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Our Children's Prayers.

RIGHTLY or wrongly, there is a general impression among thinking people that the children of homes which would claim the name of Christian are being sent into the world with little or no spiritual equipment for the battle of life. It is not sufficient that our children should develop into men and women merely morally sound. They must have as part and parcel of their being the strength and richness that only Christianity can give. Like the body, the soul and spirit can only attain perfection by slow, steady growth, and in the very weakness of infancy and youth lies the possibility and opportunity of the development of all three parts of human nature. To hamper and neglect the proper development of the soul and spirit, even though every attention is given to the welfare of the body, is both unwise and unfair. For instance, it is not sufficient to see that our children are physically fit, and that they are placed by their education and our own forethought on the sure path to worldly prosperity, and yet to fail to provide them with the spiritual equipment which will not only make prosperous days brighter, but will stand them in good stead even if health breaks down and fortunes vanish.

This question of the nurture and training of

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the souls of children is intensely practical, and should be the primary concern of all parents who have a real desire to do "the best" for their children. In spite of many flagrant exceptions, there has always been embedded deep in the heart of British parenthood the more or less conscious desire that GOD (and all that the word involves of standards of honour and righteousness and purity) should be a practical living reality in the lives of their offspring. Parents of this generation need to consider seriously whether the same desire is burning in themselves, or whether it is flickering out. There is no more serious question clamouring for attention. The hungry, restless souls of the young people of the present day are the fruitful soil for the devil's own seeds of discontent and frivolity. At whose door, it may be asked, does the responsibility lie? There is no denying the fact that the responsibility lies in the first instance with the parents, and little will be done in the way of permanent improvement until parents face and recognise this fact. Children are born not only to be safely launched in life, but also to be "brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord and to the praise of His holy Name."

Religious training is at once the right of the child and the duty of the parent. This granted, the next step is to consider when and how this training can be begun. Nature shows the way.

THE TRAINING OF THE UNBORN SOUL.

Even to the unborn babe the mother can communicate an inclination towards holiness by her own discipline in holy living. It is a point of honour with a woman that she shall do nothing to hinder the perfect formation of the body of her expected babe. The same law and duty holds good for the soul and spirit as for the body.

It was said of Charles Kingsley that his intense love of nature came from his mother, who put herself deliberately under the influence of beautiful scenes and sounds in the belief that she would transmit her impression to her unborn child. It is not unreasonable to suppose that the mother who at such a time sets herself resolutely to check the perverse and wayward traits in her own character, and to fill her mind with noble thoughts and inspirations, will bring into the world a child who has an instinct for high ideals—who, even if he proves to inherit her weaknesses, will prove also to possess a will and desire to overcome them. This innate power of motherhood surely lies at the back of that saying which every good mother hears with deep humility,—"most really great men have had good mothers."

THE BABY'S PRAYER.

But with infancy there comes the first opportunity for direct and definite training. The

infant child can be taught *the habit of prayer*. Every night and morning, after the bath which soothes and refreshes the tender frame, the little hands can be placed together in the attitude of prayer while the mother says such words as these, "GOD bless my child; may Thy holy angels keep guard over him this night (morning) to preserve him from all evil both in body and soul." Babies know from regularity of habit the time for food or for bath; they can learn in the same way the time for prayer. The next step follows quite naturally. The infant's habit of prayer becomes the child's conscious effort to pray; and the circle of petition widens to include not only himself but those nearest and dearest to him. The child-prayer, "God bless Father, Mother," has a world of meaning for the child-soul. This is his way of bringing his little world of his own accord into the protective guardianship of One whom he can trust. Baptized into the Name (i.e., power) of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, the new-born human soul looks to the human agency of the mother for means of entering by word and action into conscious communion with the life of God. Herein lies the vital importance of our little children's prayers. A poet, picturing the prayers that have just ascended to Heaven as flowers being arranged by one of the angels for presentation to GOD, beautifully describes one "hedgling

rose" sat apart by the sorter "from that tangled press."

"This," I heard him say,
"Is for the Master:" so upon his way
He would have passed; then I to him:—
"Whence is this rose, O thou of cherubim
The chiefest? knowst thou not?" he said and smiled,
"This is the first prayer of a little child."
—T. E. Brown.

THE PLACE OF PRAYER.

Many mothers have found it helpful to their children and conducive to reverence to assign one quiet spot in the nursery or bedroom for *the place of prayer*. Here pictures may be hung which will guide the mind to holy thoughts, such pictures for instance as the Good Shepherd carrying the little lamb, or the mothers bringing their little children to Jesus, or some Christmas or Easter card which conveys some definite spiritual message. A simple use like this is invaluable in forming habit, in checking wandering thoughts, and in making the approach to GOD a reverent reality. The value of prayer consists not only in the actual words uttered but also even more in that concentration and surrender of self which makes it possible both to hear GOD's voice and to feel GOD's presence. How difficult it must be then for a child to pray aright in a room where conversation is going on, or

where things are being done which distract his attention !

As soon as children are old enough to kneel alone, the parent would do well to *kneel beside the child*, for two very cogent reasons. First, the very act of kneeling together creates a bond of sympathy between them. This sympathy will help the parent to interpret the child's needs and so to guide his devotion aright, and will help the child to recognise and so respond to that guiding influence. The mother who kneels beside her little child will kneel beside the lad quite naturally as he passes through the stages of boyhood and youth, and will never cease to be his spiritual friend and confidante even beyond the days of his early manhood. Secondly, the act of kneeling together produces in the child's mind a clearer conception of GOD. It helps him to realize that GOD and parent are distinct personalities,—a distinction that is not always clear to the baby mind. Again, it helps him to realize that all those attributes which appeal to him most in the parent (love, mercy, justice) are reflections from the being of an all-perfect GOD. Finally, it helps him to realize that GOD is the GOD of his parents as well as his own GOD. Clearly then it is the duty of parents to see that their children pray, to choose a place for prayer that shall be helpful and suggestive, and to pray themselves with their children.

THE TIME OF PRAYER.

Further, there should be a *fixed time* for prayer. Some months ago a churchwoman teaching in a public school in one of our big cities asked her class of thirty girls to tell her by show of hands which of them said their prayers. She was shocked to find on a further show of hands that out of the bare majority of children who said their prayers at all only two or three prayed both night and morning. Such a state of things is a disgrace to a Christian community, and the knowledge of it should set the Christian conscience of the nation seeking the cause and the remedy. Now, setting aside the consideration of the ultimate cause, which does not concern this paper, it cannot be denied that in the first instance the offender is the home, the home that has a *fixed time* for most things, but no *fixed time* for prayer. Neglected opportunity is a woeful sin to lie at a parent's door. For in spite of all the increasing number of cares and pleasures that fill the lives of most parents to-day, the fact remains that one or the other can by a little thought and arrangement devote to their children's prayers some few moments at the beginning and the close of the children's day. Since, however, the timetable of no two households is exactly the same, it is impossible to do more than offer such suggestions as are capable of adaptation to a variety of circumstances.

Granted then that our children should be taught to pray every night and morning, it is suggested (1) that parents should fix for this purpose a period of five or ten minutes; (2) that this period shall be fixed for example half an hour before the breakfast time and half an hour before bedtime or at bedtime,—the great point is to fix some time and stick to it; (3) that parent and children shall regard the prayer time as binding upon them, to be abandoned or shifted only in the most exceptional circumstances; (4) that parents shall regard themselves as jointly responsible, father and mother each taking for example certain days or certain periods or certain children.

THE USE AND VALUE OF METHOD.

The next point for consideration is the use and value of *method* in children's prayers. Everyone is agreed that the best way of assisting the natural development of the powers of mind and body is by a process of ordered, progressive training. This law holds good also as regards the soul. Prayer is the exercise of the soul, a means by which the soul grows and develops. Prayer, too, should be an ordered, progressive process. The baby-prayer contains the germ of manhood's prayer, but the germ should be continually growing, expanding to meet every need

and development of the growing nature. Nothing is more pathetic than the inert, empty soul of the man who has not advanced beyond the prayers which were suitable for him in early childhood.

Perhaps it may be helpful to give here a method of prayer which has proved itself by *experience* to be of much value in the continuous training of children from the age of one to the age of sixteen. It is not possible to give more than a mere outline or plan, but perhaps such a limitation has its advantages, for parents should think out for themselves the best way of filling in the framework, as occasion arises, with those prayers which will best meet their children's needs at the time. It has been shown earlier in this paper how the mother's prayer over her infant may grow first into the unconscious and then into the conscious prayer-habit of the child. The following skeleton plan therefore begins with the child of one year, who should have reached the stage of conscious prayer. One striking point to notice in the plan is the fact that the little child's prayers consist of the very same features that constitute the prayers of manhood, and that each stage of growth demands the fuller expansion of one or more of those features.

PLAN OF GROWTH IN PRAYER.

AGE.	1-4.	4-7.	7-11.	11-14.
Preparation	Kneel. Hands together. Let us speak to GOD our Father in Heaven.	Kneel. Hands together. Shut eyes. Let us pray. OUR FATHER*	The same. Let us pray to GOD, Who is quite near to us. In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. OUR FATHER.	Collect thoughts. Say some text, e.g., Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see GOD. In the Name, etc. Lord, have mercy upon us; Christ have mercy upon us; Lord, have mercy upon us. OUR FATHER.
Thanksgiving	Thank GOD for taking care of me all through the day (night).	The same.	Thank GOD for protection, home, food, sleep, health, all blessings.	The same.

*OUR FATHER, i.e., the Lord's Prayer.

AGE.	1-4.	4-7.	7-11.	11-14.
Confession		Please, GOD, forgive me if I have grieved Thee this day.	<i>Self-examination.</i> (1) What have I said or done that I ought not to have done? I left undone that I ought to have done? Please, GOD, forgive me for . . . and for whatever else Thou hast seen amiss in me.	<i>Self-examination.</i> O God, help me by the light of Thy Holy Spirit to call to mind all the sins of the past day that Thou wouldst have me remember, and help me to repent of them truly. Same questions as before, and same prayer.

AGE.	I-4.	4-7.	7-II.	II-14.
Petition	May Thy holy angels keep me from all harm both in body and soul. Help me to be good and obedient, for Jesus' sake.	Help me to try my best to be good and obedient. May Thy holy angels keep guard over me to shield me from all harm both in body and soul.*	Help me to try very hard every day. Pray for grace to resist certain temptations and to conquer certain habits. Special petitions.	Same petitions as before. Grant, Lord, that I who in my baptism was sealed with the sign of the Cross may never be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified, but may manfully fight under His banner against sin, the world and the devil, and may continue Christ's faithful soldier and servant unto my life's end.
Intercession	GOD bless Father, Mother, etc,	GOD bless relations, friends, clergy, parish children in heathen lands, etc.	The same. Add missionary prayer (Heralds of the King).	The same.

*At this stage prayer-hymns are very helpful, e.g., "Jesus, tender Shepherd," "Now the day is over," and the like.

AGE.	I-4.	4-7.	7-II.	II-14.
Commendation			Into Thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit. May Thy holy angels keep guard over me this day (night), to preserve me from all evil both in body and soul.	The same.

AGE 14-16.—The same as II-14; but self-examination should be more detailed, and prayers and thanksgivings fuller. Add also the prayer at the beginning of the Communion Service, "Almighty GOD, unto whom all hearts be open"; and the morning hymn, "At Thy feet, O Christ, we lay" hymns (*Ancient & Modern 6*), and a prayer for GOD'S guidance in choosing a life-work.

PRAYERS IN CHURCH AND AT MEAL TIME.

The object of this paper is to deal with the direct personal training of the child in the practice of prayer. Hence no mention has been made of family prayer, for, though it is of incalculable value to the spiritual life of the family as a whole, it exercises only an indirect influence on each individual member. There remain, then, only two other points to emphasize, (1) the importance of teaching children to pray when entering and leaving church, (2) the value of the practice of saying grace before and after meals.

(1) The distressing experience of seeing young children who on entering church immediately sit down and stare about, or who loll forward gazing aimlessly at the hassock, is no uncommon experience. The children are not to blame. They know no better. How unkind it is to leave them stranded, when parents might teach them to kneel down reverently and offer themselves and their prayers to GOD! The following prayers are recommended as being short, simple and expressive.

Prayer on entering church :

May the words of my lips and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer. Amen.

Prayer on leaving church :

Grant, Lord, that the words that I have said and

sung I may believe in my heart and practise in my life, for Jesus Christ's sake. Amen.

(2) To turn to the second point, it would almost seem to a careful observer that the custom of saying grace before and after meals is dead or dying. In days not far away this was regarded as *the children's work*, their bit of personal service, each child taking his appointed turn of office. Is there no need for such a service from the children of to-day? What is the reason of its discontinuance? It cannot be that Australia scorns to ask GOD's blessing, and is content to use His bounteous gifts and stint Him of the praise and thanks? Rather must the blame rest on the careless negligence of the homes that have thriven and prospered and have forgotten GOD in the process. But it is not too late for parents of the present day to remedy the defect, and to restore the godly habit of "asking a blessing." The two following graces may be found useful:—

Before a meal :

Bless, O Lord, this food to our use and ourselves to Thy service, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

After a meal :

For these and all Thy mercies, Lord, we thank Thee, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Throughout this paper the writer has used the word *parent* intentionally, with the express

purpose of emphasizing a fact that is too often forgotten or ignored. While it is true that by nature and circumstance the mother must always be the chief factor in the training of a child, religious and otherwise, still it is equally true that there are many opportunities which the father can and should take as his share also. He can also supplement her work, and might well sometimes take his turn in her place. Practice will soon prove to him that the difficulties which he imagines are really no difficulties at all, and that these opportunities for his exercise of the priesthood of the family will bring fresh meaning into his own life. To both husband and wife alike belong the responsibility and the joy of training for GOD the children whom He has given them.

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