

TEACHING OUR CHILDREN TO PRAY

A young mother was recovering from a very serious illness after the birth of her child. When asked whether she had found comfort in prayer during this critical time, she answered that she had never given a thought to prayer. That is hard to imagine. An old lady of 80 years lay on the brink of death in the hospital and admitted that she had never prayed in her life. Can you imagine that?

Prayer is an integral part of the life of the believer. Just as a newborn child instinctively seeks its mother, so also the child of God seeks his God. We are needy, dependent creatures who realize that in God we live and move and have our being. We are sinners who are daily burdened with the guilt of sin. We need forgiveness, and we have experienced the wonder of grace, which only God's people know, that we can be assured of forgiveness through the atoning blood of our Savior. We draw our spiritual breath from God, the source of every blessing. For us prayer is worship, praise, and adoration, for this God is our God forever and ever. Besides all that, prayer is fellowship with the living God, so that the closest we can attain to heaven in this life is the intimate communion between us as God's children and God as our heavenly Father.

For all these reasons, teaching our children to pray is an essential part of our own spiritual life. When Scripture teaches us to bring up our children in the fear and nurture of the Lord, this already implies that we teach them to pray, even as we seek our strength and refuge in prayer.

In a sense it can be said that we always do teach our children to pray, whether we do that deliberately or unconsciously. Already a one year-old knows what it means to close his eyes and fold his hands at the beginning and end of a meal, even though he cannot see or hear the one we are addressing in prayer. The important thing is to teach them to pray properly. Therefore, under the heading of "Teaching Our Children To Pray," I wish to consider the Necessity, and the Manner, and conclude with a few specific remarks.

As has already been mentioned, prayer is an essential part of our own *personal* lives.

This is one of the greatest and most amazing of all God's blessings. Our God says to us, "Seek ye My face," and our hearts respond, "Thy

face, Lord, will I seek" (Psalm 27:8). We need no appointment as we do with a doctor or other professional person. We need no letter of recommendation. We need not write a letter, or call by telephone, or use some other means of communication. We need not even dress up or prepare our speech in advance (although that is not always improper), as we would when approaching some dignitary. We have access to the throne of grace, and boldness to approach through our Lord Jesus Christ and on His merit. We can pour out our souls, make all our needs known in prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, never afraid that we come too often or linger too long. There is nothing that we need hide from God, for He knows our walk of life and even the deepest thoughts and desires of our hearts. With David we can confess, "As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God" (Psalm 42:1). We even understand what it means to pray without ceasing, so that we dare not venture forth without a prayer in our hearts and on our lips.

That implies a unique relationship between God and us. Although this may sound like a platitude, God is GOD. He is the absolutely sovereign Lord over all His universe and over every creature in heaven, on earth, and in hell. He is also sovereign Lord over our lives, for in Him is the source of our lives and of all things in our daily existence. In Him is our confidence of the future and our hope of eternal life.

That determines the content of our prayers. Our Lord Himself taught us to express first and foremost as our great need and deepest desire: Father in heaven, hallowed by Thy Name! Along with that we long for the coming of God's kingdom and wish for nothing more than that God's will may be carried out round about us and in our own lives. That is our deepest motive when we pray for daily bread, for the forgiveness of our sins and the desire to grow in sanctification and our ultimate perfection. For in our souls rings the doxology, "*Thine is the kingdom, Thine is the power, Thine is the glory forever!*"

That also determines our attitude in prayer. Scripture teaches us that he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a Rewarder of those who diligently seek Him (Heb. 11:6). Only the believer can pray, for prayer is an act of faith. We believe in God as our sovereign Lord, our Redeemer and our Savior, our Refuge and our Strength, our God in whom we may trust. That is implied when we confess to be Christians, followers of our Lord Jesus Christ, citizens of heaven and aliens in the world. Especially in our present time this bears a special significance. Already we can recognize the claw of antichrist reaching out for us because we are Christians. Even our government

has an entirely different view of Christianity than we do. Public officials consider anyone a Christian who is not a communist, or a pagan, or distinctively professing one, only true God. According to that opinion we are guilty of *discrimination*, and may well have to suffer for this in the future. This can only mean that we must pray to stand firm and that we may receive grace to live as citizens of the heavenly kingdom and as aliens in this present world, no matter what the cost may be. All of this makes prayer an essential part of our personal lives.

Prayer is also an essential part of our *family* lives. The strongest bond between husband and wife is the spiritual bond that unites them in the Lord. That is the bond that creates harmony and unity in their lives, makes their marital union a holy marriage in the Lord. This same spiritual bond unites parents and children. We realize that our children are a gift from the Lord. We confess not only, All that I am I owe to Thee, but also, All that I have is Thine, including my children. Organically we as covenant parents produce a covenant seed, the children of the living God temporarily entrusted to our care. I do not mean to say that all of our children are elect, nor that all are saved. But God does take out of our children His own precious jewels, who are entrusted to us that, by the grace of God, Christ may prepare them for their place in glory through our instrumentality. God loves His own with a deeper love than we could ever possess. He has first claim to them. What a glorious privilege we have to be stewards in God's house and to bring up our children in the fear of the Lord to the utmost of our ability. In Christ's name the father in the family is God's prophet, God's priest, and king under Christ. Who is capable of these things? Therefore prayer is an essential part of the training of our children. It is said that a family that prays together stays together. An even greater benefit is the fact that a family that prays together is knit together in a true spiritual bond of faith and grows together in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Even as prayer is an essential part of our family life, so also prayer is an essential part of the life of our children. They need prayer as much as we do. They must always be reminded of that need that God has created in them. From their earliest infancy they must be taught to pray, and to pray properly.

The question before us now is, how must we teach our children to pray?

To that must be answered, first of all, that we do that indirectly and possibly unconsciously by our very walk of life in the family and in the

midst of the world. Children are very sharp observers. They see and hear far more than you and I do. Very little escapes their keen observation. How readily they recognize a "beautiful" prayer, full of nicely chosen phrases and moving sentiments, which is completely out of harmony with the daily language and actions of the parents. How soon children recognize the fact that our prayers are contrary to our walk of life! Moreover, children are great imitators, sometimes consciously, but even more often unconsciously. How readily a child picks up a bad habit, an improper word or expression. Yet this ability to absorb and copy can also be of great value as the child learns to follow in the godly footsteps of the parents. From this follows that parents must be careful how they speak and act, also in the presence of their children. Fathers usually recognize their responsibility of supporting their families and supplying them with some of the niceties and luxuries of life. But there is no small danger that they do this at the expense of the spiritual. After a busy day it may seem far more appealing to sit and watch a ballgame, rather than concern one's self with the spiritual welfare of the children. It is often tempting to neglect the office of believer as prophet, priest, and king in the home, especially when it comes to teaching and giving guidance in a catechism lesson or discussing the Scripture passage that was read.

Here is where the responsibility of the mother also enters in. She is her husband's helper. Since father is often compelled to be away from home because of his employment, the mother takes over in the place of the father. This is the highest calling, the best career that any covenant mother can possibly desire. I cannot imagine a Christian mother who would sacrifice her high calling in the family to pound a typewriter or work as sales-lady in a store for a few paltry dollars to add to the luxuries in the home. I can assure you that many children of unbelieving mothers will rebuke them in hell for not having taught them the proper priorities and the things of lasting value here on earth.

This also includes our prayer life. I can say that we have come a long way in respect to prayers in our family worship, at least in many homes that I have visited. Some years ago there were many fathers who did not dare to make an audible prayer in the presence of the family. Often, when the father did lead the family in prayer, this was done in such hushed tones that no one knew exactly when the prayer was ended. Often, when a prayer could be heard, it consisted of nothing more than a series of mere platitudes, which made little or no impression upon the children. Parents were too reserved to talk about spiritual matters with each other, much less in the presence of their

children. The personal needs of the parents and of the children, or of a specific child, were mentioned only under dire circumstances. Today our fathers are much more open in their family devotions. But it must still be stressed that prayer is vital to our family life as children of God. The specific needs of the family must be mentioned every day, and also the needs of the children as they go off to school, are in school and on the playground. I do think that it is very improper to use the family devotions as a time to reprimand the children for the wrongs that may have been committed during the day. But children must certainly be remembered in their preparing for catechism, for society, or for public worship. In times of illness and on other important occasions the individual child must be remembered before the throne of grace.

Along with this, we must teach our children to pray their own prayers. Even as in training the child, this should be done as early as possible, beginning with a formal prayer. There are parents who object to teaching their children a formal prayer for fear of making hypocrites of them. As covenant parents we proceed from the principle that God creates the need for prayer even in the hearts of very small children, and that therefore we should train them in prayer as soon as possible. As the child grows older, it may be well to teach him more than one prayer at meals and when he retires, so that he does not fall into mere repetition. Already at this point the child should be taught to be reverent in his prayers. He must be aware that he is speaking to the Most High God as a mere, dependent creature, even as a sinner, who must always be filled with humble fear when he addresses God. As the child grows up toward adolescence he learns the Lord's Prayer, which again must be spoken slowly, clearly, and above all reverently. Reverence in our prayers can never be too strongly emphasized.

In due time the child is able to formulate his own prayers. Now it should be stressed that he should have his private devotions, a set time when he reads Scripture and makes his personal prayers. As difficult as that may seem at first, he must learn to listen to God's Word speaking to him from the Scriptures. He needs guidance at this point. Yet by prayerfully asking, "Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth," he learns to listen; he hears God speak to him, even as the Holy Spirit applies the Word to his own heart and circumstances. The child must be instructed to make *all* his needs known. This includes intercessory prayer for his parents, for the other members of his family, as well as for his teacher, minister, employer or fellow employees. He must learn to confess his sins in all sincerity. There may be times when a certain sin demands that the parent and the child pray together for forgiveness.

In any case, he must learn to seek all his salvation in the cross of our Savior, to call upon the Lord in every circumstance of life, that he learn also to commit his whole life into the keeping of His Almighty God and merciful Father.

It may be well to conclude with a few specifics. Although there are many aspects of prayer that I cannot even begin to touch upon now, there are still a few matters worth considering.

One of the common problems in our day is that our lives become so involved, that we have not time for family devotions, at least not devotions which include the entire family. It can very well happen that there are days in which not a single meal is enjoyed with the entire family present. This is so different from the days of my childhood. Almost without exception we had at least two meals a day at which the entire family shared in the devotions. I can well remember that we were called out of our slumbers at six o'clock in the morning, so that we could have family devotions together before my father loaded his wagon, hitched up his horse and went off to work. In order to have the entire family together at least once a day, we may have to go back to that very good practice.

The question has been asked whether a mother should lead the devotions in the home when the father is absent. Personally, I am strongly in favor of that. It is also a good policy to let the older children have charge of the devotions at a time like that. Our chief aim must be not to neglect our devotions and also to keep them reverent.

One of the common problems among our youth is that they are often ashamed to pray in public, ashamed often even of having their peers know that they pray and want to live accordingly. The right and wrong of anything is determined solely by peer pressure. Sad to say, this is even evident among Christians together. Our children must be able to stand up for their convictions. They must be able to pray, "Lord, what wilt Thou have me do?" and then DO it.

Finally, this is the more necessary because Christ is Lord over every sphere of our lives. We are living very close to the end of the ages. Already antichrist is lifting his vile head in a final attempt to wipe out God's Name and people from the face of the earth. Persecution is creeping in on us from every side as the government seeks control over every aspect of our lives, as wickedness is openly displayed and praised, as apostasy grows in the churches. Our children must expect to be hated, scorned, and rejected for their faith, even more than we ever were. They must be aware that they are aliens in this world, citizens of the heavenly kingdom, and therefore also always more than

conquerors through our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom we always have the victory. This may cost them success in the world, or their job, and even other afflictions, such as hunger, imprisonment and even death. With them we continue to pray, "Come, Lord Jesus, yea, come quickly."

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ART EDUCATION IN THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOL

There are many reasons why art is an important subject, and we as students, teachers and parents must understand these. The world has much to say about art, but we as Christians ought to know what *we* mean when we say "art." So let us begin by looking at some common misconceptions of why we study art and what it is. Then let us see what art actually is, why we should study it especially in a Christian school, and therefore see how this applies to all of us whether we're in education or not.

First of all we find that the parable of the talents in Matthew 25 is often used to explain why we should develop our artistic abilities, but developing our abilities is not the point of the passage. Rather, it means we "receive a certain place in the kingdom of God," that we receive this place or talent *according* to our abilities, and that we must be content and labor in that place to which God has called us.¹ Now it is true that we do have a responsibility to develop the abilities we've been given, and if we have been given the place of artist then indeed we must labor in that, but there has to be more. If this were all we based art education on, then only those already gifted with artistic abilities need study art. Now there may be more interest shown from some students than from others, but whether it seems one is gifted or not, *art is connected to everyone's life.*

Art may be the painting in the museum, the music you heard at the concert, or the poem in your literature book, but what about the

1. Herman Hoeksema, *Chapel Talks on the Parables of Matthew*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Theological School of the Protestant Reformed Churches, 1972, p. 113.