

Box A27

Papers for Parents

No. IX.

# HOW TO HELP BOYS AND GIRLS TO PRAY



Church of Scotland  
COMMITTEE ON THE RELIGIOUS  
INSTRUCTION OF YOUTH

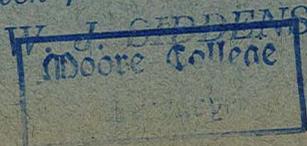
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5. GOD AND CHANGING CHILDHOOD.  
(years 8 to 11).
6. ENTERING THE 'TEENS.
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8. HOW TO HELP CHILDREN TO PRAY.
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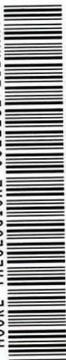
A Helpful Book on Prayer—  
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## How to Help Boys and Girls to Pray

FEW of us, who are parents, do not find difficulty in helping junior boys and girls to pray. Perhaps the greatest difficulty arises when a small child's prayers have been a prayer verse and "God bless Daddy and Mummie and make me a good boy." The junior boy or girl begins to feel he is too old to pray as he has done before; his prayers have become for him something babyish, and therefore to be put aside and disregarded.

Even when prayer has been something far more real to the small child, when he has learnt to speak with God naturally, in his own words, there comes a time when he feels that his speaking with God is not quite suitable; he feels he wants something more. He does not know how to pray in a suitable way according to his ideas of being a big boy. He feels, too, that often his prayers are not answered, and he can't understand why this should be so.

### *Characteristics of the Junior Child.*

Let us think of some of the characteristics of the junior child. He no longer considers himself

a child. He is a big boy in his own estimation, and he is firmly determined to put away childish things. He is very matter-of-fact and is beginning to question the truth of things. Perhaps he has been praying, "Please God make me a good boy," and he realizes that God does not make him a good boy, and he wants to know the reason why. He prays earnestly for something, and that something is not given, and he is worried over it. He is beginning to become reticent; he does not confide in you in the way he did, and he thinks it a babyish thing to pray "out loud."

Often, because we don't know how to help him to see what prayer really means, at this stage he stops praying altogether. This may mean that all through his life he will never pray except when he mumbles the Lord's Prayer in church, and thinks he is praying; or when someone he loves is very ill, and he utters his first real prayer that that person may be made well again.

#### *Our Task as Parents.*

What can we, as parents, do to remedy this? First of all we must have a real conviction in our own minds as to what prayer is; we must pray ourselves, and secondly we must think how we can make prayer real to our children, and how best we can help them to pray.

#### *What prayer is.*

Let us think very simply what prayer is. Prayer is speaking with God, talking to Him and listening to what He has to say to us; learning from Him what is His will for us, asking for help to do that will; telling Him when we have failed Him, saying we are sorry, and asking His help to do better; thanking Him for all His good gifts; asking help and guidance for ourselves and for other people.

#### *How to convey this idea of prayer to the child.*

Now how are we to convey this to our boys and girls? They won't want to talk to us about it. They certainly won't want to listen if we tell it to them in a merely pious manner. We must be prepared to help our children mostly by suggestion, always grasping the opportunity as it occurs, rather consulting our children than advising them.

Perhaps one evening you could suggest to your child that he is getting a big boy now, he can talk with Daddy about things, he can listen to what Daddy tells him, and so in a similar way a big boy like him is better able to talk with God, to listen to what God has to tell him, and to understand better what God wants him to do than when he was little.

You may remind him of the story of the boy Samuel hearing God's voice, and explain how people hear God speaking to them in their hearts. Tell him that God often speaks, but that people do not hear Him speaking because they never give themselves time to listen.

Tell him that it often helps grown-up people, if just before they begin to speak with God, they try first of all to think about God. He will know that Jesus came to show us what God is like, and he will probably have a few favourite New Testament stories. Give him pictures of these. Suggest that he look at a picture and then try for a few minutes to think about it. Take one of the healing pictures. Suppose you and he think of how wonderful Jesus was, never too tired to make sick people better, sad people glad. Then suggest that you and he might say "Thank you" to God for your health and strength. Tell him that to-day Jesus still heals by putting it into the minds of doctors and nurses to help sick people; it is He who gives the brains and the skill to surgeons and scientists, and for all that we give thanks. Perhaps he knows someone who is ill, and he may himself suggest praying for that sick person's recovery.

We must be absolutely frank as regards intercessory prayer with the junior child. Show him that it is not a question of trying to change

God's mind by our prayers, but that it is through us that God chooses to work. Tell him the illustration of the rose of the watering can (an illustration as suitable for him as for his younger brothers and sisters). If one of the holes of the rose is stopped up, the water cannot come out freely and evenly; so if we forget to pray for others one of the channels through which God sends His power and His help is stopped.

Ask him why God sometimes does not make a person better (he may know of people who are always ill). He won't be able to answer your question. Then is your opportunity to tell him quite simply that we do not know why this should be, but we do know that God, who is our Loving Father, knows what is best for that person, and that our prayers help him to bear his illness better, even if they are not answered in the way we should like.

If someone dies, tell him that God is answering our prayer. He has made that person better in His Heavenly Home, and though it is sad for us, yet the dear one is with Him, happy and well, and God has answered our prayer in His own way.

At first the junior will want to ask for material things for himself and his friends. "Please God, give Jimmy a new bicycle." "Please God, let me pass my exam." He is very perplexed when

the new bicycle does not appear, or the exam. is not passed.

Here again you can treat him as a "big" person and explain how Daddy does not always give him everything he asks for, because it would not be good for him. Then tell him that God, who knows each one of us and cares for and loves each one of us, does not always give to us what we ask for because He knows what is best for us.

He will gradually learn that it is better to pray, "Please God, help me to do my best in my exam." than just to ask that he should pass. Discuss with him if he thinks it is a good thing to pray, "Make me a good boy." He will at once see for himself how he would dislike God to treat him as a puppet, pulling one string to make him good, and that if that string were not pulled he would be bad. Explain how God has given to each of us a mind and a will, and that it is a splendid thing to do, the "trying to be good" ourselves with God's help; and that if we ask for His help God will always give it.

There was a little East-end London boy who went to camp for the first time. He was terribly homesick; he longed for the noise and glare of the London streets; he hated the quiet and loneliness of the country. His cub-master (he belonged to a pack of cubs) suggested that both

he and the boy should pray about it and see if that would help. They both prayed, but nothing happened, and the boy was as homesick as ever, and had eventually to be sent home. What was wrong? Was prayer of no use? The cub-master and the boy had both forgotten that God works through us. He does not pull a string and make us happy or unhappy. They were right in praying, but they forgot to do *their* share of the work. The cub-master should have given the boy some odd job to do in the camp; the boy should have been on the look-out for odd jobs to do. Then he would have been too busy to have felt homesick, and "God and himself" would have made him happy.

Perhaps your child may ask how he is to get the help he needs to be brave and kind, and happy and good. If he does, tell him the story of the Sabbath day that Jesus spent at Capernaum. Let him read for himself the verses in St. Mark's Gospel (Chap. i, 29-35). Let him try to make a picture for himself of that long, tiring day, how when Peter went early the next morning to awaken Jesus, he found that Jesus had gone away out to the hills to be alone with God, and that when He returned all His tiredness had gone and He looked like one who had got new power. Discuss with him why this should have been, and tell him that praying can have just

the same effect on his life and yours. By speaking to God and listening to what He says to us, we learn what is His will for us and we get power and help to do that will.

We should not force confession on the junior child. Often his so-called naughtiness is only wrongly expended energy. Often it is thoughtlessness, and is really our fault because we have not shown him that thoughtlessness has consequences for other people. Quite often, too, he does things just for the sake of adventure, or because he feels himself neglected, and he is not a bit sorry for what he has done.

Probably, therefore, confession should not be a regular part of prayer for the junior. Rather, when the occasion offers, suggest that we grieve God when we spoil His plan for our lives; that the only way to put that right is to tell Him we are sorry, and to ask His help to know what is His plan. Let us ask for strength and power to carry out that plan. Gradually, as "speaking to God" becomes natural to the child, he will himself know when he has been bad tempered, or selfish, or cross, or unkind, that God is grieving because he is not what he ought to be. He will feel ashamed, and will want to tell God that he is sorry. More than that, he will want to try to undo the consequences of his bad temper or selfishness by trying to be good tempered and

unselfish. He will, as he grows older, understand something of the holiness of God and how God expects His children to be holy, too. Help him by this illustration. If you were to go to Buckingham Palace to meet the King, you would be careful to wear your nicest clothes, to have no tears and no stains on them. So when we come into the presence of God, who is King of kings and speak with Him, we want to have no tears or stains; and that the only way to get rid of those stains or tears—of selfishness, bad temper or greediness, is to tell God we are sorry about them and then ask His help to put right the wrong thing we have done, and to try our best to be more unselfish, and better tempered. The junior child is very fair-minded, and will soon see that wrongdoing always does have consequences. Don't stress the consequences that come on himself. Often he will think that they are quite worth the adventure of wrongdoing. Stress rather the consequences for other people, and that will really mean something to him. "It is not of sin that we want the junior child to be most aware, but of the Divine God-planted impulse toward better things. It is the impulse toward right that makes the child conscious when he has done wrong. Just as a plant grows instinctively towards the light, so the child in all unconsciousness grows toward goodness if

only we give him the chance. Can we really know Him who is all goodness, except in so far as we ourselves are striving to be good?"

The junior child, though very independent, still feels deeply the need of someone's help; someone who will not make him do things, but who will help him to do things himself, someone whom he can follow along the pathway of life knowing that He is only a little way ahead, and that whenever we want Him, He is there to help and encourage us.

*How to help the junior to make a Prayer Book for him or herself.*

Suggest that it is a help to all of us to have a "Prayer Book" of our own. Sometimes we can't just think what we want to say to God, and when we read over one of the prayers in our "Prayer Book" it helps us. Get him a small loose-leaf note-book with not too many pages in it, help him to decorate the cover as beautifully as possible. Show him how to keep so many pages for "thank you" prayers, so many for "saying we are sorry" prayers, so many for "supplication" prayers—that is to say, prayers asking for help for ourselves; and so many for "intercessory" prayers—that is, asking God's help for other people. Suggest to him that whenever he finds a prayer that he specially likes he

might copy it into his "Prayer Book"; that he might have some pages where he could make lists of things he is specially thankful for, and also some pages for a list of people or work that he wants to ask God's help and blessing for. At the end of the "Prayer Book" it would be good to have a special Christmas prayer, an Easter prayer and a prayer that would help in times of sorrow. Help him to see that this "Prayer Book" is not a substitute for his own prayers but a help towards praying. And if you want this "Prayer Book" to be something real to him, you must use one yourself, and be willing to share some of the prayers in it with him.

*Special Note.*—A booklet for boys and girls themselves, entitled *Praying: Helps for Boys and Girls*, price 4d., is published in connection with this booklet.

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