**What Does it Mean to Use Vain Repetitions?**

In Jesus’ sermon on the mount, He taught us to not pray as the heathen do. He instructed us not to use ‘**vain repetitions’** when praying as the pagans do.

*But when ye pray, use not* ***vain repetitions****, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. [KJV Mat 6:7]*

The NIV translation uses the word ‘**babbling**’ in place of the phrase ‘vain repetitions’.

*And when you pray, do not keep on* ***babbling*** *like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. [NIV'78 Mat 6:7].*

Many interpret this to mean that Christians are not meant to repeat prayers. If this interpretation is correct, then a serious problem arises because the same Jesus taught us – both with His words and actions – to be consistent/repetitive in our prayers.

The message behind the parable of the persistent widow is to keep repeating the prayer until God answers *[Luk 18:1-8].*

Jesus Himself repeated the same prayer for hours at the Garden of Gethsemane *[Mat 26:39-40,42,44*; Mar 14:35-36,39].

So, we have instances of Jesus both praying the same prayers repeatedly and teaching us to do the same. To insist that Jesus taught us in the verse in focus that repetition of prayers is unacceptable, is to say that Jesus contradicted Himself. Most certainly, nothing in all of scripture is contradictory. When contradictions are found in scripture, it must mean that there is some error in interpretation.

**What Did Jesus Mean?**

An Examination of the original language of the New Testament (i.e., the Greek language) and of the context around the verse reveals the true meaning of Jesus’ words and settles any misunderstanding that may arise when trying to understand this verse.

**Understanding the Greek Word *Battologeo [βαττολογέω]***

Whether it is in the Hebrew language, the Aramaic language, or the Greek language, here are 2 ways to understand the meaning of Biblical words:

One can either simply just check the meaning of the words using the Hebrew/Aramaic and Greek dictionaries or one can check how the words are used by those who authored the books of the Bible. It is important to note that the dictionaries may not always give one the author(s) full intended meaning and as such, a safer bet would be to use the second prescribed method of seeing how the Biblical authors used the words. In fewer places is this more true than the verse in question (i.e., Matthew 6:7), as is demonstrated below.

**The Dictionary Method**

This simply entails checking dictionary to see how the meaning of words in the readers’ language.

In the Greek, the word translated as “vain repetitions” is “***Battologeo [βαττολογέω]***”, so Jesus’ words can be thus rephrased:

*And when you pray, do not* ***Battologeo*** *like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. [Matthew 6:7].*

The Strong’s Dictionary of the New Testament defines the word as:

***Battalogeo****: to stammer*

***Original Word****: βαττολογέω*

***Part of Speech****: Verb*

***Transliteration****: battalogeo*

***Phonetic Spelling****: (bat-tol-og-eh'-o)*

The word ‘*Battologeo G945*’ is used as a verb and is defined as: ‘to stammer’. If one were to put the verb ‘to stammer’ into the verse it would read:

*And when you pray, do not* ***stammer*** *like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. [Matthew 6:7].*

This interpretation makes no sense if the verb ‘to stammer’ were taken literally. The translators obviously translated the verb ‘to stammer’ figuratively rather than literally; hence it was translated as to ‘use vain repetitions’ and as earlier stated, this translation contradicts Jesus’ other actions and statements. If the use of the Greek dictionary to try to understand the word creates the same contradiction problem, then we must go to how to Bible authors used the word. (*As earlier stated*, *it should be noted that when trying to understand Biblical words, the way the authors of the Bible use them appears to be more reliable than using the dictionary meaning.*)

**The Author’s Use Method**

As the name implies, this method involves checking how the various authors of scripture use words. By comparing how the words are used all through scripture, one can get a sense of the true meaning of the word in question.

In this case, the word “***battologeo***” is used only once in the entire New Testament so there is no other reference point that we can use to try to understand the word. However, using Septuagint (LXX) translation of the Old Testament, we find this word used in one other place. We find the noun form of the same word used in book of Proverbs

*The* ***HORSELEACH*** *hath two daughters, crying, Give, give. There are three things that are never satisfied, yea, four things say not, It is enough: [KJV Prov 30:15]*

*"The* ***LEECH*** *has two daughters. 'Give! Give!' they cry. "There are three things that are never satisfied, four that never say, 'Enough!': [Prov 30:15]*

The Strong’s Number for the word translated “Leech” in the above verse is G945.1 ***Bdelln*** [***βδέλλη***]. While the Strong’s Number for the word translated “vain repetitions” is G945 ***Battologeo*** [***βαττολογέω***]. Both words are the same; as is seen from the fact that those who translated from Greek to English put them under the same Strong’s Number [i.e., G945 and G945.1]. If you use software such as BibleHub and click on G945.1 ***Bdelln*** [***βδέλλη***], the word rendered as Leech in Proverbs 30:15, it takes you to G945 ***Battologeo*** [***βαττολογέω***], the word rendered as “Vain repetitions” in Matthew 6:7.

The point being that the word translated “vain repetitions” [KJV] and “Babbling” [NIV] is the same word translated as ‘*Leech’*in the Old Testament. ***Battologeo*** [***βαττολογέω***] is the verb form of the noun ***Bdelln*** [***βδέλλη***]. Therefore, Matthew 6:7 can thus be rendered:

*And when you pray, do not* ***Leech*** *like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. [Matt 6:7].*

**What does the Bible say about the Leech?**

*"The leech has* ***two daughters****. 'Give! Give!' they cry. "There are three things that are never satisfied, four that never say, 'Enough!': the grave, the barren womb, land, which is never satisfied with water, and fire, which never says, 'Enough!' [Prov 30:15-16]*

Merriam Webster’s Dictionary defines a Leech as:

1. *Any of numerous carnivorous or bloodsucking usually freshwater annelid worms (class Hirudinea) that have typically a flattened lanceolate segmented body with* ***a sucker at each end***
2. *A hanger-on who seeks advantage or gain.*

In essence [literally], a Leech is a parasite that feeds off humans or animals by sucking their blood and [figuratively], a Leech is one who uses others solely for what they can gain. Leeches are not known for symbiotic or mutually beneficial relationships with their victims.

The Leech has two daughters (presumably its two suckers) who always cry 'Give! Give!' It is never satisfied. All it does is take and take. It never gives. It always asks to be given. It never offers anything in return. Notice that in the verse, the daughters of the Leech say the word “Give” twice; this shows that the Leech nags with its requests. It believes that if it asks for something by nagging, it will get it. It is not exactly the persistence of the Leech that is the problem but the persistence in asking to fulfil its needs. That is how the Gentiles pray. They ask without care for God. They just want to take from God and one of their means of achieving this is to ask God repeatedly.

It is important to note that what the Gentiles seek is not necessarily selfish or bad (although it could be) as Jesus said:

*Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.* [*Mat 6:8*]

God already knows what we need. The use of the word need shows that the request is not necessarily bad but what is needed for survival. Jesus is not saying that we should not nag God for selfish things but that we should not nag Him over even the things we need. He already knows what we need; He provides for the birds, and we are worth more than they [*Mat 6:*26].

The context further shows this. Jesus said, don’t pray like the pagans who are always asking for things without offering something in return. He says, your Father knows what you need even before you ask. This shows that the problem of the Leech/Gentiles is that they keep asking God to ‘Give!’ like He doesn’t already know what they need.

**How to not be a Leech in Prayer**

*And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. "This, then, is how you should pray: "'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one.' [Matt 6:7-13]*

Jesus’ instruction is that – unlike the Gentiles – we should not put our needs first, but God’s will first. When we pray, we should not come to God just to ask for things, but we should seek His kingdom. He taught us to ask for God’s name to be hallowed and for His kingdom to come and His will to be done on earth. Our pursuit in prayer should not be to have our needs met as the Gentiles do, but the primary goal of our prayers is to seek the coming of His kingdom. The entire context of the chapter shows this. It was in the same discourse that Jesus taught us to seek God’s Kingdom first and then we would receive the things the Gentiles are seeking. He says our goal should not be clothes and food like the Leech/Gentiles, but our goal should be the Kingdom of God. *[See Matthew 6:1-33]*. The Gentiles, just like the Leech, seek what to eat and drink; they seek comfort, but we are not to be as them.

This is not just a New Testament issue. The Old Testament is full of prayers repetitively seeking God’s Kingdom. Even God Himself said that He has stationed watchmen who will **REPEATEDLY** knock on the gates of Heaven until the Kingdom comes.

*I have posted watchmen on your walls, O Jerusalem;* ***THEY WILL NEVER BE SILENT DAY OR NIGHT****. You who call on the LORD, give yourselves no rest, and give him no rest till he establishes Jerusalem and makes her the praise of the earth. [Isa 62:6-7]*

**In Conclusion**

Repeating prayers is only bad when the content of the prayers being repeated is to fulfil our selfish desires. We must seek first God’s Kingdom.

It is important to not read verses in isolation but in their proper context if we must get the true meaning.