

Teaching Covenant Children To Pray

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Prayer is necessary for Christians. Prayer is not merely an option for Christians, to be used or not as they see fit. Rather, the Christian man or woman is under a joyful and blessed obligation to pray. He has been so commanded in [I Thessalonians 5:17-18](#): “Pray without ceasing. In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.” Therefore, prayer is a significant part of the Christian’s life. Not only must he pray, but he must do so “without ceasing.” Lord’s Day 45 of the Heidelberg Catechism also indicates the important place of prayer in the Christian’s walk. The Catechism explains that prayer is necessary for Christians in part “because it is the chief part of thankfulness which God requires of us....” The Christian shows his thanks to God for God’s marvelous salvation of him in prayer. Prayer is necessary for Christians.

Prayer is necessary for all Christians. It is not only the mature Christians who are commanded to pray without ceasing. It is not only the mature Christians who must show their thankfulness to God chiefly through prayer. Also the newly converted Christians must pray. Also the children of believing parents must pray. All Christians must pray. All Christians must, therefore, learn to pray. The young child, the new convert, and the mature believer all must learn to pray in order that they might heed the command they have to pray and to show their thanksgiving to God. Here, we are especially interested in the covenant children who must learn to pray. How shall we teach them to pray? What role do the church, the home, and the school play in this instruction?

Before anyone undertakes to teach covenant children to pray, he himself must know how to pray. Just as the carpenter who intends to instruct his apprentice in how to build a house must first himself know how to build a house, so also the believer who intends to teach children to pray must first himself know how to pray. Christ instructed us how to pray in [Matthew 6:9-13](#) with the familiar words of the Lord’s Prayer. This prayer is explained for us in Lord’s Days 45-52 of the Heidelberg Catechism. Let every parent, pastor, and teacher study this instruction so that he may know how to instruct children.

Children must learn many things as they learn to pray. This is because God only hears prayers that are proper. Therefore, children must be taught to raise proper prayers to God. Question and Answer 117 of the Catechism teach us what a proper prayer is. “What are the requisites of that prayer, which is acceptable to God, and which he will hear? First, that we from the heart pray to the one true God only, who hath manifested himself in his Word....” In the first place, then, children must learn who God is. They must learn the true God, who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ. They must learn to know the true God as He has revealed Himself in Scripture. From their earliest years, they must be taught how God cared for and preserved and regulated the lives of His people in the Old Testament. They must learn God as the Creator in Genesis and as the Redeemer in Exodus. They must learn that He is a God Whose will is sovereign and Who gives His people His law. All of this, they must be taught about God so that they know to Whom they pray.

The Catechism continues explaining what a proper prayer is when it says that prayer is “for all things He hath commanded us to ask of Him.” In other words, prayer is not up to us. Just as we do not decide whether we will pray or not, so we do not decide what it is for which we will pray. God’s will must be the rule in all of our prayer. Therefore, children must be taught that they may not pray for the new bike that they sinfully covet. Rather, they must be taught to pray for God’s kingdom, God’s glory, forgiveness of sins, and the rest. They must be taught to pray in accordance with God’s will.

Children must not only know God in order to pray; they must also know themselves. This, the Catechism declares when it says, “[s]econdly, that we rightly and thoroughly know our need and misery, that so we may deeply humble ourselves in the presence of His divine majesty.” Children must know that they may not come before God in pride, but as creatures, and sinful creatures at that. Even the holy seraphim cover their faces and feet with their wings as they fly about God’s throne crying, “Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory” ([Isaiah 6:3](#)). Children must be taught that the utmost humility is needed in prayer, for in prayer they draw before God’s throne as His children. Children must be impressed with the fact of their own sin and misery and neediness so that in humility they draw before God’s face.

But the instruction must not stop there, for God’s view of us does not stop at our sins. He sees us in Christ, washed and cleansed and righteous with Christ’s righteousness so that though we come before Him humbly, we come before Him also in confidence. This, the Catechism teaches us when it says, “[T]hirdly, that we be fully persuaded that He, notwithstanding that we are unworthy of it, will, for the sake of Christ our Lord, certainly hear our prayer, as He has promised us in His Word.” Children must be taught that we come before God only in Christ Jesus. They must be taught to say “for Jesus’ sake” in their prayers, so that they are conscious of the only One in Whom they are heard. These are the things that children must be taught as they learn to pray.

The question arises how this instruction must be carried out practically in the home, church, and school. In the home, the children learn from godly parents how to pray. As father opens and closes each meal with prayer, the children listen and learn what petitions are proper in prayer. As mother prays with the children while father is at work, the children learn the humility and reverence with which prayer is conducted. Our covenant homes must be homes of prayer, not only because this is our command, but because our children will learn much in the home about prayer. If family prayer is not a part of the family life at home, prayer will not be important in the eyes of the children of that home. Therefore, there must be a time of day set aside for family devotions, in which the family gathers around God’s Word to be instructed by God and to pray to Him. This is usually done at the evening meal of the family, when all of the family is together. But more and more, our lives become busy. Not only the parents are busy, but the children also have soccer practice, sleepovers, and the like. It is especially difficult to find a time of day when the whole family is assembled as the children learn to drive and desire to spend more time with friends than at home. Godly parents must insist that each day, be it early morning, or the evening meal, or any other time that works, the entire family is gathered together for prayer. Parents can also instruct their children by teaching them simple prayers from their earliest years. Teach them to say “Lord, bless...” and “Lord, we thank Thee...” before and after they eat. Teach them the simple and easy to learn Lord’s Prayer. Teach them a prayer to say before they go to bed at night, so that in this way they memorize prayers and get in the habit of setting aside time each day to pray. Furthermore, parents can teach their children to pray without ceasing by praying with them at all times. Before and after meals, before and after discipline,

before leaving on vacation, before bedtime, before the activities of the day begin, and at all other events of the day, prayer can be raised. In this way, the children also learn to see that every single activity of the day is not isolated but has its meaning in God.

The church also teaches children to pray inasmuch as the preaching explains prayer. This is a powerful reason why the church ought to continue to insist on the preaching of the Heidelberg Catechism. There are eight entire Lord's Days devoted to explaining prayer to God's people. In this way, the church regularly receives instruction in the important activity of prayer. God's people are then able to explain to their little ones how to pray. But the children must be taught by the preaching itself. The preaching that reveals God and God's will, our own sinfulness, and Christ's covering blood must be applied to the children as well as the adults. In this way, the children will learn from the voice of Christ Himself how it is that they must pray.

The school, also, must teach children how to pray. Prayer must be an integral part of the school day so that children learn to pray among their peers. The teacher serves the same role as the parent in the home in teaching the children to pray in school, instructing them in the proper prayer and in the necessity of prayer. Time must be set aside in the school day as well when all of the students together sit around God's Word and then pray to Him as the teacher leads in prayer.

When children are taught to pray, God's name is glorified. This is the motivation for all parents, pastors, and teachers in teaching children to pray. Then, not only from the mouths and hearts of the older sheep, but also from the mouths and hearts of the littlest lambs is God's name praised. God help us in this task.

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