

# THE THREE GREAT RULES FOR PRAYER

## MATHEW 06:07–08

### *Introduction*

Among the religious there is often a tendency toward long prayers, particularly in public. Too often people measure prayer by its fluency and length, thinking that length means devotion. “Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God” (Eccl 5:2). Christ puts the matter very simply, yet strongly: “When you pray,” follow three great rules.

- I. Rule 1: do not use meaningless repetition (v. 7).
- II. Rule 2: do not speak much (v. 7).
- III. Rule 3: trust God (v. 8).

### **I. *Mathew 06:07 Repetitive Prayer***

The first great rule of prayer is striking — do not use empty repetition (see *Repetitive Prayer*, Mt. 6:7). There are several things that lend themselves to empty repetition.

1. Memorized prayer: just saying the words of a form prayer, for example, the Lord’s prayer. There is nothing wrong with praying a memorized prayer, but it should be prayed through and not just repeated with no thought behind the words.
  2. Written, well-worded prayers: thinking that what we say is so expressive and so well worded that it is bound to carry weight with God. The words may be descriptive and beautifully arranged, but the heart must be offering the prayer, not the mind and ego. Such prayer is empty repetition.
  3. Ritual prayer: saying the same prayer at the same time on the same occasion — over and over again. This can soon become empty repetition.
  4. Formal worship: praying in the same way on a rigid schedule can lead to praying by habit (repeated practice) with little or no meaning to it.
  5. Thoughtless prayer: speaking words while our minds are wandering. Being tired is no excuse. It is better not to pray than to pray insincerely.
  6. Religious words and phrases: using certain words or phrases over and over in prayer (just because they are religious sounding). (Compare using such words over and over as *mercy, grace, I thank thee O God, in Jesus’ name.*)
  7. Habitual references to God: using such empty repetition as “Lord this,” and “Lord that,” and “Lord here,” and “Lord there,” and “Lord...,” “Lord...,” “Lord...” How little thought is really given to approaching Him whose name is “Wonderful, Counsellor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace” (Isa 9:6).
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There are several things that will keep us from using empty repetition in prayer:

- A genuine heart: really knowing God personally and having a moment-by-moment fellowship with Him all day long.
- Thought and concentration: really focusing upon what we are saying.
- Desire for fellowship with God: praying sincerely, really meaning it.
- Preparation: preparing ourselves for prayer by first meditating in God's Word.

Note something of extreme importance in discussing "babbling" repetition. Christ does not say repetition in prayer is wrong. It is not wrong. What is wrong is vain, empty, meaningless, foolish repetition. Christ Himself used repetition in prayer (Mt. 26:44), so did Daniel (Dan 9:18-19), and so did the Psalmist (Psa 136:1f).

**Thought 1.** Note six lessons.

- 1) There is one major problem with the praying of believers: they do not pray enough. They do not take enough time to pray and to pray in earnest. There is one major problem *when believers do pray*, prayer is often vain, empty, thoughtless, meaningless and repetitive. Too often a believer prays and does not concentrate. His mind wanders off somewhere else; he only mouths the words. Such thoughtless and meaningless prayer is clearly seen in public prayer and in the powerlessness of believers today.
- 2) There is one sure way to prepare our hearts for prayer: meditating in God's Word.

**2 Tim 3:16** *All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.*

It is in the Scripture that the believer learns about God, himself, and the world — the nature and truth of all things. It is the Spirit of God who takes the Word of God and moves upon the believer's heart revealing that for which the believer should pray. Therefore, the believer is stirred to pray for whatever the Word of God and the Spirit of God has shown him (Rom 8:26; see Jn. 14:26; 16:13; 1 Cor 2:12-13).

- 3) Meaningless repetition in prayer, whether formal or thoughtless, is *desensitizing*.
  - => It discourages the sincere and the newly converted.
  - => It cools the willing and the gifted.
  - => It stifles the committed and the mature.
  - => It turns away the seeking and the lost.
- 4) Repetition in prayer *is* dull. Empty repetition affects worship, interest, and attendance at services.

5) Meaningless repetition is tragic. Prayer should be one of the most meaningful experiences in life. God is certainly willing to meet the believer in a very special way — anytime, anyplace. So many hearts are just...

- barren
- desert-like
- dry
- lethargic
- complacent
- still
- dull
- rusted
- hard

So much praying is merely going over and over the same things ranging from “bless Mom and Dad” to “give us a good day tomorrow.”

6) Empty repetition turns God away and cuts the heart of the committed.

*2 Tim 3:5 Having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them.*

*Mat 15:7-8 “You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: ‘These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.’”*

### MATHEW 06:07

#### PRAYER; MEANINGLESS REPETITION (BATTOLOGESETE)

To babble much; to use many phrases; to say idle things; to say meaningless things. Meaningless repetition means at least two things.

1. It means saying the same words over and over again without putting one’s heart and thought into what is being said.
2. It means using certain religious words or phrases (sometimes over and over again) and thinking God hears because one is using such religious talk. □

## II. *Mathew 06:07 Long Prayers*

The second great rule of prayer is an eye-opener — do not speak much. Too many think that length equals devotion; that is, the longer they pray the more God will listen to them (they are showing God their sincerity), and the more spiritual they will become.

God does not hear a person’s prayer because it is long, but because his heart is genuinely poured out to God. Length has nothing to do with devotion, but a sincere heart does.

Long prayers are not forbidden. What is forbidden is the idea that long prayers are automatically heard by God. Christ prayed all night (Lk 6:12). The early disciples prayed and fasted, and sought God for ten days and nights waiting for the coming of die Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1f). A believer should sense the needs of the world so much that he is driven to seek God and His intervention for long periods of time, and the seeking should be often (Eph 6:18).

Why do some pray long prayers?

1. Some feel long prayers convince God. They feel God has to be moved, nudged and stirred to hear and answer.
2. Some feel they need long prayers to explain the situation. They feel God needs to be informed and made to understand a particular situation and how it has affected them.
3. Some feel long prayers make them more spiritual, more mature and more devoted.
4. Some feel long prayers are just demanded of believers. It is expected; it is the religious and godly thing to do.
5. Some feel long prayers show God their sincerity. They secure God's approval by long prayers.
6. Some feel long prayers impress people. They show people just how deeply spiritual they really are.

What are ways to prevent the sins that arise from long prayers?

*Eccl 5:2 Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few.*

- “Do not be quick with your mouth.” Control your mouth. Do not let your mouth rattle on and on without thought. It will often rush and hurry with every thought that crosses your mind.
- Do not be “hasty in your heart to utter anything before God”: sit still, be quiet, without saying a word for a while. Do not rush forward to speak.
- Think about who God is. Picture a man: his mouth is quiet; he has been still for some time. He has been preparing, gaining control of his mind and thoughts so he can appear before the Sovereign Majesty of the universe. He focuses his thoughts upon God, the One who is in heaven far above the earth. He meditates upon God's sovereignty and majesty. God is the centre of his thoughts (Psa 46:10).
- “Let your words be few.” Speak — but make your words deliberate — just as deliberate as the words of any interviewer before a sovereign ruler. Request — just as any obedient son would request of a revered father. The person who approaches God like this speaks with respect and thought, with care and love. He speaks few words and straight to the point — all from a prepared heart and mind.

When should the believer spend a long time in prayer? There *are* special times when an extended prayer time is necessary. Some of the times are clearly seen in Scripture.

1. Sometimes a special pull to praise and adore God is felt within. When the believer feels this pull, he should get alone, spending a long time praising and worshipping God (see Acts 16:25).

2. Sometimes a special need arises. This may be the believer's own need or a friend's need. He should intercede until God gives the assurance that the need will be met (Eph 6:18; see Acts 12:1-5, esp. v. 5).
3. Sometimes an unusual experience or event has taken place or is about to take place in the believer's life or ministry. He should get alone and share the event with God. And he should stay before God until the experience has taken place (courage, confidence, power, faith, love). (See Introduction, Mt. 4:1-11.)
4. Sometimes a great trial or temptation is faced. A long session of prayer may be needed to gain strength and to keep the believer away from the trial or temptation. (See *Temptation of Jesus*, Mt. 4:1-11.)
5. Sometimes a matter needs to be worked through or a major decision needs to be made. Help and direction should be sought from God. God should be acknowledged in all of the believer's ways. He should remain before God until the answer is given. (See Acts 13:1-3, esp. 2.)

**Thought 1.** Prayer is a matter of the heart, not a matter of words and length. Praying is sharing; it is sharing with God just like a person shares with any other person. Just as he shares thoughts, feelings, praise and requests with others, so he shares with God.

**Thought 2.** Prayer is a personal relationship. Prayer is not speaking into thin air. God may be "unseen" (v. 6); He may be invisible, but He is there. He is there more than any other person who may be in our presence. He is the One whom all men are to know and to whom all men are to be vitally related. Too often, the awareness and consciousness of His presence are allowed to fade, and we just go through our long prayer with a wandering mind leaping from thought to thought. Long prayers lend themselves to this danger. How insincere! How irreverent! How often the heart of God must be cut and hurt!

**Thought 3.** There are prayers of believers and prayers of the heathen. A distinction is made by Christ Himself. He says that both pray.

- 1) The heathen pray using meaningless repetition and speaking empty words.
- 2) The believer is vitally related to God; therefore, he prays to God who is his Father. He prays to God just as a son shares with his revered father.

**Mat 6:7** *"And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words."*

**Eccl 6:7** *All man's efforts are for his mouth, yet his appetite is never satisfied.*

### III. *Mathew 06:08 Prayer*

The third great rule of prayer is forceful — trust God.

1. God knows the believer's need even before the believer asks. Why then should the believer pray?

Prayer demonstrates our need for God and our dependence upon God. Prayer gives time for concentrated sharing and communion between the believer and God. It is not enough for man to carry a knowledge of God in his mind as he walks through life. Man needs to have times when he is in the presence of God and can concentrate his thoughts and fellowship upon God. He needs such time with God just as he needs such time with his family and friends. Man is not meant to live in isolation from people nor from God. He must have times when he is in the presence of both man and God and can concentrate his thoughts and attention upon both.

The believer, therefore, does not pray only to have his needs met but to share and fellowship and to enrich his life with God.

**Thought 1.** God knows the believer's needs. The believer does not have to worry about God's knowing or meeting his needs. The believer's concern should be living in the presence of God, taking enough time to share and to fellowship with God. The more he shares and fellowships with God, the more he will know God and learn to trust and to depend upon God's care and promises.

**Thought 2.** God is the believer's Father. The believer is God's son. The believer can, therefore, *rest* in God and His promises. He does not have to strain and pray long in order for his Father to hear him. His Father already knows and cares. He is to get with His Father for long periods of time sharing and fellowshiping, learning and getting to know his Father intimately.

2. God desires to hear. God knows the believer's need even before the believer asks (see 2 Chr 16:9; Isa 65:24). God desires to hear and answer the believer's prayer, to meet the believer's needs. God desires to work for the believer's deliverance and salvation (see notes, Rom 8:23-27; 8:28-39. This is one of the great passages on assurance and confidence.)
3. God has ordained prayer as the medium through which He blesses and moves among men. (See *Prayer*, Mt. 6:5-6; pt. 2, 1 Th. 5:15-22).

**Psa 31:19** *How great is your goodness, which you have stored up for those who fear you, which you bestow in the sight of men on those who take refuge in you.*

**Psa 32:10** *Many are the woes of the wicked, but the Lord's unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him.*

***Psa 34:22*** *The LORD redeems his servants; no one will be condemned who takes refuge in him.*

***Psa 125:1*** *Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion, which cannot be shaken but endures forever.*

***Prov 3:5-6*** *Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.*

***Prov 29:25*** *Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the see is kept safe.*

***Isa 26:3-4*** *You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you. Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord, the Lord, is the Rock eternal.*

***Jer 17:7-8*** *“But blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him. He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.” ■*