

Music, Culture, and Vain Repetition: Matthew 6 in its Context

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There are many different views on the relationship between church and culture. One extreme believes that the church should look nothing like culture and operate as a counter-cultural movement. This view tends to accuse recent worship music of being guilty of vain repetition, which Jesus condemns in Matthew 6:7. However, this view often does not want a counter-cultural church, but rather a church that preserves the culture of a previous generation instead of embracing the culture of the current one. What pastor hasn't heard questions and statements such as "Why are we singing that 7/11 chorus (a chorus with 7 words sung 11 times)? Why are we singing this new song with these new instruments? It causes us to look like the world! What's wrong with our old hymns?"

The other extreme believes that the church should fully embrace culture and operate with all the current cultural concepts of both style and practice. This view accuses more traditional music of being outdated and irrelevant to the current culture. Its proponents say things like, "I can't emotionally connect with that kind of music!" or "Hymns don't make me feel anything, therefore it has no value to me." This can take an anything goes approach, thus ignoring Matthew 6:7.²

Both these groups, whether they realize it or not, are not fighting over repetition, but rather are wrestling with the relationship between worship and culture. The hymns that were sung on the day when the elderly woman first came to Christ, when she was married, when her children were dedicated to the Lord, and sometimes when her spouse has died, hold special value to her because it is how she has interacted with God in each of those times. In the same way, the younger generations are interacting with God through different songs with a different sound and style. If both groups were to recognize this, then the argument over whether modern music is vain repetition or not becomes a non-issue and the conversation can shift to an honest discussion about the culture of the church as a whole and what music is appropriate for that church's culture.

Repetition, of course, is not the only element of contemporary worship music that some people find inappropriate. Melodies and rhythms that are challenging for congregations to sing, instrumentation that embraces more popular sounds, and lyrics reflecting shallow or heterodox theology are others. The frequent repetition of texts, though, is perhaps the

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² These questions and statements of both views are based on recent conversations expressed by individuals in actual churches and in college and seminary classrooms.

most easily identifiable offense and one that has long been the object of complaint and satire. And it is the one element addressed specifically by Christ.

What then does Jesus mean when he condemns vain repetition? This article will argue that repetition becomes vain when it is used with bad motives. Bad motives for repetition include any attempt to use music and repetition to elicit a purely emotional response, to gain a personal audience, or to manipulate God. Repetitious music sung with the right motives, however, can lead the congregation to true worship and praise of God, Christ, and the Spirit. When this happens, the song becomes more than a song, but functions as a prayer.

This approach allows for a variety of freedom in choosing music that fits the culture of an individual church. Different age groups, ethnic groups, and people from different geographical areas connect with different styles of music, worship, and prayer structure. Further, no one testimony is the same. Some believers have connected with the Gospel because of God's love, other his mercy, others his forgiveness, and so on. Because each congregation is unique, the culture as demonstrated in prayer, worship, and music should also be unique.

As with any practice within the church, the Word of God should serve as the guide to music and repetition. While Scripture does not directly address the use of repetition in music, it does give some specific commands in relation to prayer that relate to music as it is used as prayer. This brief review will attempt to establish the meaning of vain repetition in its context. It will offer a brief analysis of the themes of kingdom and righteousness in the beginning of Matthew, the context of the beatitudes, the place of Christ in reference to the law, the role of the "You have heard it said" statements, and finally an evaluation of the meaning of vain repetition. On the basis of those findings, this article will offer some suggestions on the relationship between vain repetition, music, and culture within the church.

Kingdom and Righteousness in Matthew

Throughout Matthew's Gospel, he emphasized the themes of kingdom and righteousness. In terms of narrative development, the plot moves forward once the author establishes the main character and how the reader can anticipate his function throughout the rest of the story.³ In Matthew, Jesus is the main character who functions as the Son of Abraham and the Son of David. Such titles would have evoked thoughts of the golden ages of Israel and spurred hope of the expected Messiah and coming King who would establish God's kingdom.⁴

As the plot develops, Matthew establishes that Jesus not only has the right pedigree to be king, he has the birth signs of a king. From the virgin birth to the star that led the wise men, Jesus' birth was like no other. In the midst of the coming of the wise men, Matthew introduces a form of role reversal. The wise men come to Herod, the king of the Jews, seeking

³ H. J. Combrink, "The Structure of the Gospel of Matthew as Narrative," *Tyndale Bulletin* 34, no. 1 (1983): 75.

⁴ Craig Keener argued that in a first-century environment "the masses would surely interpret messianically one who promised an imminent kingdom and the meek inheriting the land, as well as implied a central role for himself in its inauguration." Thus Jesus, as Son of David, establishes to this audience Jesus' right to rule and inaugurate this expected kingdom. Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 62.

Jesus, the baby born king of the Jews. Thus, Matthew infers that Jesus is the true King of the Jews who will bring in God's kingdom, not Rome's kingdom. He is king of the Jews, but not only just the Jews, but of all those who will seek him, even the pagan wise men.

Matthew further demonstrates the uniqueness of Jesus by showing God's blessing upon him in his baptism. Matthew 3:16-17 states,

And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."⁵

Matthew moved Jesus from Son of Abraham and David to "My beloved Son." Jeffrey Gibbs argued that Matthew's use of this title is better understood as a reference to Israel. As such, Matthew, from the birth narrative forward, demonstrates Jesus as the antitype or recapitulation of Israel as a whole.⁶ While the themes of recapitulation have a strong presence in the beginning of Matthew, "My beloved Son" still functions as a demonstration of Jesus' uniqueness in the eyes of God. Thus, Jesus may well be the recapitulation of Israel, but he is the better Israel and the better Son with better privileges, mainly those of authority and kingship, which Matthew further establishes through Jesus' preaching (as one not like the scribes, but with authority) and healings, and ultimately through the forgiveness of sin. Following his baptism, Jesus went out preaching the kingdom. If Jesus the king has come, then God's kingdom has begun, a theme that Matthew develops at every stage of his Gospel.

If the king has come and the kingdom has begun, then Jesus, as king, has the right to establish the rule of his kingdom. Throughout Matthew's Gospel, Jesus expected/demanded righteousness. Matthew refers to righteousness twenty-eight different times. In many of these instances, Jesus contrasted his demands for righteousness with the cultural expectations of righteousness. Thus, in Matthew 1:19, Joseph is considered righteous for not wanting to bring public shame to Mary although it would have been his legal right to do so.⁷ Jesus as king, however, demands more than outward obedience to the law, but a righteousness that exceeds it, a righteousness with right motives in both the realms of the heart and of the mind.

⁵ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001).

⁶ Jeffrey Gibbs, "Israel Standing with Israel: The Baptism of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel (Matthew 3:13-17)," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (July 2002): 514.

⁷ J. J. Pilch rightly noted that "by law, Joseph is entitled to return Mary to her father and expose her to death . . . But Joseph is an honorable man and determines to divorce her leniently" (J. J. Pilch, *The Cultural World of Jesus* [Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1997], 11). Matthew Marohl further argued that Joseph's act of righteousness was done, not to uphold his own righteousness, but to keep Mary's righteousness intact through the divorce process (Matthew Marohl, *Joseph's Dilemma: "Honor Killing" in the Birth Narrative of Matthew* [Eugene: Cascade Books, 2008], 37).

Matthew 5:3–11: The Blessed

Matthew 6:7 is part of a much larger pericope, which begins in Matthew 5. Throughout this section, Jesus challenged cultural norms with behavioral expectations and heart attitudes. In 5:3–12, he challenged the cultural position and value of the lowly by granting them position and value in God’s kingdom. They are called blessed. Recent scholarship has sought to define *makáριοι* (μακάριοι; “blessed”) in terms of happiness.⁸ Popular Christian magazines have latched onto this idea and, in doing so, explain how living in accordance with cultural norms will never make a person happy.⁹ While this may be true, Matthew 5 does not emphasize a person’s feelings, but rather his position and value in relation to God on the basis of their behavior as it relates to God’s demands.¹⁰

Some have chosen to avoid this type of emotional language by using the idea of fortune.¹¹ This gives the idea that the individuals are somehow lucky through circumstances out of their control or well off through their own behavioral achievements. The context, however, does not allow for this interpretation. Jesus was preaching on both the demands and expectations of the kingdom of God. The groups mentioned all have a position and a value within God’s kingdom because their behavior and attitudes have matched the expectations of God, the King. Thus, it is God, the King, who is granting these groups their value and position. He is the one who has made them *makáριοι*.¹² The ones whose position and behavior that culture rejects (e.g., the poor, meek, merciful, peacemakers), God the king will bless.

Matthew 5:17–20: Christ and the Law

In Matthew 5:17–20, Jesus again challenged cultural norms by contrasting the established religious standards with the standards of God and his kingdom. Thus, his statement concerning the abolishment of the law versus its fulfillment must be understood (at least in

⁸ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, vol. 2, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 155-56.

⁹ Johannah Reardon, “What Does It Mean to Be Blessed,” *Christianity Today*, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/biblestudies/bible-answers/theology/what-does-it-mean-to-be-blessed.html> (accessed April 24, 2015).

¹⁰ Charles Talbert, *Matthew*, Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 78.

¹¹ John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2005), 193.

¹² In his argument against *makáριοι* meaning blessed by God, R. T. France noted that the usual term for blessed by God is *eulogetos*, not *makáριοι*. He believed that “‘Congratulations to . . .’ would convey much of the impact.” This view, however, misses the association with the individuals, their reward in relation to the kingdom, and the king. It is God’s kingdom that the *makáριοι* belong to, thus it is hard to imagine anyone or anything that is providing the blessing other than the King himself, allowing for a meaning of “blessed.” See R. T. France, *Matthew*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Gordon Fee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 160-61.

part) as a demonstration of his consistency with the law and his inconsistency with the religious culture that surrounded the law.¹³ This concept comes into sharp focus in verse 20. If Jesus was in line with the Old Testament Law (v. 17) and he was advocating for strict adherence to it (vv. 18–19), then Jesus should have granted the Scribes and the Pharisees the highest positions within the kingdom of God. Yet, Jesus stated, “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:20).

The challenge to religious cultural norms is obvious. Jesus does not want the amount of righteousness demonstrated by those who have assumed the mantle of the most outwardly self-righteous. Instead, he wants the people to beware of the practices of such people (6:1) and demonstrate righteousness that exceeds their own. It must be pointed out that verse 20 does not just look forward, but also serves as a summary statement of Jesus’ previous thoughts.¹⁴ Thus, the Pharisees were not wrong to uphold the law. They were wrong to do it in such a way that ignored the weightier issues of the law (Matt 23:23).

The “You Have Heard It Said” Statements

Both in Matthew 5 and Matthew 23, Jesus went on to describe exactly what he was demanding. In both passages, Jesus demonstrated that true righteousness involved not just external actions with regard to the law (which of course were still demanded), but rather the motives behind the actions. In Matthew 23:23, Jesus emphasized justice, mercy, and faithfulness. In Matthew 5, Jesus offered six “You have heard it said” statements, with each one offering an antithesis that speaks to the motives behind the law being addressed. The command to not murder and harbor anger is interpreted in light of Jesus’ commands of love and reconciliation.¹⁵

¹³ J. Daryl Charles argued that “While some in the Christian community might be inclined to believe that the commandments are no longer valid, ‘on the other side of the street,’ most likely in the synagogue (23:2, 6), there are debates raging between the schools of Hillel and Shammai. Oral tradition, that is, the ‘fence around the law,’ has had the effect of obscuring the true meaning of the commandments (see Mark 7:8-13). In a day when halakhic interpretation was en route to being absolutized, it was the ‘abrogators’ of the law who were to meet the force of Jesus’ fury (hence, the material in Matt 23:1ff.). Stringent Pharisaical interpretation of the law (not to mention ‘lawlessness’) was to be rejected, and it is the distortions in these traditions that must be addressed—*Ēkou sate hoti errethē. . . eg ō de legō hymin* and purged (5:21-48). The stress on continuity in 5:17-18 is important for interpreting the ‘antitheses’ in 5:21-48; it is not the Torah itself that Jesus rejects, rather the *halakah*, the oral tradition and interpretation, that have come to surround the law” (J. Daryl Charles, “Garnishing with the ‘Greater Righteousness’: The Disciple’s Relationship to the Law [Matthew 5:17-20],” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 12 [2002]: 8).

¹⁴ F. P. Viljoen, “Righteousness and Identity Formation in the Sermon on the Mount,” *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 69 (2013): 6.

¹⁵ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 228.

The command against adultery and lust is interpreted in relation to Jesus' commands to completely remove sin from practice. Craig Blomberg noted that "Christians must recognize those thoughts and actions which, long before any overt sexual sin, make the possibility of giving in to temptation more likely, and they must take dramatic action to avoid them."¹⁶

Jesus' statements concerning divorce and remarriage flow from his commands concerning lust. In a culture that allowed the husband to divorce his wife for any displeasurable reason, Jesus maintained the seriousness of upholding the marriage relationship. John Nolland stated, "Marriage is not a contract to be cancelled when no longer convenient but rather, as testified to in Mal. 2:14-16, a covenant relationship that calls for sustained faithfulness."¹⁷ This leads to Jesus' statements concerning oaths, which he interprets in relation to God's demands for truthfulness. A person should do what he says, without needing an elaborate oath, simply because he is a person of truthfulness. Once again, there is great continuity between Jesus' demands and Old Testament obligations and discontinuity with the religious culture of the day.¹⁸

Jesus' final two "You have heard it said" statements revolve around the relationship between an individual and his enemy. Once again, Jesus interprets these commands in relation to his demands for love. Jesus demanded love for not just those who it was socially acceptable to love, but also for an enemy. Two notes need to be made here. First, Jesus compared the one who loves only those who it is socially normal to love with the tax collectors and the Gentiles. Both groups were reviled by Jesus' audience. Tax collectors were Jews carrying out the bidding of Rome (sometimes at a dishonest rate) at the expense of their kinsmen. Thus, they were considered "among the most apostate Jews."¹⁹ There are possibly two connotations to the term "Gentiles." On one hand, the Jews despised the Gentiles because they were considered unclean and, in the words of Craig Keener, "immoral, idolatrous, and often anti-Jewish pagans."²⁰

On the other hand, the term has a political meaning as well. Israel had been waiting for the Messiah to come and deliver them from the rule of the Gentiles. Chief among the Gentiles in this time was Rome, whose rule, according to Philip Esler, exhibited "three essential characteristics" of colonialism: "first, political control over subject peoples backed up by

¹⁶Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, vol. 22 in *The New American Commentary*, ed. David Dockery (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 109.

¹⁷ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 247.

¹⁸ See Don B. Garlington, "Oath-Taking in the Community of the New Age (Matthew 5:33-37)," *Trinity Journal* 16 (1995): 139-70.

¹⁹ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), Mt 5:46-47.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

overwhelming military force; second, the voracious extraction of economic resources; and third, an ideology legitimating these processes conveyed by discourses of various kinds.”²¹

Whether or not Jesus was conjuring up thoughts of their uncleanness or their political hatred (or both), Jesus’ mention of these two groups moves beyond the comparison between them and his audience to the direct ramifications regarding love. Who is the enemy his audience hates the most? The tax collectors and the Roman pagans. And yet, Jesus is demanding that his audience love even them. Once again, Jesus moved his audience from the mere demands of the culture to the demands of God, who sees the motives and the heart.

Hypocrisy and Specific Practices

Jesus moved from the motives behind specific commands to the motives behind specific practices, mainly, giving, praying, and fasting. In all three pericopes, Jesus warns against following the pattern of the *hypokritēs* (ὑποκριτής). The term *hypokritēs* refers to an actor who takes on a role or puts on a mask for the sake of the show.²² Thus, Jesus saw the Pharisees participating in acts glorifying themselves that should have brought glory to God.²³ It is not that giving, praying, and fasting are wrong; these are acts that Jesus expected to occur with some regularity (when you pray, when you fast). *Hypokritēs* occurs in Matthew fifteen times, in Luke three times, and once in Mark. This amount of usage in Matthew’s gospel as compared to the other gospels demonstrates Matthew’s continual desire to express the demands of Jesus on the motives of his hearers.

What is the meaning of “vain repetition” in the midst of this context? The term *battalogéō* (βατταλογέω) has a base meaning of stammering, speaking with many words, or babbling. It is a hapax legomenon, only occurring here, and is also rare in secular use as well, making the context of Matthew 6 the key in determining meaning.²⁴ Much like 5:20, Matthew 6:7 both summarizes Jesus’ previous statement (don’t babble on for the sake of gaining personal attention, i.e., with wrong motives like the Pharisees) and moves his audience forward to his following statement (don’t babble on for the sake of coercing God, i.e., with wrong motives like the Gentiles). Instead, the individual should pray with a proper understanding of God (the Father who knows our needs before we ask).

²¹ Philip F. Esler, “Rome in Apocalyptic and Rabbinic Literature,” in *The Gospel of Matthew in its Roman Imperial Context*, ed. John K. Riches and David C. Sim (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2005), 10.

²² Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), s. v., “ὑποκριτής,” by Ulrich Wilkins.

²³ Robert Balz and Gerhard Schneider, eds., *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), s. v., “ὑποκριτής,” by H. Giesen.

²⁴ Robert Balz and Gerhard Schneider, eds., *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), s.v., “βατταλογέω,” by H. Balz.

Matthew 6:7: Culture, and Music

Matthew introduces Jesus as the king who has the right to demand a new kind of righteousness with new expectations and requirements. Throughout Matthew 5, 6, and 7, these new expectations are made on the heart. These heart demands include a proper understanding of relationships, fasting, and prayer. While music is not specifically mentioned in this passage, music as praise and worship in church settings can and often does serve as communication between God and the congregation, putting it in the category of prayer. After all, in praise the congregation is magnifying God, and in worship the congregation is bowing down before him. If he is King and he has the right to set the expectations and requirements, then all that is done in a church setting should conform to these new commands of righteousness, including music and culture.

The issue at hand is not repetition per se, but rather repetition with wrong motives. Some have argued that music should be safeguarded by not allowing any sense of drastic repetition. Prohibiting repetition in order keep it from becoming vain establishes a demand of music that Jesus does not, thus putting the church in danger of judging righteousness based on external appearances. Such a view is no better than the attitude of the Pharisees and would be just as hypocritical. We recently baptized a new believer and added her to our church fellowship. After Sunday School one day, she asked why we Baptists do not recite the Lord's prayer. It was explained that the Lord's Prayer was a model to be followed, not repeated in vain. As the service was about to start, she looked at her bulletin and noticed that we were singing the Doxology as we usually do each Sunday. She turned to me and asked, "why is it not OK to recite the Lord's Prayer in repetition because it might be said in vain, but it is OK to sing the doxology each Sunday? Couldn't that become just as vain?" The hypocrisy of safeguarding certain things but not others based on cultural traditions fails to follow Jesus' commands. Throughout this passage, Jesus addressed his culture's understandings and safeguards around God's law. The "But I say to you" statements addressed these safeguards by moving past the external appearances and gave new commands that moved to the motivation of the heart. If Jesus is the king and he has given new commands, then his commands are the only safeguards that matter.

There are, however, valid reasons to take care when using songs with repetition. Matthew 6 does not give a license to sing whatever song in whatever way a worship leader or congregation desires. Instead, it demands that the church implements practices of music and worship that are consistent with the teachings of Matthew 6. Jesus warns against hypocrisy, which in terms of music equals choosing songs and singing them with wrong motives and meaningless repetition. Once again, the new King has set new demands that move from external practices to the internal motives.

In order to avoid hypocrisy and meaningless repetition, the leader should ask himself two questions. First, "What is the theological basis or spiritual truth being emphasized?" If it is not based in truth, then do not sing it. The King has come, revealing himself, his nature, his purpose, and his commands. The songs we choose to sing should reflect this revelation. If theological accuracy cannot be maintained in worship, then it misrepresents the King's revelation, nature, purpose, and commands, leading to hypocrisy.

On the other side, if it conforms to truth, then it can and should be sung with the appropriate motives and attitudes. This allows for great freedom as a congregation determines which music style to use, whether as a declaration or as a prayer, whether spontaneous or

prepared, as well as in worship, prayer, and other congregational practices. The church should always rely on the new King and his new commands, not personal preferences, to establish what is and is not sin.

Second, the music leader should ask, "What am I trying to accomplish in the hearts and minds of the congregation?" If a song sung in a certain way is used purely to elicit a conjuring of internal emotion, personal attention, or manipulate God, then do not sing it. There is no doubt of the connection between music and emotion. The song leader, however, should never seek to disengage the mind from the heart in song and style choices. Jesus does not want just emotional connection or intellectual knowledge. Jesus wants hearts, minds, bodies, and souls. In other words, he wants all of us in all our actions, even in song. As the leader uses songs with repetition, I suggest he take the time to challenge the congregation to hold onto their intellectual knowledge of the theological truths being expressed as the music also engages their emotions.

By asking these two questions, the song leader can guide his congregation to worship in theological truth and with the right motives. The congregation can then effectively move from vain repetition, which is hypocritical and follows the pattern of the Pharisees, to biblical worship in both spirit and in truth.

Conclusion

Throughout Matthew, Christ is king. Since he is king, he has the right to dictate his demands for righteousness. Matthew 5–7 sets up Jesus' definition of righteousness as righteousness that stems from right desires, attitudes, and motives, which is contrasted with the cultural understanding of righteousness exhibited by the Pharisees. Thus, vain repetition does not mean no repetition, but rather repetition or babbling with wrong motives, either to gain the attention of others or to gain the attention of God.

In order to avoid babbling, the music sung should maintain theological accuracy, allowing worship to be consistent with the nature and character of God. In order to avoid the hypocrisy of wrong motives, worship should seek to connect the heart with the mind, allowing for the whole person and congregation to use their songs as more than just songs, but as authentic prayer.

This understanding allows for great freedom when it comes to the church's use of culture, especially as it relates to music. While there are valid reasons to be cautious, if a song speaks theological truth and it is sung with right motives, then it enters into the realm of prayer and worship that is in both spirit and truth. Let the leader choose songs that truly lead the congregation to worship (bow down) and praise (magnify) God, Christ, and the Spirit.