



## Teach Little Ones to Pray

### *Leading Our Children to Their Heavenly Father*

Catechism brings children into dynamic contact with the Word of God. We try to imprint the speaking of God upon their ears. We should also teach them to pray – to talk to God. Prayer is talking to God. We may cast it in many forms. We may pray, "O Lord, what a lovely day You've made!" We may ask, "O Lord, bless and increase the Church of Jesus Christ." But whatever form we may give it, we must realise that it is a very serious and important exercise.

Prayer is important for prayer is communication with God. God draws children into His Covenant of grace. Communication is essential if we are to live in a covenant with God.

Prayer is important because without dialogue, two-way communication, a relationship dies. When God repeatedly speaks in grace and receives no answer He builds a wall of silence. *"Because I have called, and you refused, I have stretched out my hand, and no one regarded; ...Then they will call on me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently, but they will not find me."* (Prov 1:24, 28)

Prayer is important because *"God has spoken to us by His Son ... Therefore we must give the more earnest heed...."* (Heb 1:1, 2; 2:1)

Prayer is important because Christ has opened the way to God's throne for us. *"Therefore brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way ... let us draw near..."* (Heb 10:19, 20, 22)

Prayer is important because God promises to accomplish mighty acts through prayer. *"And the smoke of the incense, with to prayers of the saints, ascended before God from the angel's hand ... And there were noises, thunderings, lightnings, and an earthquake."* (Rev 8:4, 5)

### **Prayer should be taught**

The idea that we must learn to pray comes a little strange today. The prevalent fashion is no fashion. The "come-as-you-are" school of thinking has infected prayer as well as worship.

Does this attitude honour God? We carefully craft a petition to our congressman. We submit a job application with exactly worded phrases. Do we then run to God with an empty mind, grab whatever thoughts are flitting by, and fling them toward His holy throne as prayer?

Our children are disciples of Christ. *"Let them come to me,"* He said. We must teach them to say, *"Lord, teach us to pray."*

### **Take The Right Role**

We can address God personally or corporately; that is, we can pray as a child to our Father or we can pray as a member of a larger body. In a personal prayer we say, "I praise you Father." When we pray at the table speaking for the family, we say, "We thank You, O God."

The Psalms show many examples of personal prayer. *"To You, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, I trust in You."* (Ps 25:1, 2) Our instruction should cultivate a personal relationship with our God.

Daniel's prayer illustrates a corporate prayer, a self-conscious identity with a body or group. *"We have sinned and committed iniquity..."* (Dan 9:5) Cultivate a sense of covenant, of community. We

each belong to a family, a local church, a catechism class, a federation of churches, the church in a nation, the world-wide church, a town or country, a state, a nation. Christ taught us to pray, "*Our Father.*"

Our personal identity is formed in the matrix of the broader covenant body. We each have a corporate participation in its triumphs and failures, its righteousness and sins. Too often prayer forgets the broader body and concentrates on the little world that revolves around me. There may easily be too many I's, me's, and my's in prayer.

## **What we put in prayer**

A handy acronym reminds us of the main elements of Biblical prayer: ACTS. "A" is for Adoration, "C" is for Confession, "T" is for Thanksgiving, and "S" is for Supplication.

### ***Adoration***

We must praise God for Himself, for His person, for His character. Adoration celebrates God's holiness, simplicity, infinity, eternity, omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence, sovereignty, goodness, justice, love, patience and righteousness.

While prayer may praise God for His character, it often relates it only to self. "I praise You God for being so good to me." While there is nothing at all wrong with this, we should be wary of our tendency to praise God's character only in direct proportion to our personal profit. Let us adore and praise our God for His awesome acts: it was our father Noah He saved through the flood; they were our fathers He redeemed with such stupendous catastrophes in Egypt; it was our sister Hannah's prayer He heard in the temple so many years ago.

### ***Confession***

From the contemplation of God's attributes, especially as we realise that all aspects of His person are adorned with infinite holiness, our sinful creatureliness looms before us. So as Daniel opened his prayer by adoration, "*O Lord, great and awesome God,*" he continued with confession, "*we have sinned.*" (Dan 9:4, 5)

A prayer begun by adoration leads us to humble ourselves before the face of His majesty. To a large degree, we have lost our sense of creatureliness and sinfulness. We generally paste confession to our vehicle of prayer like a bumper sticker on the tail end, "*and forgive us our sins, for Jesus' sake. Amen.*" So much for our recognition of the epic event of all history, the death of Christ on the cross.

The phrase "*forgive us our sins,*" although it implies confession, is really a petition; a request, rather than a statement of sin.

We sometimes treat God in a manner that no employer or parent would tolerate. I once made a mistake in a stock transaction that lost the bank I worked for \$6,000. Suppose at the end of the day I went to my manager and said, "I'm sorry. Please forgive my sins," and ended there. He would say, "What do you mean?" What if I said, "Well, we're all human here and we all make mistakes. I don't really remember anything specific." Would that satisfy him? I should think not.

Be specific. We neither honour God's holiness nor show true consciousness of our sins by relating them in generalities.

Be conventional. We are teaching public prayer. The confession of personal sins has no place in public prayer (unless our personal sin was of a public nature). We belong to a covenant community family, church, nation. We share in responsibility for their sins even if we avoided direct involvement. Look at Daniel's prayer again.

### ***Thanksgiving***

Even children commonly include this element in prayer. "Thank You, Lord, for Mommy and Daddy, and for food, and for sunshine."

Of course, the list of things for which we give thanks includes the physical, but should not stop there. Give thanks for Mommy's cookies, but go on and thank Him for her skill and love.

This area may overlap adoration, for at times we praise God for what He gives. This is fine, for this outline is not meant to be a rigid form but a guide.

Again, Biblical praise and thanksgiving flourishes in an environment of broad covenantal and historical consciousness. We thank God for His benevolence in our family, church, churches, state, and nation. *"When the Lord brought back the captivity of Zion..."* (Ps 126:1) We express our gratitude for His great acts in history, both salvation and judgement. *"Men shall speak of the might of Your awesome acts, and I will declare Your greatness."* (Ps 145:6)

## **Supplication**

Finally, when we present our petitions before God, we ask for things. We ask for physical things, food, *"Give us this day our daily bread."* We ask for spiritual things, protection, *"Deliver us from the evil one."* We ask for things for ourselves and for others.

Again, a keen sense of covenant should be cultivated. Our supplications should avoid revolving around our personal wants.

The Lord's prayer models our supplications. First we pray for the advance and glory of our Father's Name, kingdom and will. Christ gave us three more petitions mainly designed to request those personal things we need for us to be effective in implementing the first three petitions. To say it plainly, we ask for bread, forgiveness, and protection so that freed from the pursuit of these items we might concentrate on advancing the Name, kingdom, and will of our father in heaven.

## **Make prayer familiar**

While there will be times when our prayers will rise unprepared and spontaneously from a burdened or overflowing heart, there will also be formal and public occasions which will require a carefully prepared prayer.

Our children will need to write prayers and then read them. Both writing and reading prayers perhaps seems strange. It's not as strange as it may seem. The church has gotten away from this practice but we'll find it common enough in history.

Many of the Psalms are prayers which somebody sat down and wrote out. David and others took great pains to put together the right words and phrases into just the right poetic form. They wanted to present to their God a gift of enduring value. Evidently God treasured them, for He kept them in print for 3,000 years and He shows them to us today. We sing those prayers in worship and also sing many of the hymns that were written as prayers.

Map out prayer expeditions through the Bible. Have your children tour the rich prayers of David, Asaph, and Heman recorded in the Psalms. Then send them to explore the prayer of Solomon (2 Chronicles 6), Ezra (Ezra 9), Daniel (Daniel 9), Mary (Luke 1), Zechariah (Luke 1), Christ (John 17), and the apostles (Acts 9).

Among the rich treasures of the Reformation are surely numbered the many recorded prayers of Calvin and other reformers. The liturgical section of the Psalter Hymnal includes some formal and carefully crafted Reformation era prayers for various public occasions. Among my books on prayer, I especially treasure the Book of Common Prayer, for it preserves many prayers of profound and moving beauty; and a book recording some of the prayers of Samuel Johnson.

What we say to God, then, is deserving of discipline, thought, and beauty. Let us lead our children to devote the time, care, skills, and love necessary to present to their heavenly Father prayers He can look at and listen to with fondness and joy.

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