

Question: "Is there anything wrong with repetitive prayer?"

Answer: The phrase *repetitive prayer* can mean a few different things. Depending on what exactly is meant by "repetitive," there may or may not be a problem with repetitive prayer.

Repetitive Prayer—Mantras

Prayer that is repetitive in the sense that a person repeats the same phrase over and over as some sort of mantra or formula is not biblical. In Matthew 6:7 Jesus says, "And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words" (ESV). The Greek word translated as "empty phrases" is variously rendered as "vain repetitions" or "babbling." It refers to the use of the same words over and over or a nonsensical, idle babbling. To "pray" by simply repeating a word or phrase over and over is unbiblical. Prayer is not a magical formula, an incantation, or the determination to say the "right" words the right number of times. Prayer is not bead-counting. Prayer is a form of communication with the God of the universe made possible through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Vain repetition tends to give more credence to superstition than it does to the work of God. It is not our prayers or our word count that has power but the God to whom we pray.

Repetitive Prayer—Habits or Ruts

Praying the same thing often or offering prayers with similar wording might also be considered a type of "repetitive prayer." For example, some people like to recite the Lord's Prayer. Others have a set prayer list. Or they simply find themselves generally saying the same things to God in prayer day in and day out, due to having a natural comfort with certain phrasing and patterns of speech that come easily. There is nothing necessarily "wrong" with this type of prayer, but we are wise to consider our hearts. Are we truly praying, or are we simply going through the motions?

A helpful way to conceptualize prayer is as a conversation with a loved one. When our spouse asks how our day was, we probably share many of the same things day in and day out. That we repeat our words is not necessarily an issue; it just speaks to the routine nature of our days and our conversations. But when we only ever respond with "Good," we know we have a breakdown in communication. The same can be said in our prayers. We can repeatedly pray the same types of things and even routinely use the same words. But, if they are just words, we have a problem. We want to actually communicate with God, not just mechanically recite phrases or speak by rote.

Remember that prayer is a privilege. We are granted access to God Most High. He isn't an afterthought, and prayer is more than just a habit. We want to be continually in an attitude of prayer (1 Thessalonians 5:17) and approach God's throne of grace with confidence (Hebrews 4:16). But we also want to be sure that we are paying attention to the One seated on the throne and not just saying words for the sake of saying words.

Repetitive Prayer—Persistent Intercessions

In one sense, persistent prayer can also be thought of as a type of repetitive prayer. All of us have prayer requests that we've prayed about for years: the salvation of a lost loved one, the healing of a broken relationship, or the forgiveness of a habitual sin. In the parables of the neighbor in need (Luke 11:5–10) and the persistent widow (Luke 18:1–8), Jesus encouraged us to keep coming to God with our requests. We "should always pray and not give up" (Luke 18:1). Persistent prayer builds our dependence on God and demonstrates our knowledge that only He can truly change the situation. It is a way to be honest with God and continually offer to Him the things that weigh on our hearts. In Christ, we are God's children, and He cares deeply for us. If an unjust judge will respond to us simply because we keep asking, how much more will our righteous Heavenly Father respond to us when we keep seeking Him in prayer?