

The Bible Instructs us to Pray Repetitive Prayers

It is not from Fundamentalist TV preachers that we should receive direction on how to pray. We should learn how to pray from heaven itself and the divine instructions provided in Scripture and Sacred Tradition. And, both heaven and divine revelation teach us how to pray—and the practice of repetition is part of that instruction.

Prayer is more than just asking God to give us things or do things for us. It's an attitude of heart by which we “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess 5:17). The *Catechism* defines prayer as, “The elevation of the mind and heart to God in praise of his glory; a petition made to God for some desired good, or in thanksgiving for a good received, or in intercession for others before God.” (Glossary, 894)

We can assume that in the heavenly realm—inhabited by God, His angels and saints—prayer and worship are conducted correctly and serve as a model for us. After all, in the *Our Father*, Jesus taught us to request “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”. So let's start by looking at some of the prayer patterns in heaven from which we can take instruction.

In Revelation 4, a door to heaven stood open. The author stepped in to behold the throne of God surrounded with indescribable glory, filling the celestial realm with prayers and praise. “And the four living creatures ... day and night they never cease to say, 'Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!'" (Rev. 4:8).

This prayerful praise is repeated around God's throne 24 hours a day without ceasing. God receives this perpetual praise; in fact, everything in heaven is done according to his will. God desires

his will done not only in heaven but also on earth. Heaven endorses repetitive prayer.

Prayer is not just a heavenly activity. The Temple in Jerusalem swelled with prayer and psalms as the Israelites followed the prescribed forms of worship. The Psalms are called the “Hymnbook of the Hebrews,” and the *Catechism* says, “The Psalms constitute the masterwork of prayer in the Old Testament” (2596). These masterworks of prayer give us proper instruction on how to pray.

Stop for a moment and read Psalm 136, if, of course, you are not hesitant to recite a repetitive prayer. As the great Baptist preacher Charles H. Spurgeon wrote, “From the striking form of [Psalm 136] we should infer that it was a popular hymn among the Lord’s ancient people.” Of all the psalms, it is referred to as the “Great Hallel” or the “Great Praise” which was regularly used in Jewish celebrations and daily worship. It was sung in the Temple of Solomon, and therefore also by Our Lord.

Psalm 136 could be considered the biblical epitome of repetitive prayer. In its twenty-six verses, it repeats the prayer refrain “for his mercy endures forever” twenty-six times. Anyone refraining from repetition in prayer should certainly avoid Psalm 136.

Jesus repeated himself in prayer and encouraged us to do the same. While experiencing great agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed: “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.” (Mt 26:39)

In verse 42, it says “for the second time” Jesus prayed the exact same words, and then in verse 44, he “prayed for the third time, saying the same words again.” If Jesus was opposed to repetitive prayers, why would he be redundant with “the same prayer again” three times in succession? Didn’t his Father hear

him the first time? Did he really need to repeat himself over and over again?

Did Jesus encourage us to be persistent with our petitions as well? Yes. Let's look at a few examples. Jesus instructs his followers to "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you." (Matt 7:7). "The three imperatives in this verse are in the present tense and could also be translated 'keep asking,' etc."¹ The imperatives or commands "are in the present tense because asking should be continual."² In other words, Jesus tells us to be asking continually, persistently, repetitively.

Our Lord again emphasizes this in the parable of the unjust judge who "neither feared God nor respected man". He ignored a widow who pursued him to obtain justice. He finally retorted, "'This widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.' And the Lord said, 'Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night?'" (Luke 16:1-8).

Jesus told his disciples not to pray like the gentiles who "heap up empty phrases" who "think they will be heard for their many words" (Matt 6:7). The *King James Version* renders this "vain repetition". Most commentators relay this back to Elijah's mocking of the prophets of Baal who "raved on" until evening with no response from the pagan god. Their babbling and vain repetition, the heaping of words-upon-words was to no avail. The Greek word used by Jesus is *battalogeō* which means to

¹ Donald A. Hagner, Matthew 1–13, vol. 33A, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1993), 173.

² W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew, vol. 1, International Critical Commentary (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 679.

stammer, to babble, prattle, utter meaningless sounds, or to speak incoherently.

Jesus says we are not to prattle on or babble like the incoherent pagan prophets of Baal, who “think they will be heard for their many words”.

Immediately after commanding us not to babble with words-heaped-upon-words, Jesus tells us to pray like this, “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be thy name...” This prayer he taught us is not only a *model* of prayer, but he gave us the perfect prayer, a prayer revealed from the very heart of God. It is a prayer to be repeated often and from the heart, not just empty words while our mind drifts elsewhere. Can one pray this prayer too frequently? Would God be displeased if we repeated this prayer often? I think not.

The early Christians repeated the Our Father frequently based on Jewish patterns of prayer. In the *Didache* (an ancient manual for Christian prayer and liturgical worship, written as early as AD 60) we read, “Nor pray like the hypocrites but, as the Lord has commanded in his Gospel, pray in like manner: Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be your name ...” After reciting the prayer in full, it concludes, “ Pray this prayer three times a day.” (*Didache*, 8). The early Christians, therefore, were in the habit of repeating the Our Father at least 1,095 times a year and probably more often if we include its use in the liturgical prayers of the Church.

So we can conclude, based on heaven, Divine Revelation, the teachings of Our Lord, and the practice of the early Church, that we are not forbidden from repetition in prayer, but we are actually instructed to do so. However, it is not necessarily the words that are important to God, but a sincere prayer from our heart welling up with praise, intercession, and requests that are uttered in a deep love for God, even if we use words and they are repeated.

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thess 5:16–18).