

Children & Prayer — The Power of a Praying Child

By Dr. David Ireland

I was not expecting this. My plan was to spend a few minutes in the prayer room after a global conference in South Korea. The room was humming with the sound of small voices. “God, give me Mexico!” came the plea from a corner of the prayer room. Another voice sobbed, “Lord, send me to Pakistan!” In the same moment I heard a third voice coming from a tiny prostrate figure cry, “Use me in Turkey.”

When I looked to see who was praying, my knees buckled as they hit the floor. My eyes flooded with tears. Instead of the customary die-hard intercessors, I was shocked to see little children—some as young as seven years old. Since it was nighttime, the kids had on their pajamas. One was fitted with Superman-looking nightwear; another looked like a little princess. But they were all eagerly seeking the Lord. The image of these pint-sized intercessors crying out before God became etched in my mind. It was *their* little voices that pleaded for Mexico, Pakistan, and Turkey.

I could hardly concentrate on my own prayers because my mind was racing a million miles a minute. These little kneeling warriors had exposed my ignorance about kids and prayer. My preconceived notions of chronological age and spiritual growth were being debunked—no, decimated. These children *knew how to pray*. They knew how to plead their cases before God’s throne of grace. There was no doubt; God’s throne room was just as accessible to His little subjects as it was to the adults in His kingdom.

These missionary kids were not asking God for a comfortable, middle-class life. They weren’t even asking for the latest electronic gadget—or an old version, for that matter. As I drew near, I felt their heart after God. These kids knew the power and necessity of prayer. Their parents lived on the front lines of Christianity. Some were stationed in countries with strict laws forbidding the propagation of Christianity. In fact, some of these nations have religious and cultural views that hold Christianity so objectionable that imprisonment or death awaits its followers. Despite the difficulty of living for Christ, these children were asking God to send them to dangerous places to serve.

I thought to myself, “If every parent could see and understand the power of praying kids, they would pay far more attention to their children’s spiritual development.” The fact that this book is in your hands speaks volumes about you. You care! You are convinced that your kids can learn how to pray. And you’re absolutely correct. Read on. I will teach you how to raise a child (or grandchild) who prays. It’s vital to attaining a flourishing Christian life.

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Although your kids will learn how to pray, they will still be kids. Sometimes cute prayers will emerge from their mouths because they are kids. One kid prayed:

Dear God, please take care of my daddy and my mommy and my sister and my brother and my doggy and me. Oh, please take care of Yourself, God. If anything happens to You, we're gonna be in a big mess.

Despite these laughable moments there will be serious ones that let us know they are just as connected with God as we are. Your kids can learn how to pray. They just need some guidance and patience. That is where you come in.

Learn more about Dr. Ireland's 30-day prayer challenge at:
familyprayerchallenge.com

Children & Prayer — A Praying Parent

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The apostle Paul had to point out Timothy's spiritual legacy. It was a vital part of who he was. It helped shape him as a man, a Christ-follower, and an emerging apostle.

Timothy's actions prompted Paul to write: "I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also" (2 Tim. 1:5).

Young Timothy became the recipient of a trans-generational legacy. Two generations of praying women shaped him from the inside out. Timothy's home life, created by the faith of his grandmother and mother, left an indelible mark on him. His grandma and mom were praying women. And their behavior shaped his. The stark reality is you cannot take someone where you've never been yourself. To raise praying children means that you must first have a measure of proficiency yourself. In the book *No Easy Road* Dick Eastman says: "To learn prayer we must pray. We only learn prayer's deepest depths in prayer, not from books. We reach prayer's highest heights in prayer, not from sermons."

Eastman's observation is not isolated. E. M. Bounds, the prolific author of numerous books on prayer, notes: "Prayer is a trade to be learned. We must be apprentices and serve our time at it. Painstaking care, much thought, practice and labor are required to be a skillful tradesman in praying." Would you attempt to teach your child to swim if you were uncomfortable in the water?

Susanna Wesley, the mother of John and Charles Wesley—founding brothers of the Methodist Church—had nineteen children. Seldom did she miss a daily hour of prayer. Even with the stress and time commitment of mothering, she made time to be with God. She had no private room or dedicated space in which to go and seek the Lord. Yet that didn't stop her. This habit made it easy for her to model prayer to her kids. Eastman documents Susanna's practice like this: "At her chosen time for spiritual exercise she would take her apron and pull it over her face. Her children were instructed never to disturb 'mother' when she was praying in her apron."

The sight of a praying parent leaves a huge impression on the soul of a child. It trumps any verbal instruction that you'll ever give to your little one on prayer. This observation caused leading pastor and author Rick Warren to say: "A dad stands tallest when he kneels to pray with his children."

Susanna Wesley taught each of her children the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9–12) as soon as they could speak. She made them recite it twice daily: when they woke and again at bedtime. As they got older, she added other elements to their prayer regimen. They would be taught to pray for their parents and some of the promises found in the Bible. This was all based on their stage of development and ability to memorize.

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Admittedly we're living in a different era with different cultural norms and expectations. But as Christians we should never veer from this parental target: "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it" (Prov. 22:6).

The Message puts it this way: "Point your kids in the right direction—when they're old they won't be lost." We cannot cave in to popular culture that suggests that we leave our children to form their own opinions about God, about faith, or about prayer. God demands us to take on the role of a teacher—a teacher of prayer. We come full circle to my point: to raise a child who prays, you must be a "pray-er"!

I saw the truth of this at a conference where the speaker kept me on the edge of my seat as she shared from the Word. Her sermon was on a topic I'd heard a thousand times: prayer. As a pastor for some thirty years, I had preached on it at least a hundred times. Yet there was something different in Theresa's preaching. Her knowledge was not simply academic. She was an experienced intercessor. But that wasn't all. I listened intently, trying to understand why such a basic subject kept hundreds of pastors in rapt attention. We were like clay in her hands.

I suspect most of us were seminary-trained. Preaching was our craft, our skill, and our area of proficiency. It's not easy for a preacher to render another preacher spellbound, but Theresa had "it." Halfway through the sermon the source of her anointing became clearer. She said, "As a child I used to wake up sometimes in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom, and I would see my dad in the living room on his knees praying. Sometimes I would hear his loud sobs as he asked God to save his children. He was praying for my soul. He was also praying for the conversion of my seven siblings."

At that she paused, as if she had momentarily left the room, taken captive by her vivid childhood memories of a praying father. It was so moving that I felt like I was carried along with her. It dawned on me; a praying parent is the best foundation for raising a praying child.

In fact, author and teacher Mark Batterson writes: "Prayer turns ordinary parents into prophets who shape the destinies of their children, grandchildren, and every generation that follows." Theresa's life and ministry testified of this fact. You don't have to be a perfect parent, but be a praying parent! God's involvement with the rearing of your child will fill in the parenting gaps that you were unable to perform.

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Children & Prayer — Jesus, The Praying Child

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Before there was a cross, there was a cradle. Jesus did not skip steps on the way to the cross. He had to progress through all of the ordinary, yet necessary, stages of human development. Scholars use the terms *very God* and *very man* to describe the unique nature of Jesus. He was totally God while at the same time totally man. His humanity did not take away from His divinity. His divinity did not suppress or deny His humanity. In fact, being human enabled Jesus to sympathize with our weaknesses, as our High Priest (Heb. 4:15). He accurately and compassionately brings our suffering before God's throne of grace.

Jesus's prayer life had a starting point, just like yours, mine, and our children's. Jesus was a baby, a preteen, a teenager, and a young adult before He made His mark on the world as an adult. The Bible gives us little bits and pieces of His life prior to adulthood. We have enough to form this conclusion: God does not wait until you're an adult to respond to your prayers.

Jesus, the Twelve-Year Old Prayer Warrior

At the age of twelve Jesus understood the importance and value of prayer. He participated in prayer—His Father's business—and other spiritual matters. Jesus made that point very clear to His earthly parents. Unbeknownst to Mary and Joseph, on their return trip home from the annual Feast of the Passover, Jesus stayed behind. Like all parents, when they realized He was not in the caravan with any of the other families, they returned to Jerusalem in search of their little boy. When they found Him, Jesus respectfully said: "Why were you searching for me? . . . Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" (Luke 2:49, NIV).

What did Jesus mean by this? What was this twelve-year-old doing? The answer is found when we understand what occurs in the temple. Years later, as an adult, Jesus said: "My house shall be called a *house of prayer* for all nations" (Mark 11:17, emphasis added). Jesus used the terms "My house" and "My Father's house" (John 2:16) interchangeably. Both terms reference the temple as a place of prayer, among other religious activities. Without reading anything into the text, we can easily see that Jesus prayed as a child.

If the Father valued, respected, and answered Jesus's prayers while a child, God also values the prayers of your children.

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The influence of Mary and Joseph

As parents Mary and Joseph created a certain home environment, family culture, and expectation about Jesus. Even if their influence on Him was limited, flawed, or partial, they still played a role in His spiritual development. Joseph was a carpenter (Matt. 13:55). Jesus became a carpenter (Mark 6:3). Jewish boys, in those days, went into the same line of business as their father. Becoming a carpenter was no accident. We know that parental influence was at work in Jesus's life. It didn't stop at His vocational choice. It extended into the whole of His life.

The religious practices of Mary and Joseph are without question. When Jesus was eight days old, like any good Jewish parents, they had Him named and circumcised (Luke 2:21). At the appropriate time they traveled to Jerusalem to dedicate Him to God, in accordance with the Law of Moses (Luke 2:22). Every year Mary and Joseph faithfully went to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of the Passover (Luke 2:41). It was during one of these annual visits that Jesus, at twelve years old, remained behind to pray and attend to His "Father's house."

The Bible doesn't detail all the things Jesus learned from the godliness of His parents. Even in their limited knowledge, imperfect lifestyle, and inadequacies in raising the Savior, they still played a critical part. Your role in the spiritual development of your child is invaluable. You cannot deflect it back to God. You cannot claim that your inadequacies disqualify you. Even if they do, you still cannot abdicate your role as an influencer. You can't even say: "My parents didn't teach me how to pray. Therefore, I lack the tools to teach my child." None of these excuses hold water even if they are true.

Your home is the number one influence in the life of your child. The average church has a child 1 percent of his time and the school for 16 percent, but the home for 83 percent of his time. This reality does not eliminate or reduce the need for churches or Christian schools to serve as positive spiritual training centers for your child, but it establishes the fact that your home dominates your child's world and you have an opportunity to maximize that benefit. You must take your role seriously!

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Children & Prayer — Your Child's First Prayer Lesson

By Dr. David Ireland

The first step in becoming a positive influence in the spiritual life and development of your child is in admitting your imperfection as a parent. My wife, Marlinda, and I sat across the dinner table from this young couple in our church. They are parents of two young children, both under the age of ten. A few minutes into our conversation Michele started crying. It was one of those silent cries. Tears rolled down her cheeks, but there was no noise. We waited patiently, silently, for her to tell us why she was crying. In a few moments Michele stammered: "I feel like such a bad mother."

The husband tried to console her, rubbing her back, silently but reassuringly. I understood his actions. So did Marlinda. As seasoned parents—at least that is how we appeared to them, having raised our children—the next words out of our mouths would mean the world to them.

I spoke first. I reassured Michele that the fact she was so broken up about not being the mom she envisioned probably proved just the opposite: she was a good mom! Her husband immediately chimed in, "You're a great mom, sweetheart. Our kids know that, and so do I." As Michele continued wiping the tears from her eyes, Marlinda spoke up, saying, "I know how you feel. I used to struggle with the same feelings when our daughters were little kids. You never think you're doing enough. You always think that you're falling short of the standard. I think we mothers set up an unreachable goal that keeps us in a vicious cycle of self-loathing and depression."

Michele's head bobbed up and down, affirming that's how she'd been feeling. We spent some more time reaffirming them and reminding them that parenting is a marathon, not a sixty-yard dash. But effective parenting begins when you realize that your kids are not looking for perfect parents. They are looking for loving parents. The spiritual formation of your children starts with your loving them. You cannot score an A-plus in every area of life or every stage in the parental process all the time. But you can love your kids throughout every stage of their development, even during some of their unpleasant moments.

Before you can effectively love your kids, though, you have to love yourself. This is also the starting point! If you think the worst about yourself, how will you teach or demonstrate to your kids that God has good things in store for them? Prayer starts with the premise: God loves me and wants my best.

Prayer will become a difficult task if the foundation of love is removed from our minds. That is why you have to learn to love yourself. Our parenting springs from this self-love. The effective parent teaches his child to love himself and behave accordingly. Most of this is nonverbal. It's modeled.

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Jesus was loved by His parents

Jesus's home life was a nurturing environment. Mary and Joseph loved Him. They also loved each other. Joseph took Mary to be his bride knowing she was pregnant—albeit by the Holy Spirit (Matt. 1:20). For him to wed Mary took a lot of courage and love. It tells us a lot about his character. Joseph even moved his young family out of the country to protect them from Herod's death sentence levied against Jewish boys born during the time of Jesus's birth (Matt. 2:13). This demonstrated his genuine love for Jesus and the preservation of His future—the call of God on His life.

We should not overlook these acts of love because they played an invaluable role in the spiritual formation of our Lord. The role of parents in the spiritual shaping of their children is to create a home environment that makes it easy for the child to locate and remain on the path of the divine. Mary and Joseph did that, and with God's help so can you.

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Children & Prayer — Teachable Moments with Your Child

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Spiritual instructions best occur in ordinary moments. This is why God said to the Israelites:

Therefore you must fix these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and bind them as a sign on your hand, so that they may be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall teach them to your children, speaking of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.

—Deuteronomy 11:18–19

When you draw spiritual lessons from the ordinary affairs of life, it shows that God is involved in everything. He is not just the “Sunday morning” God that we only visit during weekly worship. He’s the God of the entire week, even when we’re driving to the mall or the soccer game.

I recently learned that my wife, Marlinda, used to periodically pray with our youngest daughter when she drove her to school. As Jessica shared her challenges or interests, Marlinda would say, “Let’s pray now about those things.” She was teaching Jessica how to pray about the affairs of her day and her life. Today Jessica is an adult. Last year she and Marlinda went to a women’s conference together. Knowing that there were quite a number of mother-daughter groups present, the speaker invited the daughters to share with their mom one of their most enjoyable childhood moments together. Jessica told Marlinda that she enjoyed the moments they prayed together in the car going to school. Marlinda did not know those ordinary moments had such a profound effect on Jessica.

This is precisely why God instructed us to use life’s ordinary moments as teaching opportunities for our kids. As long as it’s not forced, scripted, or overwhelming, the opportunity can prove to be something special and memorable for both of you.

Limit the teaching moment.

The most powerful teaching moments are just that, a moment—a short span of time. It shouldn’t feel like an eternity. It should be special, like a snack. Eating an entire strawberry cheesecake is not a special treat if it’s a daily occurrence. That’s not even considered snacking.

It’s gluttony! A slice or two is a snack, but not an entire twelve-inch gourmet cheesecake with all of the fixings. Allow the Holy Spirit to lead you even in these mundane things. If your child seems uncomfortable or if you sense resistance, just change direction. Wait for a more opportune time to offer a spiritual lesson. You may share it at a time when you sense the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in a stronger way.

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If God gives you some insight about a spiritual truth, even in the middle of a very basic task, that is likely your best opportunity. Go for it!

Keep the goal in mind.

The teaching moment is not for you. It is for your children. Keep this as your goal, or the teaching moment will quickly become dysfunctional and weird. Teachable moments are precious when the lesson is positive and enlightening. In fact, the word *speaking*, as used in Deuteronomy 11:19, rarely has any connection with destructive speech. It is a natural conversation—an enjoyable talk. You'll know it's effective when your child starts asking questions and giving feedback. This shows that he's engaged.

Once these moments sound like a lecture, your child will simply detach and will soon come to despise these occasions. If your voice deepens like that of five-year-old Teddy when he prays, you're signaling to your child: "We're now going to have a *teachable moment about God*." Once he notices the change in your pitch, he'll turn a deaf ear, because it's clear to him you're about to lunge into a religious speech. Teachable moments benefit the child. Spiritual reprimands benefit you.

If you notice that your special moment is becoming a lecture, stop. Change the subject to something more pleasant. Pray about it later before bringing it up again. Ask God for strategy and insight to better introduce the subject to your child. Taking the needed time to bathe it in prayer is using wisdom and shows that you believe God cares about the spiritual welfare of your child.

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