

The background of the entire cover is a vibrant, fiery sky with a bright sun or light source at the top center, creating a lens flare effect. The sky is filled with soft, glowing clouds in shades of orange, yellow, and red. In the lower half of the image, two hands are raised in a gesture of prayer, palms facing each other. The hands are silhouetted against the bright sky, with some light catching the fingers and palms. The overall mood is one of spiritual contemplation and earnestness.

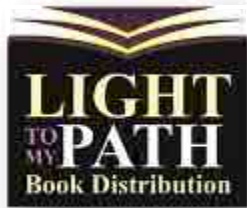
Vain Repetitions

**An Examination
of Jesus' Teaching
about Empty
Phrases in
Prayer**

F. Wayne MacLeod

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Empty Phrases in Prayer*



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INTRODUCTION

7 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. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. (Matthew 6:7-8, ESV)

The passage quoted above was spoken by Jesus. In this passage, He speaks about "heaping up empty phrases" when we pray. Jesus' words are translated in different ways by the various English translations of the Bible. Consider how the following translations deal with this passage:

"do not keep babbling like pagans" (NIV)

"don't babble on and on as people of other religions do." (NLT)

"do not use meaningless repetitions as the Gentiles do" (NASB)

"use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do" (KJV)

The word Jesus uses is the Greek word "*battalogéō*". Matthew 6:7 seems to be the only time this word is used in the

New Testament. It comes from two other Greek words. The first is "*battos*" which refers to a person who stammers or stutters. The second is "*logos*" which is interpreted simply by "word". "*Battalogeó*" carries with it the sense of stuttering or repeating the same sounds over and over again.

Let's look a little deeper into this phrase. Notice that Jesus speaks of "empty" phrases (ESV), "meaningless" repetitions (NASB) or "vain" repetitions (KJV). The words "empty," "meaningless" or "vain" are significant. They tell us that the words or phrases being used are of no value. We will take time later to examine possible reasons why these words and phrases in prayer are of no value. For now, it is simply important that we note that the words Jesus speaks about here are unnecessary and have no purpose or place in the genuine prayer of the believer.

Another point we need to see in these verses is that Jesus attributes prayers with empty phrases or vain repetitions to pagan Gentile religions:

... when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases
as the Gentiles do (Matthew 6:7)

In saying this, the Lord is telling us that this form of prayer has no place in the Christian life. It is the model used in the unbelieving world but one that true believers should never use. In fact, notice that Jesus uses the words "do not" twice in these two verses in connection with this type of prayer:

Do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do
(verse 7)

Do not be like them... (verse 8)

Jesus gives a command here. Do not pray like the pagan Gentiles. The repetition of these words "do not" shows us that as believers we are to be careful not to fall into this trap. Jesus addresses this matter of "vain repetitions" or "empty phrases" in prayer because it is a temptation for the believer.

The purpose of this brief study is to examine Matthew 6:7-8 with an attempt to understand what Jesus meant by praying with "vain repetitions" and "empty phrases".

This study has a very particular focus. It is not an exhaustive study on prayer but a devotional look at one small aspect of prayer as recorded for us in Matthew 6:7-8. I trust it will bring some clarity and application to this important command of Jesus.

F. Wayne MacLeod

CHAPTER 1 - AS THE GENTILES DO

And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do: for they think that they shall be heard for their many words. (Matthew 6:7)

As we begin our reflection on the Lord's teaching about "vain repetitions" or "empty phrases" in prayer, it may be helpful to examine a Biblical example of what Jesus was speaking about. We have such an example in 1 Kings 18:26-29.

Under the rule of King Ahab and his wife Jezebel, Israel rebelled against God and bowed down to the pagan god Baal. True prophets of God were being sought out and slaughtered. Elijah went into hiding to save his life but, on this occasion, God called him to stand up against the prophets of Baal. To show the people that the God of Israel was the one true God, Elijah suggested a contest between himself and 450 prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel.

Elijah suggested that two bulls be brought for a sacrifice. One bull would be given to the prophets of Baal—they would choose this bull for themselves and Elijah would take the other. Altars would be built and the bulls sacrificed as

offerings. Instead of lighting a fire, however, Elijah suggested that the prophets of Baal call out to their god and he would call out to the God of Israel. The God who sent fire to consume the offering was the true God. The prophets of Baal agreed to these terms.

1 Kings 18:26 tells us that the prophets of Baal sacrificed their bull first. They cut it up and placed it on the altar according to their tradition and began to call out to their god:

26 And they took the bull that was given them, and they prepared it and called upon the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, "O Baal, answer us!" But there was no voice, and no one answered. And they limped around the altar that they had made.

Verse 29 continues:

29 And as midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation but there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention.

Let's take a moment to examine these two verses. Notice first, from verse 26 that the prophets of Baal "called upon the name of Baal from morning until noon." While we are not sure exactly what time these prophets began their prayers the Hebrew word used for "morning" refers to sunrise or to the beginning of day. What is clear is that this process of praying and chanting "O Baal, answer us!" went on until noon. A number of hours have passed here.

Verse 29 goes on to tell us that when midday (noon) passed, "they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation." In Old Testament times, there were two important offerings made in the course of the day. The first offering

was made in the morning and the second as the sun was setting in the evening.

38 Now this is what you shall offer on the altar: two lambs a year old day by day regularly. 39 One lamb you shall offer in the morning and the other lamb you shall offer at twilight. (Exodus 29:38-39)

The prophets of Baal cried out to their god from morning till noon (verse 26), and then from midday to the evening offering as the sun was going down (verse 29). This meant that they spent the whole day praying, "O Baal, answer us!" 1 Kings 18:28 tells us that these prophets also cut themselves with swords until blood ran down their bodies in an attempt to get Baal to hear their prayers.

What do we see in the prayer of these prophets of Baal? First, they repeated the prayer: "O Baal, answer us!" over and over again. Second, they cut themselves in an attempt to get the attention of their god. Third, 1 Kings 18:29 tells us that they "raved" on until the time of the evening offering. The word "raved" is the Hebrew word "*naba*" which means to prophecy or to speak under the influence of a spirit. This implies that these prophets placed themselves under the influence of evil spirits in an attempt to get the attention of Baal.

The prayer of the prophets of Baal shows us something about how these prophets saw their god. By repeating the same phrase over and over again, they show us that they were not confident that he would hear them if they only asked once. In fact, Elijah touches on this in verse 27 when he said to the false prophets:

27 And at noon Elijah mocked them saying, "Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is

relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is sleeping and must be awakened."

While Elijah says this in a mocking tone, there is an element of truth in what he was saying to these prophets. They felt they needed to cry aloud so Baal could hear them. They needed to repeat their request over and over again because maybe he was occupied with something else and couldn't hear them at the time.

Beyond this, however, they believed that the answer to their prayers depended on their efforts. It is interesting to examine the focus of 1 Kings 18. When the prophets of Baal are praying, all focus is on them and how they cut themselves and repeated their prayers all day long. When Elijah prays, the focus shifts to God and how He sent down miraculous fire from heaven in response to a very simple request from His servant.

The prophets of Baal believed that the answer to their prayer would come because of their efforts. They cut themselves to arouse the pity of Baal. They repeated their prayer and called out louder in an attempt to get through to him. They worked themselves into a religious frenzy to get closer, so he could hear them. Had Baal answered, they would have left that place patting themselves on the back because of their devotion and ability to get his attention.

In contrast, Elijah's prayer is very simple. In a brief moment of time, Elijah prayed:

36 O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done these things at your word. 37 Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that you, O Lord, are

God, and that you have turned their hearts back. (1 Kings 18:36-37)

That simple prayer touched the heart of God and resulted in fire descending from heaven, consuming the burnt offering, the wood, the stone, the dust and the water Elijah had put in the trench around it. These twenty seconds of speaking with God accomplished more than the whole day of repetition, bloodletting and shouting from the prophets of Baal.

We have here in this chapter a comparison between the prayer of the pagan prophets of Baal and the prayer of Elijah. Let me underline some important differences between these prayers.

Human Effort versus Faith

The first difference is seen in the focus of the prayers. In the prayer of the prophets of Baal, we have the multiplying of words from morning to evening. We see the intense effort these prophets put into getting the attention of Baal. They cut themselves and cried out all day long in an attempt to get an answer. They believed that the answer to their prayer depended on how much effort they put into it. They did everything they could to get this answer.

In contrast to this, we see Elijah's simple prayer of faith. He spoke his request, believed that God had heard and waited for His response. He trusted God to do what He said He would do.

Manipulation versus Trust

Closely related to this matter of human effort versus faith is a second difference. The prophets of Baal sought to manipulate Baal to get their wishes. They did everything they could to get him to see things their way.

Elijah's prayer is one of trust in God. He does not attempt to manipulate God or stir up His pity. He comes to Him with a request and leaves the result to Him. He trusts that God will do what is right.

Uncertainty versus Confidence

As the prophets of Baal cry out to their god, there are questions on their mind. Will he hear them? Will he listen to them? Have they done everything they could to attract his attention? Will he even notice them? Baal may or may not be interested in their request. He may or may not listen to them. They did everything in their power to get his attention, hoping that their words and actions would draw his attention to them.

Elijah, however, prays with absolute assurance that God had heard:

Let it be known this day that you are God in Israel,
and that I am your servant, and that I have done all
these things at your word. (1 Kings 18:36)

Notice what Elijah says here. "You are God in Israel." There is no uncertainty in this. Elijah knew that the God he was praying to was the true God. "I am your servant." He knew that this God had called him and had put His hand on him to be His servant. "I have done all these things at your

word." This whole confrontation with the prophets of Baal was not Elijah's idea—it was God's. Elijah was absolutely confident in his God, his calling from God and the leading of God in this particular confrontation.

Take a moment to examine your prayers to God. What kind of God do you pray to today? Our prayers reflect our understanding of God. Does He hear our simple prayers? Do you feel somehow that you can oblige God like the prophets of Baal? "Lord, if I do this for you then you need to answer my prayer." This was the attitude of the prophets of Baal. They cut themselves and afflicted pain on themselves feeling that they could buy an answer from Baal. They sought to bargain with their god and manipulate him into giving them what they wanted.

The prayers of the prophets of Baal were manipulative, lacking in faith, and focused on human effort. They multiplied words because they were not sure their god had heard them. They multiplied words because they believed that their prayer would be answered because of all their effort. These are the prayers of the pagan. They are not, however, the prayer of the true believer.

For Consideration:

- What did the prophets of Baal do to get the attention of their god? What does this tell us about their god?
- What is the difference between trusting God in prayer and trusting human effort in prayer?
- What is the difference between manipulation and trust in prayer?
- What do your prayers reflect about your God?

- Take a moment to compare your prayers to the prayers of the prophets of Baal. What differences do you find? Are there any similarities that you need to be warned about?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He is the God who has our best interest at heart.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for times when your prayers resembled those of the prophets of Baal—lacking in trust and focused on yourself.
- Ask God to give you greater confidence that He hears your prayers and has your best interest at heart.
- Ask God to increase your faith and confidence in His purpose for your life.

CHAPTER 2 - MANY WORDS

... they think they will be heard for their many words
(Matthew 6:7)

As we said in the last chapter, the word Jesus uses for "empty phrases" (ESV) or "vain repetitions" (KJV) is the word "*battologeo*". The word comes from two other words, "*battos*" referring to a person who stammers and "*logos*" meaning "word". Together they give the idea of stammering words—the repetition of words or sounds that have no purpose.

In Matthew 6:7, Jesus tells us that one of the reasons people use empty phrases in prayer is because they think they will be heard for their many words. The idea seems to be that such people feel they need to invest something of themselves into prayer if it is going to be answered. In other words, it is more likely that God will answer a longer prayer than a short, one-time prayer. Consider this for a moment. When was the last time you had a burden on your heart for something you were praying for? At that moment, how did you pray? Were you able to simply commit the matter to the Lord and leave it there, or did you feel compelled to pray about it over and over again, many times in the course of the day? Why did you feel that you had to ask God for the same thing over and over again? I admit that there may be

various reasons for this. Could it be, however, that one of the reasons was because, like the prophets of Baal, you wanted to be sure God heard what you said?

An Attempt to Be Heard

In their prayer to Baal in 1 Kings 18, the prophets repeated the same words over and over again from morning until the evening offering. They did this to be heard. The idea was that their god may not have heard them the first time so they had to keep repeating their request in order to get through to him. Baal was a god that did not always listen when his worshippers prayed. Sometimes he was busy doing something else and could not hear their cry. The prophets of Baal needed to get his attention. They did so by persisting in their request and multiplying words in the hope that some of those words would get through to him.

While this type of prayer may have been necessary for the prophets of Baal, Jesus reminds us that this is not the case when we pray to the God of Israel:

8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. (Matthew 6:8)

Prayers to Baal needed to be repeated endlessly to get his attention. The God of Israel, however, knows all about our needs even before we ask. He knows His children intimately. He knows better than us what we need. Listen to the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 10:29-31:

29 Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. 30 But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. 31 Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.

The Lord God knows the number of hairs on our head. He knows every sparrow that falls to the earth. There is nothing we can tell Him in prayer that He does not already know. Consider the words of the Psalmist in Psalm 139:

1 O Lord, you have searched me and known me!
2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from afar.
3 You search out my path and my lying down
and are acquainted with all my ways.
4 Even before a word is on my tongue
behold, O Lord, you know it altogether. (Psalm
139:1-4)

The psalmist believed that even before he spoke a word in prayer, the Lord knew already what he was going to say. Knowing that God is already aware of our needs before we ask, changes how we pray. We do not have to endlessly repeat our request to get His attention because He is already fully conscious of our need. More than this, however, the God who knows the number of hairs on our head and notices every sparrow that falls to the ground is a God who cares for us. The God who cares for the lowly sparrow will certainly provide for us in our time of need.

31 Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. (Matthew 10:31)

God calls us to come to Him with our requests. In fact, the apostle James tells us that we do not have because we do not ask (see James 4:2b). While we are commanded to bring our needs to the Lord, sometimes our faith is like that of the prophets of Baal who prayed with endless words because they were never quite sure Baal really cared to listen. This kind of prayer is not a prayer of faith.

Even true believers can sometimes feel that the more times we ask God the more likely He is to hear us and grant our request. At other times, we feel that the more people we have praying for a particular request the more likely God is to hear and answer. In my society, if an individual wants to get the attention of the government, he or she will write up a petition and have as many people sign it as possible. This will then be presented to the government. The idea is that if there is a large enough number of people who want the same thing, then the government will be forced to listen. This comes from the idea that government is not concerned about the request of one individual and that the only way they will listen is if thousands of people raise their voices.

I am not saying that we should never repeat our requests—Paul prayed three times for healing. Nor am I saying that we should not have others pray for us—the apostles often asked for prayers from the churches they planted. What I am saying, however, is that our confidence in prayer ought always to be in God and His grace and not in our "many words" or in how many people we can sign up to join in our petition to God.

Jesus calls this multiplying of words, "empty phrases." They are empty because they lack faith and confidence that God has heard.

Human Effort

There is another reason for "many words" in prayer. That is because we believe the answer depends on us and our prayers more than on the grace of God. The prophets of Baal spent the full day praying to their god. They gashed themselves and worked themselves into a frenzy in an at-

tempt to get the answer they wanted. They somehow believed that their god would answer because of their devotion to him.

Christians too can fall into the trap of believing that the answer to their prayer depends more on their devotion than on the grace of God. Sometimes we want the credit for answered prayers rather than giving all that credit to God. We want to believe that God answered because of our efforts in prayer. There are certainly times when the Lord will call us to wrestle for long hours in prayer. There is a battle raging in this world that will only be won as God's people seek Him in prayer. What we need to understand, however, is that while God may call us to wrestle long and hard in prayer, these are not the only kind of prayers He answers.

Consider the prayer of Nehemiah in Nehemiah 2:4-5. While in exile, Nehemiah heard about the devastation in the city of Jerusalem. This burdened him tremendously and so he sought the Lord about this. One day he was serving wine to King Artaxerxes. He was saddened with the situation in Jerusalem and this showed on his face. The king asked Nehemiah why he was downcast. Nehemiah told him that it was because of a deep burden for the condition of the city of Jerusalem that lay in ruins. King Artaxerxes then spoke to Nehemiah:

4 Then the king said to me, "What are you requesting?" So I prayed to the God of heaven. 5 And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' graves, that I may rebuild it. (Nehemiah 2:4-5)

Notice particularly the prayer of Nehemiah. When the king asked him what he was requesting, Nehemiah prayed and

answered the king. There was not likely much time between the king's question and the answer Nehemiah gave. In the short time between the question and the answer, Nehemiah prayed. This may have been a very short prayer for wisdom, guidance or blessing. It was, however, a prayer God heard. The result of that simple prayer was that the king granted Nehemiah the privilege of returning to Jerusalem to rebuild the city that lay in ruins. There was nothing fancy about the prayer. It was brief, to the point and spoken only once but it was answered by God in a wonderful way.

Jesus tells the story of two men who went to the temple to pray. The first was a Pharisee who prayed with many words. The second was a simple tax collector. Listen to what the Lord tells us about the prayer of the tax collector in Luke 18:13-14:

13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" 14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.

Notice several things about the prayer of the tax collector. First, he stood far off. He hardly dared to approach God. Second, as he spoke his prayer, he would not lift his eyes to heaven. He felt unworthy of anything God would give. He felt he was such a sinner that he could never look at God. Third, he beat his breast. He grieved over his condition as a sinner. Here was a broken man, weeping before God. He knew he had nothing to offer God. He cast himself fully on God's mercy. His prayer was simple and to the point. God's heart, however, was touched by this man's prayer. God

turned His back however in the long winded and proud prayer of the Pharisee.

Have we somehow come to believe that because we have prayed long and hard God is now obligated to us? Will we trust our efforts in prayer more than the grace of God? "Many words" sometimes come from a heart that believes it is responsible for the answer to prayer. This attitude of pride and self-righteousness poisons our prayers making them vain and empty of spiritual authority.

Prayers to Impress

There is yet another reason why we can use "many words" in prayer. Jesus begins Matthew 6 by speaking about the Pharisees who loved to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they would be seen. These religious leaders loved to be heard. I can imagine that they prayed wonderfully worded prayers. They were praying to impress people. They spoke words but those words were not directed to God but to the people around them. They were like the people Isaiah spoke about in Isaiah 29:13:

13 And the Lord said:

"Because this people draw near with their mouth
and honor me with their lips,
while their hearts are far from me,
and their fear of me is a commandment taught by
men... (Isaiah 29:13)

The people of Isaiah's day honored God with their lips but their hearts were far from Him. In other words, they spoke religious words but their hearts were not in those words. I must confess that there have been times in my ministry that I found myself guilty of this sin. I would prepare messages

going over them to get the words right to make the biggest impression. I wanted people to be impressed with what I was saying and how I said it. We can do the same thing in prayer. We can seek to impress people with our words and our ability to use those words in prayer. People may enjoy listening to our prayers but they are filled with wrong intentions. These prayers are filled with empty phrases designed to impress others but they are not the true cry of our soul to God.

Empty phrases come from a heart that questions whether God has heard or if He will truly care for His children—they lack in faith and confidence in God. They come from a heart that seeks credit for the answers or one that wants to impress others with its devotion. Lack of faith and pride seem to be the seedbed in which these empty phrases grow.

If we want to pray as Jesus taught, we need a faith that believes God hears our prayers and a confidence in His grace alone as the source of every answer. Any prayer that does not include these elements is filled with empty phrases.

For Consideration:

- Why did the prophets of Baal repeat their prayers all day long?
- Do you believe God has heard your request? Can you leave it with Him to answer as He pleases?
- Have you ever prayed believing that the answer to that prayer had more to do with your efforts than God's grace? What impact does this attitude have on your prayers?

- How does pride in prayer lead to empty phrases? For example, if you are praying with the purpose of impressing someone with your ability to pray, how does this affect your prayer? How does God view this kind of prayer?
- How do faith in God and a confidence in His grace protect us from empty phrases in prayer?

For Prayer:

- Ask God to give you faith to believe that He hears your requests and will answer them in His way and in His time.
- Ask the Lord to set you free from any pride in prayer. Ask Him to forgive you for times you wanted to take credit for answers to prayer rather than recognizing His grace.
- Ask God to search your heart and rid it of any pride or lack of faith that would keep you from praying as He requires.
- Thank the Lord that He knows our needs. Thank Him that He hears us when we cry out to Him. Thank Him that He cares deeply for us and will always do what is right.

CHAPTER 3 - HEARTFELT REPETITION VERSUS EMPTY PHRASES

Pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17)

In the previous chapter, we examined the seedbed in which empty phrases grow. While it is not always easy to understand whether the words we use in prayer fall under Jesus' classification of "empty phrases," it may be helpful to examine our prayers in light of the following questions:

1. Do my words in prayer reflect a lack of faith that God has heard me or do they express my confidence that He not only has heard but will answer in His way and in His time?
2. Do my prayers come from an attitude that believes the answer depends on my words or do they rely fully on the grace of God?
3. Are my prayers worded to impress people who hear them? Is the focus of my prayers on people around me or on God alone?

The answer to these questions may help us understand the motive behind our prayers. Empty phrases seem to flourish in pride and a lack of faith that God has heard our request. It is important that we understand, however, that we cannot define "empty phrases" on the basis of how many times a person repeats the same words or thoughts in prayer. In this chapter, I want to examine the difference between heartfelt repetition and empty phrases.

In Revelation 4, the apostle John was given a glimpse of worship in heaven. As the chapter begins, John saw the throne of God. The One who sat on this throne of heaven was awesome to behold. John describes His appearance to be like the brilliance of jasper and carnelian. A great rainbow surrounded His throne and flashes of lightning, peals of thunder and fire shot out from it.

As John looked at the scene before him, he noticed four creatures surrounding the throne—one on each side. Notice how John describes this in Revelation 4:8:

8 And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!"

John went on to say that whenever these living creatures gave glory and honour to the Lord, twenty-four elders fell down before the Lord, cast their crowns before Him and cried out:

11 "Worthy are you our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,

and by your will they existed and were created."
(Revelation 4:11)

Notice particularly how John tells us that the four living creatures "day and night never ceased to say, holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!" (Revelation 4:8). John also tells us that the twenty-four elders cried out, "Worthy are you our Lord God," whenever these four creatures gave glory and honour to the Lord. Again notice the constant repetition of these phrases in the worship before the throne of God in heaven.

It is quite clear that these repeated phrases, coming from the four creatures and the twenty-four elders, were not empty phrases. The hearts of those who repeated these words were deeply moved. These words came from hearts overwhelmed with the holiness of God seated on the throne of heaven. This shows us that the empty phrases and vain repetitions Jesus speaks about in Matthew 6 have more to do with the attitude of the heart than with how many times they are repeated.

In Numbers 6:23-27, the Lord instructed the priests in how they were to bless the people of Israel. Speaking to Moses, God said:

23 Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them, 24 The Lord bless you and keep you; 25 the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; 26 the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. 27 So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.

Notice that there was a particular format God required for the blessing of God's people. Through Moses, God gave the wording of the blessing He required. These words were memorized and repeated over the people in obedience to the command of God. The repetition of these exact words was a requirement of God.

Jesus taught his disciples to pray: "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11). It is easy to miss what Jesus is saying here. Notice two details in these words. Notice first the phrase, "this day" and secondly the phrase "our daily bread." Jesus was teaching His disciples to pray each day for the requirements of that day. Every day the believer was to get up in the morning and ask God for the bread he or she needed for that day. This was to be the believers' constant request. Every day brings with it fresh needs. It is not enough to pray, "Lord, give me all I need for the rest of my life." Jesus taught that our dependence and requests were to be daily.

Each day I rise, I need to seek the Lord for wisdom, strength, provision, guidance. Each day I rise I will need to ask Him to meet the requirements of that day. This request is repeated over and over again in my life. I am constantly in need of the grace of God. Jesus teaches us that we are to come to Him daily for this grace. Again, the repetition of this prayer: "Give us this day our daily bread" is a requirement for all believers. Though repeated daily, it is not repeated as an empty phrase but as a heartfelt recognition of need.

The apostle Paul experienced some form of suffering which he referred to as a thorn in his flesh. He brought this to the Lord for healing, but the Lord told him that He would not

remove it from him because it would keep him from becoming conceited (2 Corinthians 12:7). What is important for us to note is what Paul told the Corinthians about this affliction:

8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. 9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

Paul repeated his prayer about this affliction three times. He stopped repeating it only when he understood that the Lord wanted him to bear that affliction for a purpose. He then rejoiced in the burden he once sought to pray away.

What is true of Paul was also evident in the prayer of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 26. As the time for His crucifixion drew near, the Lord Jesus took His closest disciples with Him to Gethsemane. He asked them to pray by themselves as He went alone to pray to His Father. Leaving the disciples, Jesus went to a place where He could speak privately to the Father. There in the presence of His Father, the Lord Jesus prayed:

"My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will but as you will." (Matthew 26:39)

Returning to His disciples, Jesus found them sleeping. He woke them up and repeated his call to prayer, then returned once again to speak to His Father saying, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done" (Matthew 26:42).

When he returned the second time to His disciples, once again, He found them sleeping. So for the third time Jesus went back to the place of prayer. Matthew 26:44 tells us:

44 So, leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words again.

Notice, that Matthew 26:44 tells us clearly that Jesus said "the same words again." Jesus' repetition of His prayer three times, was a heartfelt expression of His faith in God. These words came from a heart that was burdened with what He was about to bear. He returned to the Father for strength to face what was ahead of Him. We learn from this that there will be times in our lives when we, too, will need to come to God more than once seeking an answer to our prayer.

What do we see from these Scriptural illustrations? We see that there is a difference between empty phrases and the heartfelt repetition of our requests to God. This is why it is so important that we understand the intention and motivation behind the words we speak in prayer. The empty phrases Jesus speaks about have more to do with the motivation and intention of the heart than with how many times requests are repeated in prayer. A phrase is empty, not because it is repeated, but because it comes from a heart that is not in tune with God and His purpose.

For Consideration:

- How can we determine if we are speaking empty phrases or vain repetitions in prayer? What makes a phrase empty or a repetition in vain?

- Give some Biblical examples of repetition in prayer and worship.
- What does Jesus' teaching about our "daily bread" teach us about our need to come daily to the Lord for our needs?
- Both Paul and Jesus repeated their request to the Father. What was the motivation behind these requests? Compare this with this with the repetition of the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18:26.

For Prayer:

- Ask God to examine the intentions and motivations of your heart in prayer. Ask Him to show you when your prayers are motivated by self-seeking or a lack of faith and confidence in God.
- Thank the Lord that He asks us to come to Him on a daily basis for the need of each day.
- Ask God to forgive you for judging others in prayer. Thank the Lord that He sees the intentions and motivations of our hearts.

CHAPTER 4 - PERSEVERANCE, WRESTLING AND EMPTY PHRASES

4 ..."Though I neither fear God nor respect man, 5 yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming." (Luke 18:4-5)

We have already seen that defining what Jesus means by "empty phrases" or "vain repetitions" is not a simple matter of counting how many times a person repeats a phrase in prayer. There are times when repeated phrases and requests come from a true heart of worship and confidence in God.

Closely related to this is the matter of perseverance in prayer. We have seen that Paul prayed three times for the healing of a thorn in his flesh. Jesus prayed three times about His coming crucifixion. Jesus taught that we are to ask each day for our daily bread. We see from this that there are times when we need to come repeatedly to the Lord with our request and not give up.

Perhaps you have a burden on your heart. Maybe it is the salvation of a loved one or a matter that you struggle with in life. Day by day you bring that same request to the Lord. You repeat those words over and over again in prayer, crying out for God to answer. This is your heartfelt cry to God.

Jesus told a parable about a widow asking an unjust judge for justice. This woman came repeatedly without fail to the judge asking for justice. In the end, the judge gave her the justice she requested simply to get rid of her. Jesus, however, concluded this parable with a lesson for his listeners:

6 And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. 7 And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? 8 I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth? (Luke 18:6-8)

Notice the reference to the "elect who cry to him day and night?" Like the widow of this story, these saints sought justice. They did so "day and night" crying out repeatedly to God for His will to be done and injustice conquered. Notice, however, in verse 8, that Jesus connects this crying out to Him day and night with faith when He says: "Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" The connection in these two verses leads us to the conclusion that the crying out of the saints was a cry of faith in the God who would bring justice. The perseverance of these saints in crying out was not in empty phrases but in faith filled trust and confidence in their God who would bring justice in His time.

The apostle Paul challenges the Romans to be constant or regularly in prayer:

12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. (Romans 12:12)

The word "constant" in this verse has the idea of giving oneself continuously to something without giving up. Speaking to the Ephesians, Paul would say:

18 praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. 19 To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints. (Ephesians 6:18-19)

The Ephesians were to pray "at all times... with all perseverance." They were to seek the guidance, blessing, wisdom and strength of the Lord in every situation they encountered. They were to do this not only for themselves but for all the saints. They were to storm the throne of God with requests at all times. What could they do without God's help and blessing? They depended on Him moment by moment for all things. They were to live in this constant state of dependence on God and pray to Him constantly without giving up.

Paul would go on to tell the Thessalonians to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). In other words, they were to seek God's direction for every situation that came their way.

He told the Colossians to:

Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. (Colossians 4:2)

Again the idea of steadfastness in prayer gives us the idea of holding to this practice without losing heart. The believer

is to be persistent in prayer, praying at all times in all situations for the blessing and direction of God.

It is hard to miss what the Scriptures teach us here. We are to persevere in prayer. We are to bring our requests to the Lord day and night. We are not to give up asking, seeking and knocking on the doors of heaven. We are to be a praying people. God wants to hear often from us in every situation and at all times. We must not be afraid of asking too much or too often.

How many times in the course of the day will I need to ask the Lord for wisdom? How often will I need to repeat my prayer for forgiveness? How many times in the course of my life will I need to ask the Lord for guidance and direction to do His will. To persevere in prayer is to be constantly seeking God and His purpose.

While we cannot judge the intentions of any one person in prayer, there are times, however, when our persistence is not about seeking God but our own way. Consider the request of the people of Israel in 1 Samuel 8. Wanting to be like the nations around them, the people of God came to the prophet Samuel and requested an earthly king. To that point, the Lord God had been their king and His prophets were His spokesmen. God's people, however, were rejecting God as king and wanted to be governed like the pagan nations around them.

Samuel was very unhappy with this request, but took it to the Lord anyway. The Lord told him to warn the people about the ways of an earthly king. He would take their son and daughters to be his servants. He would also require the best of their fields for his own vineyards and orchards. He would demand a tenth of their grain and vineyards for his officers and servants. A tenth of their flocks would go to

him. God even warned that the day was coming when they would cry out to Him because of the oppression of their kings but He would not answer them.

As Israel came to God about this matter of having an earthly king, they were not seeking His will but their own. Despite the warnings of God against having an earthly king, the people of Israel persisted in their request. God gave them what they requested but as He has told them, the day came when they lost everything because of the evil of these earthly kings. There is persistence in prayer that is not from God. It is a demanding of our own way.

In the book of Numbers, we read about how God fed His people as they wandered in the wilderness. They became tired of the manna they were eating and began to complain because they wanted meat. They cried out with a grumbling and complaining heart. Their cries of complaint rose up to God who was angry with them because they did not appreciate His provision. The people continued in their grumbling and demanded that God give them meat to eat.

God sent a wind that blew quail into the camp of Israel. For a whole month the people of God feasted on this meat (Numbers 11:19-20). It would make them sick and many would die from a great plague that broke out in their camp where the quail gathered. The psalmist recounts the story of those days in Psalm 78:29-31:

29 And they ate and were well filled,
for he gave them what they craved.
30 But before they had satisfied their craving,
while the food was still in their mouths,
31 the anger of God rose against them,
and killed the strongest of them

and laid low the young men of Israel. (Psalm 78:29-31)

Israel cried out for a king. She cried out for meat. Nothing would convince them that this was not good for them. They insisted that God give them what they wanted and ultimately they paid the price for their persistence.

What does this have to do with the subject of our study? Consider the persistence of Israel in demanding that God give them what they wanted. They prayed for their requests but those requests were devoid of any spiritual benefit. If anything, an answer to those requests would destroy them and take them away from God. Israel felt she knew what was best, however, and would not be persuaded to ask for anything else. In the end, however, she saw how empty her requests were. She saw where this led her and realized that she had filled her prayers with empty phrases. They were empty because they were self-seeking. They were empty because they had no spiritual benefit or value.

James speaks about such prayers when he writes in James 4:2:

You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions (James 4:2)

James recognized a type of prayer that was not concerned for the advancement of God's kingdom but only for the sinful passions of the person praying. There is a time to persevere and wrestle in prayer but we must be careful to seek God and His purpose in these times. Scripture gives us examples of individuals who persisted in asking for things that would ultimately destroy them. Their requests were empty of any spiritual value because they were not in tune with the purpose of God.

Let us wrestle and persevere steadfastly in prayer but let us do so in the will of God saturating our prayers with a desire for His purpose in our lives. In doing so, we can avoid the empty phrases Jesus spoke about in Matthew 6.

For Consideration:

- Why is it important to seek the heart of God in our prayers?
- Give some Biblical examples of people whose prayers were filled with "empty" requests. What made these requests empty or in vain?
- What is the difference between persevering in prayer and praying with empty phrases and requests?
- Is it wrong to pray for things we would like in prayer? How do we balance enjoying the good things of life and walking in the purpose of God?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to truly seek Him and His heart in prayer.
- Ask God to help you to pray for those things that will truly advance His kingdom in our society and in our personal lives.
- Ask God to forgive you for the times you insisted on praying for empty requests that came from the selfishness of your own heart and not from any desire for God or his purpose for your life.

CHAPTER 5 - HEARTLESS PRAYERS AND EMPTY PHRASES

And the Lord said: "Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men. (Isaiah 29:13)

In the above verse, we gain yet another sense of what Jesus means by empty phrases in prayer. In the context of Isaiah 29, the prophet has been speaking about the city of Jerusalem and how the Lord was going to judge and bring it down. The reason for this judgement is described in Isaiah 29:13.

God's people offered their sacrifices and sang songs of praise and thanksgiving to their God. On the outside, everything appeared to be wonderful. The problem, however, was that while they sang about a great and holy God, they did not live pure and holy lives. Their words were empty phrases, not because they were not true but because they did not come from hearts and lives that were in tune with the words they spoke. Their hearts were unmoved by the

truth they proclaimed. These words were empty of any personal meaning for them.

Jesus applies Isaiah 29:13 to the Pharisees of His day in Mark 7:6. They were a very religious people but hypocritical in their personal lives. They prayed great prayers on the street corners but did not live their lives in ways that were honoring to God.

Listen to what the prophet said about God's relationship with His people in Ezekiel 33:32:

And behold, you are to them like one who sings lustful songs with a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument, for they hear what you say, but they will not do it.

The picture here is one of a talented musician. The people listening are attracted to the tune and the skill of the musician but the words, as beautiful as they are, have no connection to real life for them. They may sing these words with great enjoyment but they are just words empty of any real application to their lives. This is how the people of God listened to the prophets He sent. They heard what they said but they did not understand that these words were to be acted upon.

We can pray and worship the Lord like this today. We sing songs of praise, but our hearts are not touched by those words. We pray, but our minds are not engaged with what we speak. Sometimes our prayers can become mindless repetitions of words and phrase we have adopted over time rather than the heartfelt cry of our soul.

God is more concerned about the cry of our heart than the words of our mouth. In fact, the prophet Jeremiah reminds

us that the Lord tests our heart toward Him when we cry out to Him:

2 You plant them, and they take root; they grow and produce fruit; you are near their mouth and far from their heart. 3 But you, O Lord, know me; you see me and test my heart toward you. (Jeremiah 48:2-3)

Notice how God was near to his people's mouth but far from their heart. God sees the condition of our heart and tests our heart toward Him as we pray and worship. We can fill our prayers with empty phrases but God hears what comes from the heart.

Listen to what the Lord said about the nation of Judah in Jeremiah's day:

Yet for all this her treacherous sister Judah did not return to me with her whole heart, but in pretense, declares the Lord. (Jeremiah 3:10)

God saw that the people of Judah were coming to Him in worship and prayers, but he also tested the condition of their hearts. He knew that they were not coming with a "whole heart, but in pretense." The word "pretense" in the Hebrew language can be translated by "vain," "false," "deceitful," or "lie." In other words, the people of Judah were coming to the Lord deceitfully with hypocritical hearts. Their words were true in themselves, but not true for them personally. True words about God were spoken from a deceitful heart.

What do we learn from these verses about empty phrases in prayer? The Bible teaches that God tests the heart and examines our motive when we come to Him. Empty

phrases are empty when they do not come from a heart that is in tune with the words spoken. Do you praise God for His holiness and still live in sin without repentance?—your great exclamations of worship may be empty phrases because they do not come from a heart that is right with God. The prayer God hears is the prayer that comes from a sincere heart seeking Him and His purpose. All other prayers are filled with empty phrases.

For Consideration:

- Can true words spoken insincerely become empty phrases? Explain.
- What is the connection between the heart and the words we speak in prayer?
- Examine your worship and prayers. Do they come from a heart that is sincere before God?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to express your heart in prayer. Ask for forgiveness for times you have simply spoken words that had no personal meaning to you.
- Ask the Lord to give you His heart in prayer. Ask Him to show you how to pray.
- Ask God to soften your heart so that you can pray with sincerity of heart.

CHAPTER 6 - SINFUL HEARTS AND EMPTY PHRASES

13 Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me, new moon and the calling of convocations—I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. 14 Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. 15 When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers I will not listen, your hands are full of blood. (Isaiah 1:13-15)

In this study, we have discovered that empty phrases come from a heart that is no longer in tune with God and His purpose. This may be the result of a lack of faith, pride, lack of concern for God's will, or wanting to look good before other people. All such attitudes lead to vain and empty prayers. The prayer God hears is the prayer that comes from the heart. Our motivation in prayer is of utmost importance.

In the verses quoted above, the Lord speaks to His people about their offerings and celebrations. What is important for us to note is that these offerings and celebrations were ordained by God. In Isaiah 1:13-14, however, God has some

very strong things to say to His people about their religious activities.

Notice in Isaiah 1:13-14 that the Lord calls Israel's offerings "vain offerings." In other words, their offerings were empty of any meaning as far as the Lord was concerned. He went on to say that their incense was an abomination, He could not endure their religious assemblies and hated their spiritual celebrations. God refused to listen to the prayers of His people. Israel was practicing her faith in vain because God was not interested in what she was offering Him. This leaves us with the question: "What was it that made these practices empty and vain?"

The answer to this question is found in the context of these verses. Isaiah 1 begins with an accusation against the people of God:

Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, children who deal corruptly! They have forsaken the Lord, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged. (Isaiah 1:4)

The reason their offerings were in vain was because the nation was a "sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity." The Israelites of that day were practicing their faith and living in sin at the same time. If they wanted the Lord to hear their prayers and accept their offerings, there were certain things that needed to happen. Listen to what the Lord tells them in Isaiah 1:16-17:

16 Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, 17 learn to do good; seek justice,

correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.

Until the people of God dealt with their sins and made things right with God, with their brothers and their sisters, their prayers and offerings would be empty and in vain.

The Lord spoke further about this matter in Isaiah 58. He began by reminding His people of how they came daily to Him:

2 Yet they seek me daily and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake the judgment of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments; they delight to draw near to God. (Isaiah 58:2)

Here were people who came regularly to the Lord in prayer and service. The problem, however, was that despite their prayers and fasting, the Lord was not answering them:

Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it? (Isaiah 58:3)

Their prayer and fasting was in vain. God was not listening to them. Isaiah gives them the reason for this in Isaiah 58:3-4:

3 Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. 4 Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high.

God made it clear to the people of Israel that until they recognized their sin and changed their ways, their prayers would be empty phrases—they would have no spiritual authority or value before Him and He refused to listen to them.

In Haggai 2:12-13 the prophet asked the priests a question about the Law of Moses:

12 "If someone carries holy meat in the fold of his garment and touches with his fold bread or stew or wine or oil or any kind of food, does it become holy?" The priests answered and said, "No." 13 Then Haggai said, "If someone who is unclean by contact with a dead body touches any of these, does it become unclean?" The priest answered and said, "It does become unclean."

The questions asked here are important. Haggai gives an illustration of a man carrying something holy in his garment. As he carries this object, he brushes up against something else. Haggai's question is this: Will the object he brushed up against become holy simply because he was carrying something holy in his garment? The Law of the Old Testament was clear on this point. A consecrated object did not make something holy by simply touching it. The point is this. Going to church will not make me a holy person. Praying to God will not make me a holy person. Many people go to church and pray but they have no intention of living for God. Coming into contact with something holy doesn't make you holy yourself.

The second question Haggai asks is this: If someone who is ceremonially unclean comes into contact with some other object, will that object become unclean? The answer to this question again was clear. An unclean person would make an object he touched unclean. Again the point we need to

see here is this: If a person is not right with God, then his or her prayers will be affected by this. If I come to God with a sinful and rebellious heart and no intention of repenting of that sin, my prayers will be unclean, empty and vain.

The attitude in which I come to God is important. If I come with a heart that is not right before Him and I have no intention of confessing and repenting of this, I should not expect that my prayers will be heard –I am praying in empty phrases, devoid of all spiritual authority. The Psalmist understood this when he said:

If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. (Psalm 66:18)

Listen to what the Lord Jesus said in Matthew 5:23-24:

23 So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

There is a strong connection in what Jesus says here between dealing with our sin and the acceptance of our offering. If we want our offering to be acceptable before God, we must first deal with the sin in our lives.

Speaking to husbands, the apostle Peter said:

Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honour to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered. (1 Peter 3:7)

Prayers are hindered when, as husbands, we do not respect our wives and treat them with the honour they deserve. The husband who mistreats his wife prays in vain.

What are empty phrases in prayer? They are prayers spoken from a heart that is not ready to walk in obedience to the Lord God and His ways. They are prayers spoken by those who continue to live in sin with no intention of making things right with God. They are vain prayers stripped of any authority before God.

For Consideration:

- In Isaiah 1:13-15, God speaks of Israel's offerings as "vain." Why were their offerings and prayers offered in vain?
- What is the connection between the condition of the heart and effectiveness in prayer?
- Can we pray with any authority if we are not in a right relationship with God?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to examine your walk with God. Are you walking in God's purpose for your life? Ask God to reveal anything He would like you to deal with.
- Are you in a right relationship with your brothers and sisters in Christ, your husband or wife? Ask God to help you to deal with any barrier that has come between you so that your prayers will not be hindered.
- Ask God to give you the assurance that your prayers are not in vain. Thank Him that He hears the heartfelt cries of our heart.

CHAPTER 7 - THE SERIOUSNESS OF THE WORDS WE SPEAK

If there is one thing we need to understand as we conclude this series of reflections on empty phrases in prayer, it is the seriousness of the words we speak before God. Solomon has some important words of advice in Ecclesiastes 5:2:

Be not rash with your mouth, do not let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few.

Notice what the writer of Ecclesiastes tells us here: "do not let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth." There is wise counsel in this verse for us. Solomon is telling us that we need to give careful thought to the words we speak before God. The God before whom we kneel is the Almighty God of heaven. He is the sovereign Lord and Creator. There is no one greater. As we come to Him we must do so in reverence and respect, especially with regard to the way we speak to Him.

This God of heaven hears what we say. He takes our words seriously. He holds us accountable for what we promise to Him. Ecclesiastes 5:4-6 makes this quite clear:

4 When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. 5 It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. 6 Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake, why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands?

Solomon tells us that if we tell God we are going to do something we had better do it. It is better never to have vowed anything to God than to vow and not keep our word. Ecclesiastes 4:6 tells us that if our mouth leads us to sin we risk the anger of God and the destruction of the work of our hands. This shows us how serious our words are to God.

Solomon would go on in Proverbs 10:19 to say:

When words are many, transgression is not lacking,
but whoever restrains his lips is prudent.

The more liberty we give to our lips the more we risk saying things that will make us guilty before God. In any court of law, it is a serious offense to lie. This is a crime punishable by law. What is true for our earthly authorities is also true for God. It is a privilege to come before God in prayer. As we do, we stand before the holy God. He hates lies and evil of any kind. He sees the heart and knows the attitude of that heart. If speaking lies and half-truths before an earthly judge is a punishable crime, how much more will we be guilty if we speak this way before the God of heaven?

Do we dare come before God and say things which we do not really mean? Will we kneel before Him and praise Him for His great holiness but have no concern for our own? Can we offer our lives to Him while at the same time surrendering to the lusts of our flesh and the temptations of this world? Do we understand the nature of the God before whom we kneel? Empty phrases come from the lips of those who do not fully appreciate the nature of the God before whom they bow and the seriousness of what they say to Him.

We multiply words because we do not understand Him to be a God who knows all things and has our best interests at heart. We pray with eloquent and impressive words only to be seen by people and admired for our prayers. We come before Him with words empty of heartfelt passion and promises we do not intend to keep. We repeat mindlessly words of praise but do not gaze on Him with awe and wonder. Like the people of Jesus' day, we seek His blessing but do not seek His face. We heap up empty phrases in prayer—phrases emptied of passion and delight in God and His will.

As we come to God to worship Him and seek His favour, we must recognise the significance and privilege we have. We stand before our Creator, the One who holds this world together; our Saviour who laid down His life to bring us salvation. We stand before the Spirit who has and is working out the purposes of the Father and the Son in this world. One day every knee will bow to Him in recognition of who He is. Satan and his angels will flee from His presence in terror. He stands above all earthly powers. Nothing would exist without Him. As we speak to this great God, how important it is that we weigh our words. We stand before a God who knows every thought and intention of our heart. We dare not speak what we do not mean. We dare not

promise what we will not keep. To do so is to pray as the pagans do. It is to heap up empty phrases, devoid of any spiritual value. May the Lord give us grace to pray with heartfelt prayers, seeking His face and desiring His glory lest we, too, be guilty of praying empty phrases.

For Consideration:

- How important it is that we carefully weigh our words before we say them to God?
- Why is it a serious matter to speak to God what we do not truly live or believe in our heart?
- What is the connection between understanding the God before whom we stand and speaking in empty phrases?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to reveal Himself and His character to you in a greater way.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you have failed to understand the seriousness of what you have spoken to Him in prayer.
- Thank the Lord that He asks us to come to Him. Thank Him that even though He is so much greater than us, He still is willing to listen to our prayers.
- Ask God to help you to respect Him by means of the words you speak to Him in prayer.

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