

Engaging The Heart In Prayer

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In Matthew 6:9-13, during the great *Sermon On The Mount*, Jesus teaches a model prayer, beginning with these words: “*In this manner, therefore, pray...*” Notice that the word *therefore* indicates that the following teaching (that is, the model prayer) is built upon preceding instructions, namely, the verses in which Jesus states:

“*And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words. Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you need before you ask Him*” (Matthew 6:7-8).

Evidently, the Gentiles (or heathen peoples), moved by their logical belief in the divine creation of the universe, wanted their prayers to be heard by the powerful gods of the heavens, but these petitions were vain because: 1) they were ignorant concerning the nature of the one true and living God (read Acts 17:16-31); and 2) they had no clue *how* God truly wished for them to pray to Him – they mistook the power of prayer as being held in formulas of words instead of in the heart and attitude of the worshiper. Thus, the Gentiles’ ignorance of how to communicate with God led them to mindlessly pray with vain repetitions that meant nothing to their true Creator.

These brief comments reveal several important lessons concerning our own prayers. First of all, people who wish to communicate with God should not be ignorant concerning how to pray to Him. The command in Matthew 6:7-8 implies that God absolutely does not accept just any words that are murmured toward the heavens. And thus, Jesus goes on to give His disciples a pattern, an example – not a ritualistic saying to substitute for our own heartfelt and meaningful supplications, but a model by which our own prayers should be molded. Note that Jesus states that His disciples should pray “*in this manner,*” not “*with these words*”! Many individuals and religious groups have arrived at a false conclusion concerning the model prayer of Matthew 6, simply repeating it over and over again instead of expressing their own prayers to God. However, Jesus never intended for this model to be repeated word for word as a liturgy or religious ritual. In fact, this passage strictly commands against such vain and mindless repetitions – prohibiting not only verbatim recitation of the model prayer itself, but also all other types of recitations which are droned in religious rituals. Jesus here condemns liturgies or formulaic recitations of any kind.

But secondly, and probably most importantly, Christ teaches in this passage that the power of prayer lies not in complex or elegant formulas of words but in the attitude and disposition of the person who prays. Without a doubt, our prayers must be in accordance with the instructions given in God’s revealed word. However, one might offer a beautiful prayer, with all clauses in absolute accordance with the exemplary prayers of the Bible, but if he or she does not speak from a lovingly devoted and humbly submissive heart, those words will not reach God. Constantly in Scripture, God’s children are reminded that our Father cares most of all about the

condition of the *hearts* of those who worship Him. In a great prayer of repentance in the book of Psalms, David states: “*The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart – these, O God, You will not despise*” (Psalm 51:17). In fact, some of the Jews of Jesus’ day had forgotten this very principle, praising God and praying to him with their lips but refusing to worship and obey Him from their hearts, thus Jesus rebuked them saying:

*“These people draw near to Me with their mouth,
And honor Me with their lips,
But their heart is far from Me.
And in vain they worship Me”* (Matthew 15:8-9).

What does this mean to you and me? Our worship, including our prayers, simply is not acceptable to God unless offered from adoring, devoted and obedient hearts. For example, one might not have a lovely singing voice by this world’s standards, but if he strives to make melody in his heart to the Lord, and to encourage and edify his brethren in truthful song, then his worship is acceptable to God (Colossians 3:16; Ephesians 5:19). One might not have the resources to offer large sums of money in the weekly collection, but if she cheerfully offers to God of her means as she has purposed in her heart, God sees not the quantity of capital but the quality of character expressed in that contribution (II Corinthians 9:7; cf. Mark 12:41-44). Truly, the same principle applies to prayer: God, who knows the things we need before we even ask, seeks for His children to humbly bow their hearts before Him in earnest and devoted prayer, no matter how inadequate our vocabularies might seem.

As important as it is for our prayers to be offered in accordance with truth, it is equally important they be offered in spirit, as though we were kneeling before the very throne of the Lord (see John 4:24). There is no mystical power in reciting the model prayers of the Christ. Indeed, mindless, mechanical repetition of *any* prayer, or even of a particular phrase in prayer, means nothing to God. But our Father in Heaven desires for His children to express their thanksgiving and concerns in prayer offered from hearts full of devoted love and elation that we stand in the mercy and grace of the Most High.