

Empty Prayers to Allah

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I have an American friend who converted to Sunni Islam in his 20s. After four years, he left Islam and became a vibrant Christian. I asked him, "What made you choose to leave Islam?" He told me: "It was the prayers. When I prayed, I felt nothing. I wasn't getting any closer to God. When I pray as a Christian, I experience the presence of God."

I completely understood his point of view. By the time I was 35, I had spent 27,000 hours doing the duty prayers of a Muslim. That's five prayer times a day, about half an hour each prayer time, 365 days a year for some 30 years. But I knew in my spirit I wasn't getting anywhere.

When a Muslim does his five duty (or, required) prayers a day, he is not engaging in personal conversation with Allah. Only the Sufites, a tiny sect of Islam, emphasize personal communication with Allah. Most Muslims reject this philosophy and practice prayer according to the pattern taught by Muhammad.

The pattern is this: Before prayer, the Muslim must follow detailed instructions about washing his hands, mouth, nose, face, arms, hair, ears and feet. Then he may go to a mosque to pray with a group or find a clean place to pray alone. Prayer in the mosque is preferred.

Following a prayer leader, Muslims as a group say words of worship to Allah, such as, "Allah is great," and "I praise my

great Lord," as they kneel, bow and prostrate. They all say the same words, except when: (1) they are required to recite their choice of verses from the Quran, and (2) their foreheads are touching the floor, at which time they may offer requests to Allah.

Each unit of prayer is called a raka'ah (pronounced RAW-kuh-ah), and a Muslim repeats two to four raka'ahs, depending on which prayer time it is. To show devotion, he may choose to do additional raka'ahs.

Why do Muslims do this? Out of great love for Allah? No, it is out of great fear.

Muslims want to avoid Allah's punishment for disobeying the command to pray five times a day. Muslims also hope to please Allah so that he will accept them on Judgment Day and admit them into Paradise.

Muslims believe Allah requires them to pray according to Muhammad's revelation, which is why they are so careful to follow his instructions about praying. However, Muslims cannot know if Allah was pleased with their prayers until Judgment Day.

In contrast, Jesus never taught His disciples that God required them to repeat certain words for every prayer. Instead He said, "'And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words'" (Matt. 6:7, NIV).

Why was repetition unnecessary? Jesus explained, "'Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask

him'" (Matt. 6:8).

This is very different from Islam. Muhammad taught his people to pray the same words over and over to gain Allah's favor so Allah would meet their needs.

The type of prayer Muhammad modeled was of a slave trying to please a distant master. In contrast, Jesus modeled prayer as personal communication between Father and child. Jesus showed that prayer was for worship, fellowship, guidance and strength.

In His personal life, Jesus went to "lonely places" to pray (see Luke 5:16). Again, this is because His prayer was about a personal relationship.

How could Muhammad and Jesus be talking about the same God if their revelations were so different? The answer is that they were not talking about the same God.

That is why it is so important to look closely at the beliefs of Islam. Yes, Muhammad taught Muslims to "pray," but his methods and purpose of prayer were entirely different from Jesus'. As Christians recognize these differences, I pray they will increase their efforts to reach out to Muslims, who are working so hard to please their god but will get nothing in return.

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differences in prayer between Islam and Christianity, see his new book, Jesus and Muhammad, published in April by Charisma House ().