

TEACHING CHILDREN TO PRAY.

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OUR children are the children of God, and above all things they must learn to live as children of God, therefore we must take care to train their spiritual faculties: those senses of the soul by which we feel the presence of God, and recognise His claim upon our conduct.

The senses of the soul are trained by its own prayers, for “prayer is the soul’s sincere desire, uttered or unexpressed,” and the soul will grow in the direction of its desires and according to their energy. Therefore, our most pressing duty as parents is to teach our children how to pray, and to train them in the habit of praying.

Unbelief and irreligion in later life are often due to a misconception of the meaning and value of prayer formed in childhood. Children too often learn that prayer is asking God for things to make them happy, just as they ask their parents for the things they want. As they grow up they find that God does not give what they ask for, so they not unnaturally suppose that prayer is a delusion, and when they give up praying they often give up any real or effective belief in God.

Our Lord’s most important lessons about prayer are contained in the sixth chapter of St. Matthew’s Gospel. All children should learn this chapter by heart from the Revised Version, and it should be carefully explained to them, especially the distinction Our Lord draws between heathen and Christian prayers. The heathen look to God for earthly rather than for spiritual blessings, and think that He can be persuaded to give what they want by persistently repeated appeals. Our Lord’s main lesson is that the prayers of a Christian are not to be spent on earthly benefits, but on the righteousness of the Kingdom of God, for they ought to express his soul’s desire to live a godly life.

As our knowledge of prayer increases, our experience of its far-reaching effect is widened, and we find that our ordinary

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affairs, anxieties and desires all come within its scope; but only as secondary objects, only as wishes which we bring before God tentatively, because we think they are in accord with His righteousness and that if they are granted we shall be the better able to do His will. This is the lesson of the prayer of our Lord in Gethsemane. His chief desire then, as it had been all His life, was that He might do the will of God and that God’s great purpose of Salvation might be fulfilled in Him; but He shrank with horror from the anticipation of the violent death that lay before Him, from the treachery, the denial, the false witness, the unjust judgment, the brutality and from all the crimes of Calvary which His people would commit in order to destroy their Saviour. He felt it was almost more than He could bear, too horrible for God to permit; and so He prayed, “Let this cup pass from Me”; but, lest it should interfere with His greater desire, He added, “Thy will, not mine, be done.”

Every child’s prayer should therefore be, as every man’s prayer should be, the utterance of the noblest desire of his soul—his aspiration towards things divine, his appeal to God to stir, to guide and to strengthen his efforts, to attain virtue and Godliness—the pleading of his better nature for God’s help to subdue his lower passions, that he may do God’s will, and live for God’s glory. This is what we must endeavour to teach our children, and it is not impossible if we set about it wisely.

The most remarkable feature of a child's nature is his conscience, or his power to hear the voice of God. Conscience is the basis of personal religion, the leaven God has put into the life, the seed of the Kingdom of Heaven which He has secretly sown in the character. A mother's duty and privilege is to educate that spiritual sense in her child, and to foster its growth, and this she can do by teaching her child to listen when God speaks, and by making her own authority supplement and support His law. The first duty a child recognises through his conscience is obedience to mother, and the right answer to many a childish "Why must I?" is, "Because I say so." But when the child has obeyed, mother should remind him that even while he asked "Why?" he knew that he ought to obey, for God was telling him to obey all the

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time. Then let her explain, that because God loves us He makes us feel that we ought to be good, and that we must pray that He will help us to listen when He speaks and to do what He tells us. So let the child's first prayer be "Make me a good child." It is wonderful how this petition will stick to a man in after years, and be always the basis of his private devotions. The great thing is to make it a reality from the first by telling our children their faults, and the virtues they should seek; so let us add to it particular and varied petitions against selfishness, greediness, etc., and for truthfulness, generosity, self-control, and above all, for a spirit of ready obedience.

The regular habit of saying prayers night and morning is most valuable, and should be acquired in early childhood; but, let us take care that the daily prayers do not become mere formal acts, or a part of the process of going to bed and getting up, which must be got through like brushing your teeth. Prayer is of no value unless it contains thought and spiritual effort, and therefore we must not let our children acquire the lazy habit of always saying the same words. Formalism and superstition are the two dangers we have to guard against, and they are very real dangers. Don't let a child imagine that if on any morning he has omitted to kneel and repeat a few well-known words, something dreadful will happen to him during the day; but let us do all we can to make the daily prayer a real part of the education of the soul. For this purpose, we must from the first, teach children to connect praying and trying, and we must explain that no wish becomes a prayer until we try to obtain it. To impress our lesson on the child's memory we can use such homely ritual as this—"hold up your left hand for asking, hold up your right hand for trying, join them together for praying." It is a good rule not to allow your child to pray for a blessing unless he can also try to win it. This is important, even in prayers of intercession; for example, we teach our children to pray, "God bless father and mother"; then we must explain that they can convey to us the desired blessing by being good children. We always make our prayers of intercession real when we seek to become the agents of the blessings which we ask God to bestow.

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When a child has done wrong, we should at prayer-time explain about repentance, as simply as possible. We can remind the child that while he was doing wrong he did not like to think of God, and so his fault was separating him from God; now, he cannot come back and ask for God's blessing until he feels sorry for his fault and is willing to say so to God; but, that is not enough, for he must resolve to resist the temptation when it comes again, and he must pray to God for help. God forgives by making us feel that He loves us still, and by making us good.

The faith as well as the prayers of a child should be simple and direct, it is not well to

burden them with fanciful ideas about angels, or about their need for special protection during the night. Children are safer in bed than anywhere else, and we must not make them afraid of the dark, or of sleep, by suggesting evil dreams and other terrors, as that really beautiful hymn, "Glory to Thee, my God, this night," unfortunately does. We do not want children to think about death until they have learned to believe that we do not really die at all.

For the sake of simplicity, children should be taught always to pray to our Father in Heaven, and when they use hymns of prayer addressed to our Saviour, it should be explained that there is no difference between the love of Jesus and the love of God, for the love that Jesus showed was simply the revelation of the Father's love for all His children. Even the common conclusion of our prayers, "For Jesus Christ's sake, Amen," must not be understood to mean that God only loves us for the sake of Jesus Christ. It is most important that children should feel that God loves them all as naturally as mother loves them, and wants to hear their prayers.

As children grow to be boys and girls of school or the schoolroom, and we cease to hear their daily prayers, we may help them very much by quiet talks about prayer, if we always take care to impress upon them that prayer should be the expression before God of our highest aspirations. The growth of the soul is irregular; there are periods when the world seems to claim all our energies for business or pleasure, or when the mind is fully occupied with learning. There are other times when God makes Himself very plainly known, when we feel His presence, and our consciences respond to His

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revelation; it is at these times that we should compose our prayers and form the habits of praying which will keep us near to God, even when business lays its hold upon us again. Prayer is indeed the real means of union with God. Our faith catches sight of Him from time to time. We hear Him either in the warnings of conscience, or in the blows of trouble; but, by prayer we can keep always within His reach. An Eastern Archbishop once said, "Prayer is a golden chain, let down by God from heaven, upon which the soul of man is drawn up to God," or we may liken it to a ladder of holy thoughts and desires which God has given, that we may ascend into His presence. When, through repentance and love, we have climbed a few steps of that ladder, and have seen in purer light a brighter vision of the Kingdom of God, our souls break forth into nobler thoughts of prayer. But we must try to keep our place on the ascent, by impressing those thoughts upon our daily life through frequent repetition of the prayer we have learned with God. At such times a mother's aid is of great value to her boys and girls, she can suggest good words of prayer, and she can explain the full meaning of prayers they have already learned to say.

They should be advised to choose a Collect out of the Prayer Book, and use it every evening for a few weeks, and then to change it for another. Favourite verses out of the Psalms may be treated in the same way—but the boy or girl should choose for themselves. Children should not be taught to say long or many prayers. One short petition for help to resist a special temptation, or do some particular thing, if it is thoughtfully said, is quite enough for a morning prayer, and far better than longer prayers said by rote, because in our prayers we should always think more of what we ought, or ought not to be and to do, than of what we ought to say; the words, whether of a Collect or out of our own heads, will always come when we are in earnest about improving our characters or our conduct. In the evening, prayers may be longer,

because we can give more time to meditation, and in the evening we ought to think of our faults, for in the Christian life there must always be the battle against sin, we must fight our faults from beginning to end, and we must continually pray for God's help to find and face and conquer them. This is the

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true purpose of repentance, and the way to work out our own salvation by the Grace of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

The greatest of all lessons in prayer is the study of the Lord's Prayer. When we fully enter into its meaning it brings us into close communion with our Saviour, because it expresses His own deepest thoughts and desires. Nothing reveals to us so plainly the character of Christ as His prayer; nothing shows us so clearly what our lives ought to be. He gave it to His disciples as a lesson in praying, and it is one of His priceless gifts. Let us examine it with care.

Its opening words teach us that our prayers must never be selfish, for we say "Our," not my—that our prayers should be offered with confidence, for we speak to "Our Father"—that our prayers should be reverently thought and spoken for He is in Heaven. The order of the petitions is of great importance. Luther said that the natural man wants to pray them in the reverse order; his first idea being his own safety, then his own forgiveness and the supply of his daily wants; when these are supplied he is willing to think of his duty, and lastly, of the Glory of God. But the plan Christ made for His disciples was the opposite of this. The first petition, "Hallowed be Thy Name," presents to us the great thought of the prayer—so beautifully expressed in the answer to the first question of the Scottish Catechism, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him for ever." This was the purpose of the life of Christ; He lived for the glory of God, and by the prayer "Hallowed be Thy Name" He would raise us to His own level. It shews us that Our Father in heaven has committed the very holiness of His Name to His children. We help the world to honour God when we live Godly, Christian lives and this Our Lord commanded us to do, saying, "Let your light shine before men as a lamp shineth in a house, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in heaven."

"Hallowed be Thy Name," is indeed the aim of all Christian prayer. The petitions which follow it in the Lord's Prayer are the several efforts of the soul to accomplish this great purpose. May Thy Kingdom come into our hearts and be established in the world, that our character may be sanctified and strengthened for this purpose—Help us to do Thy will

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for this—Give us what we need—Cleanse us from the faults that spoil our service—Lead us in the right way and deliver us from the power of evil, in order that we may hallow Thy Name; for Thine is the Kingdom, the Power and the Glory—all that we have and all that we are, or can be, belong to Thee.

I regret that space does not allow me to write more fully of these petitions, though indeed, the Lord's Prayer requires a much fuller exposition than can be given in such an article as this, but I would urge upon all whose duty it is to teach children to pray, to found their lessons on its careful study. Let me conclude with a few words as to the best way for our children to use it.

The Lord's Prayer should not be thoughtlessly repeated. When we have plenty of time we cannot do better than pray the prayer sentence by sentence, while we meditate on the meaning of each petition. On ordinary days it is better only to pray the first and one other of its

petitions, thinking deeply of the connection between them, and of our own special needs.

Another excellent way of using the prayer is to apply the whole of it to some definite purpose, or to some deeply seated desire of our souls.

This is the intention of our Prayer Book. When a child is baptized we are to pray that his life may be lived for the glory of God, that God's Kingdom may come in his heart, that he may do God's will, that God will give him all that is needful both for his soul and his body, forgive his sins and purify his character, that God will bestow upon him a forgiving spirit, and will always be his Guide and Protector. Similarly, we may apply the prayer to every purpose and occasion, and when we do so we shall find it the best expression of our feelings and of our desires before Our Father in heaven.

The last words of the Lord's Prayer were added by the first disciples of Christ. They show that men have always felt that no prayer is complete without praise and thanksgiving—this is a lesson we also should teach—but, here again, we must urge that to make praise real it must not only be the utterance of humble and grateful lips; for God looketh on the heart, and the praise He claims from us is our active

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worship, our useful service, therefore every offering of praise pledges us to fulfil it by endeavouring to live for the glory of God.

I cannot conclude these few words about teaching our children how to seek their Heavenly Father's blessing without saying how inadequate they seem to me as I read over what I have written. I have omitted many points of the first importance and have failed to express my thoughts clearly about others, but I have tried to offer some suggestions to parents, who like myself, feel how difficult it is to lead their children into the presence of God, and who desire to fulfil their duty toward Him and toward those whom He has committed to their care. What I have tried to say is only what I think myself about this great subject, it is the fruit of my own experience and of my personal convictions, and I offer it very humbly to my readers. They will find much to criticise here, but my hope is that they will seek better guidance than I can give from the thoughts of wiser and more devout writers, and that above all they will make the great duty of teaching their children to pray the subject of their own prayers to Him Whose ears are always open, and Whose help is ready for all who try to serve Him.