

PRAYING RIGHT FROM CHIDHOOD

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1. PARENTS PRAY WITH THEIR CHILDREN

In order to pause to consider the meaning of prayer within the family, I should first like to lay a Biblical foundation for the place of prayer in the family.

In Deuteronomy 6, God calls upon Israel to love Him with all its heart and to serve Him.

The passage reads:

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord; And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; And you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise."

Praying with your children begins with yourself.

The conviction that the Lord is our God will be the motivation for loving and serving Him thereafter. It is from the basis of this personal conviction that you will talk to your children about

God. In this sense, the commandment to Israel is also our foundation.

In this way, the parents image of God is transferred to their children, consciously and/or subconsciously. It is important as a parent to recognise what you yourself experience in God and in your own prayers.

Religious upbringing is a primary task of parents, aided by "co-upbringers" such as school and Church.

What can children learn from their parents?

The best thing a religious father or mother can pass on to his/her child, is his/her life example. Our children will learn from our lives whether God is important, whether God is to be trusted and whether He is a reality.

The life of prayer with our children therefore takes its strength from our own personal life of prayer.

As believers, we can be on our guard against the transfer to our children of the practice of saying prayers becoming no more than just a good habit - although a fixed pattern of prayer is an indispensable element for children in that transfer.

In our example, children have an opportunity to experience the fact that praying to God means something for us. It is not something we do for no particular reason.

A few examples:

Our Help comes from God! As a mother of four growing children, my energy has its limits. I pray for strength to carry on my work as a mother within my family. Father prays for strength for his work. In difficult times God wants to be our help. Our example tells our children that we turn to God with our problems, with our questions, with our worries. They share in our praying to some extent. We will have our own life of prayer, without children, but within the family prayers they hear our questions to God.

The children follow our example. They pray for their difficult school project, for their friend whose parents have separated, or for their teacher who is ill.

They enter the path which we walk and in this way we 'diligently teach' our children something.

Teaching diligently could stand for familiarising with...

Our belief in God turns our prayers into a question and answer relationship with God. What Jacob says of Elijah is so striking:

"Elijah was just a man as we are and he offered up a prayer (that it would not rain and it did not rain on the land) and he prayed again and the Heavens gave rain and the earth did bring forth fruits."

We can count on a response. Expectant praying by parents carries the children along. Teaching them, in their turn, to expect, to believe, that God hears our prayers and wishes to hear them.

It makes sense, then, to pray in this life!

2. PRAYING 'ON OUR HAUNCHES'

What language do we use when praying with our children?

Praying is talking to God!

It is a constant challenge for me to find the words which, while expressing my feelings, can also be understood by my children. We 'crouch down' to their level, as it were; this means that we have to formulate the prayer 'on our haunches' a prayer which our child understands, but which no longer comes from my heart.

I sometimes hear children using words or a tone of voice when praying which they have copied from adults. It sounds unnatural.

Why shouldn't we speak in our prayers using ordinary words, in a natural tone? At the same time, we can teach our children that praying is accompanied by an attitude of.

Respect and reverence. We are after all speaking to God, our Heavenly Father.

Honesty towards God and our fellow men.

Praying without excessive verbosity, which leads to 'woolliness' and thus makes the prayers unintelligible.

Realising that there is no need for long prayers. Best of all is if the child can say "Amen" because it agrees with you, and not as a relief, a feeling of at last... you've finally finished!

The parents in the family will show their children two ways of praying:

The shared prayer of the family of parent and child, of child with its parent; of parents together; of children together.

The personal prayer, both of the parent and of the child.

The example of the little boy Anne. He had been sent to his room for being naughty. Now the little lad was angry with his mother, but was missing her at the same time. How did he and his mother make it up? He had learned that you can ask God for help. God would really have to 'lend a helping hand'.

His mother came upstairs. She found a sullen little boy lying in bed with his back to her. There wasn't much she could do in the face of such resistance.

She went and sat by the bed and began to pray. "God will You help us to settle this argument with each other? I love Anne so much, and he loves me. You teach us that we must forgive. We don't want to have an argument at all..."

The little boy turned over and crept into his mother's lap. "I've been praying as well ... that you would come and sit by me", he confided in her. While mother hugged him, he told her enthusiastically all the things which had happened at school. Everything was fine again!

Topics of prayer within a family

Prayers for our protection and safety. God has Angels who are able to protect us. Think of a long family journey. Or the journey to work or school. ---

Prayers for forgiveness, both to God and to each other. It is a great release to offer up a reconciliatory prayer together, after a conflict with or between children has been talked through.

Prayers for our development and fulfilment. We may use our talents and gifts in honour of God. We can 'bless' our children here and confirm and strengthen their self-image through our prayers. In this way we take their development (of talent) seriously!

Prayers of thanks for our daily food, our home, our prosperity. Looking around us, we see only too clearly that food, drink, security and shelter cannot be taken for granted in the world in which we live.

We must sow gratitude in the hearts of our children. We must not forget to say thank-you!

Prayers of thanks for our health, or, if we are confronted with sickness, we can pray with our children for God's healing powers.

Prayers of consolation in times of sadness, if the family is suffering, for example because of the death of a much loved family member.

Fixed patterns in family prayer

Saying grace at table, in the morning, at lunch time and in the evening.

Praying when, as parents, you put the children to bed. This moment can be very valuable, because the child has his or her father or mother to him/herself for a little while. It is an 'example' experience which indicates an intimate relationship with God.

Praying before a holiday trip.

Praying together if someone is going away for some time.

Praying together when special events occur.

3. PRAYING WITH CHILDREN: WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT PHASES IN A RELIGIOUS UPBRINGING?

It is the responsibility of the parents to bring up their children to be independent in their (religious) life.

Teaching our children to pray is a step on the path to the personal life of prayer of the child as it develops its independence. We can distinguish the following phases in this process:

The prenatal prayers of the mother

I have personally experienced two miscarriages. Job 3 describes the value of the unborn life to God. I lost them, but I know that there is a place for them next to God, where the great and small from this life are equal! The unborn life is a valuable human life. God's eyes see the shapeless beginnings! As a mother I prayed for the development of my unborn children and for their protection.

Having children is not a right, but a gift.

Parents praying with their baby (aged 0 to 2 years).

Every child is worthy of thanks I Even the handicapped child. God gives us children and He will be the Father both to them and to us!

At this stage, praying means 'security, warmth'. It is a warmly embracing prayer between fellow-men. The child, our small fellow-man, is literally and figuratively carried, by the prayer and by the arms of its parents.

Given the emotional needs of a baby, you see that it is in this stage of life that the basis is laid for trust, security and affection.

The small child is most definitely not too small to join in prayer!

Praying with our baby in our arms, we build up its basic faith in life! And also its faith in God! Even though the young child does not understand your words, it will feel something which meets its basic need:

I am welcome!

I belong!

I am loved!

The toddler (aged 2 to 4 years)

The small child which is just beginning to juggle with words in life, itself carries no prejudices with respect to prayer. It is happy to join us in praying.

One of the first words can be the powerful "Amen!" following the prayers of father or mother at the table.

The child will do its best to put its little fists together and to keep its eyes tightly shut, just as its father and mother do!

In this phase the child has a need for safe and, especially recognisable things around it. The power of repetition! For example: God has made everything! And then you list all the things which have his attention: a ladybird, a horse, birds, the pet dog.

God takes care of us! Of the little child him/herself, but also of the other members of the family.

The example of Tiago. Because of his handicaps, he is like a little toddler. He prays steadfastly at the table, while making the sign of the cross: 'Father, Son and 'oh' (which is his version of 'Holy Ghost') Amen." And then lists all our names: Papa, Mama, Melle, Anne and Floortje, Amen." If there are visitors sitting at the table, they are also included in his prayer!

There is only one aim at this age: building up an awareness of God! God created us, God Who loves us and Who takes care of us! Songs and verses can be useful supports during this phase! So can an attractive child's Bible with illustrations.

The young child (aged 4 to 7 years)

For the young child, a new concept begins to penetrate his/her life: friendship! He or she begins to make friends. This phase in the child's life forms the basis for building up a relationship with God. Jesus refers to Himself as a 'friend' to mankind! Friendship is something beautiful! Friendship means something, but also sometimes costs something. Because in order to play together it is necessary that you both want the same thing. You can tell a friend everything and you know that he or she loves you!

Children are very happy to be a friend of Jesus, but the question will arise: "Where is Jesus, then? I can't see Him anywhere. How can He be close by me and live in Heaven at the same time?"

Example of Floortje and the ant on her big toe, which thought that it was climbing a mountain, while it had no idea of how big Floortje was or who Floortje was, of all the things she could do, such as being able to read, write and ride a bicycle... That ant could not even understand what 'reading, writing or riding a bicycle' was!

With all our questions about God, we can stick to the explanation that God Himself has given about Himself. It is too much for a small child to understand that the great God in Heaven also wants to live in our heart.

I believe that the first seed of belief in God is sown at the moment that you acknowledge as a parent that not everything can be understood, but that it is still true!

Typical questions which arise in this phase include:

How can God hear me; do I have to shout?

Doesn't God have to take care of lots of people at the same time?

Does God know I live here? Aren't I too young for God? If I can't see Him, can God see me?

The primary school child (aged 7 to 11 years)

In this period, we fill children full of all kinds of information. It is the period of greatest learning. We can use this period to teach the child a great deal about God and His Word.

Belief and prayer will have to overcome the threshold of understanding. The child will make a more conscious choice to remain a friend of Jesus or to be a Christian. His/her knowledge of God helps him or her to place God in his/her life more solidly than the infant with its boundless imagination.

It is during this period that we actively point out the importance of the personal prayer by the child to God: the prayer which is spoken, for example, after we have put the child to bed and have prayed with them. You could encourage them by saying: "You won't forget to say your own prayers, will you?"

In this way we acknowledge that our child is growing up. We build up their independence. It implies that, while the child can still be carried along completely on the belief of its parents, the choices which he or she makes with regard to his or her belief and personal prayer will definitely have an effect. We always take our child seriously!

The pre-adolescent child (aged 11 to 14 years)

Whereas transfer of knowledge was the key issue in earlier years, the child will now begin to express an opinion for or against issues. His or her will power awakens, desires become clear, the body is developing. The child sets aside its 'childhood', while it still does not fit entirely into its fast-approaching mantle of adulthood.

This is the age when, in addition to knowledge (of God and the Bible), we can tell the child a great deal about the lives of Christians. What does Christendom entail, what are Christians, what has happened to them in history? What inspired people to lay down their lives for their faith? Why do

things such as missionaries, Christian Aid, Christian schools, political parties, exist? Why and for what purpose? What are the principles of Christianity? What is Christian ethic? And so on and so forth.

During this period there will be a sifting between 'real and unreal' in our religious upbringing.

Our family has two sons in this phase. Their questions force us to think about issues and to seek out the reasons underlying rituals or 'truths'. They have a right to expect that their parents know the answer or search for the answer with them!

It is the stormy phase in the child's religious upbringing! Jesus can silence the storms. It is better that He should do this than that we should attempt to master these 'storms' by smothering our children's awkward questions.

The essence of praying with children undergoes a test: Do I as mother or father believe that my prayers for my children are heard and are of value in their lives?

The family prayer continues to be present, alongside the personal prayer.

The growing adolescent needs space to make mistakes, including his or her relationship of faith with God. God gives people the space 'to walk away, to come to their senses, and to return!' We must dare to follow the example of 'The return of the Prodigal Son' with our children.

On the other hand, it is moving to see what positive and often radical' use teenagers make of this space. At the start of the New Year, several friends of our children went on a 'fasting' weekend (no eating or drinking), in order to pause together and consider the issue of hunger in the world. We did not expect to see any teenagers, but in fact hundreds of them came. The weekend was rounded off by the eating of a bowl of rice.

4. CONCLUSION

The prayers of parents are like 'arms' around their children. As the child grows older, these arms will open. More and more, the parents will have to respect their child's own identity, own colour and own choices. The purpose of our religious upbringing can be: to grow towards a shared belief, the shared prayers of two equal believers. God wants to hear our prayers!

I cannot force my children to believe.

I can do no more than live out my own faith as an example to my children. It is my faith in God that He will approach my children, at the moment that they turn their little faces in His direction. I pray for each of my children, that God Himself will show them Who He is! I could recount lots more fine things on that subject.

Matthew 16: 16-17

"Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God."
And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you Simon-Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father Who is in Heaven."