed to promote repetition, it is the instruction to ask of God, even though He knows what your request is. One can also read in scripture that we should go on and ask repeatedly.

Christians are also exhorted to continually pray the worthy prayer that is on their hearts, as can be read in the epistle (or letter) to the Ephesians where in chapter 6, Paul encourages the saints at Ephesus about...

*18 Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto **with all perseverance and supplication** for all saints;*

19 And for me, that utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel,

20 *For which I am an ambassador in bonds: that therein I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.*

21 *But that ye also may know my affairs, and how I do, Tychicus, a beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord, shall make known to you all things:*

22 *Whom I have sent unto you for the same purpose, that ye might know our affairs, and that he might comfort your hearts.*

The Greek word for 'perseverance' is derived from one meaning to be 'steadfast', and it means to 'continue steadfastly, giving unremitting care to it', which rather conjures up the vision which John saw in the Revelation where he describes the twenty-four elders around the throne having golden bowls of incense, being the prayers of the saints; the narrative suggests that they were active in an ongoing manner in their supplications except for the time when they cast down their crowns upon the floor and worshipped Almighty God.

Let us look at another scripture.....from the epistle (or letter) to the Hebrews, chapter 13...

13 *Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach.*

14 *For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come.*

15 *By him therefore **let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name.***

16 *But to do good and to communicate forget not: **for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.***

17 *Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you.*

The Greek word used here and translated into English as 'continually' means literally "unto the end of time".

I'm sure that it would be extremely difficult for most of us mere humans to offer praise continually without repeating ourselves a bit. I remember hearing a Baptist minister speak on this subject once, and he first of all described the creation of mankind as being so that God Himself might have a creation that would worship Him because it chose to do so; he then went on to ask what wife would reject her husband's words in her ear, saying that he loved her, often? Those of us who "endure to the end" shall become collectively Christ's bride, and I'm sure that He is not going to get snaky if we were to continually tell Him how much we love Him. In any case, verse 16 tells us that God is well pleased with a continual praise to him, spelled out in fine detail as "the fruit of our lips giving thanks to His Name". As he discourages us from the affairs of the world, notwithstanding our existing in it (but to being "of" it), what better way is there to conduct ourselves if we are to receive his approbation, than by continually praising Him?

I believe that scripture makes our conduct quite clear in this regard, and if we aren't in agreement, it might make good sense for us to examine our attitudes rather carefully to see if we can determine exactly what we dislike, and why. If we do so later, it might be too late.