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CHAPTER 1

Giving Our Children the Best

Half an hour of prayer, morning or evening, every day, may be a greater element in shaping our course than all our conduct and all our thought.

P. T. Forsyth

Today, sending our children to school to learn the basics is just a beginning. We want the best for our children, so we make sure we do all we can for them.

We teach our children to ride bikes, skate, swim, and ski. We sign them up early for baseball, soccer, football, hockey, and/or basketball, and we send them to sports camps in the summer. You may offer your children the musical arts: piano, violin, voice lessons, guitar, and, if they must, drums. Also, if you or your children are so inclined, there is dance, ballet, gymnastics, tumbling, and/or trampoline. You can enroll your children in acting, stage, performance classes, and even modeling. And afterward you can find them an agent.

Some parents hire tutors for extra help, take their children to second-language schools after their regular schooling, enroll them in night school or weekend community courses, and/or

take them to summer school. They don't do this because their children are behind; they want to help them get ahead.

It may seem funny to see it all listed like this, yet the time spent driving, enrolling children in lessons, attending concerts, practices, games, recitals, and auditions is serious, valuable time. We want our children to develop fully their talents, abilities, and character. We can buy books that will help us teach our children manners, values, virtues, and assertiveness. There are books to teach them how to handle finances, get better grades, discover their personality types, learn business basics, conquer public speaking, and be politicians. (Well, I haven't seen that one yet, but I'm sure it won't be long.)

So, why do we do it? Because we love our children and want the best for them. This is as it should be.

Giving the Very Best: Prayer

As important as all these skills and experiences are, there is something far more important—something that is foundational for all

of life, something that will truly equip our children for whatever their futures hold. This something is prayer.

Teaching our children to pray will truly prepare them for life and equip them to face everything life has to offer.

Jesus once scolded the religious leaders because even though they were careful to give exactly 10 percent of their spices to the temple, they were not treating people very well. He wasn't saying they shouldn't give a portion of their spices to God; He was drawing a contrast that highlighted their lack of proper focus. In a similar way, all these things we teach our children are important, and the activities and tasks can better prepare them for life, but, in comparison to the importance and benefit of teaching our children to pray, they are like giving 10 percent of our spices.

Teaching our children to pray will truly prepare them for life and equip them to face everything life has to offer. By teaching them to pray, we will be teaching our children to communicate with the One who is their Creator, Father, Teacher, and Guide—

the One who loves them more than we can imagine.

Teaching our children to pray will put them in touch with the Father who not only wants the best for them but who knows what that best is and has the power and resources to deliver. Jesus compared our ability to give to our children to God's ability when He said, "If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!" (Matthew 7:11).

A recent Gallup survey published in *Parenting* magazine revealed that about 65 percent of parents pray with their children before bed and at mealtimes.¹ This suggests that as parents we have a heart for prayer and acknowledge prayer's importance. But, although bedtime and mealtime are great places to start, teaching a child to pray must go beyond those times.

Reflections

1. What role does prayer play in your family's life? In your relationships with your children?

2. What are some things you want for your children? How can teaching them about prayer help them get those things?

The Benefits of Prayer Lessons

When my wife, Elaine, and I enrolled our daughters in violin, we considered the benefits first: (1) learning music basics while young seemed easier for them, and the learning would become natural; (2) the classes would be fun and rewarding and would give our daughters an appreciation for music; (3) the lessons

would help them to learn the discipline that regular practice brings.

Every parent wants to see the success and promotion of their children. As an audience, we constantly rejoice over Cinderella stories. The low, humble but beautiful, and often sweet-spirited child is whisked away from trouble in Plainville and given a place among royalty. Childhood stories from *Rumpelstiltskin* to *The Prince and the Pauper* to Disney's recent adaptations of *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Little Mermaid*, and *Aladdin* all carry this familiar theme.

This is closer to reality than you might think for we have an invitation from the King of all kings for our children to go to heaven—the ultimate palace. Here all can receive status as part of the royal family of God. But this invitation to heaven is not simply to attend. It's an invitation to sit, talk with, and get to know the One who is all-powerful and in charge of everything. It's an invitation for our children to become permanent members of that family and enjoy its benefits. And membership with its benefits begins before their arrival in heaven; it begins right here on earth.

Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (Mark 10:14).

God's offer to all—children and adults—to enter His kingdom includes knowing and experiencing God's presence. Consider these verses:

"Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you," declares the LORD. (Jeremiah 29:12–14)

Jesus replied, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him." (John 14:23; see also Jeremiah 24:7 and James 4:8)

When we teach our children not only to pray but to have prayer as part of the *foundation* of their lives and who they are, we give them the ultimate gifts, benefits, and blessings that life has to offer: an audience with and the friendship of God.

Let's consider prayer in a way similar to how we consider music lessons. What advantages does a regular and healthy prayer life bring to our children? Many! The advantages flow out of that relationship with God. The Bible, God's Word, clearly describes several of these benefits, ranging from a better inner life to promotion and honor.

1. A Better Inner Life

When we teach our children to pray, they learn about the joy and peace that are available to them. That joy and peace exceeds anything we can personally offer them, for God, unlike us, is always there to hear and to help. There is the promise of perfect peace (Isaiah 26:3), the joy of God's presence that chases away fear (Psalm 21:6-7), and a reason to have joyful hearts (Psalm 105:3).

Two New Testament writers describe the joy and peace that come through prayer:

Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, *and your joy will be complete.* (John 16:24, italics added in this and remaining Scriptures for emphasis)

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And *the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.* (Philippians 4:6-7, italics added)

2. Personal Growth

All parents desire personal growth for their children. We want our sons and daughters to grow in understanding, wisdom, and the fullness of God. Through prayer, our children can have such growth:

If you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God. *For the LORD gives wisdom,*

When we teach our children to pray, they learn about the joy and peace that are available to them.

and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.
(Proverbs 2:3–6, italics added)

To know this love that surpasses knowledge—that *you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.* (Ephesians 3:19, italics added; see also Psalm 119:26 and Jeremiah 33:3)

3. Strength and Courage

Our children’s fears may seem silly at times, but they are real. And as our children grow into teens and adults, the fears do not go away; they merely change in type. By giving our children the resource of prayer, we provide them with the strength, even courage, to face their world. The Scriptures describe the answers that come through prayer:

I sought the LORD, and he answered me; *he delivered me from all my fears. Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame.* (Psalm 34:4–5, italics added)

When I called, *you answered me; you made me bold and stout-hearted.* (Psalm 138:3, italics added; see also 1 Chronicles 16:11, Lamentations 3:57, and Acts 4:31)

4. Protection and Rescue from Harm and Evil

Many issues threaten our children today, ranging from violent crime to drug abuse. There is also the threat of evil influence. Through our prayers and theirs come protection and deliverance from harm’s way:

The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears them; *he delivers them from all their troubles.* (Psalm 34:17, italics added; see also Psalm 22:4 and Matthew 6:13)

5. Purpose, Guidance, and Direction for Their Lives

God desires that we and our children call upon Him for guidance and direction in our lives. He has a purpose for each of us, and He promises to fulfill His purpose when we ask:

I cry out to God Most High, to God, *who fulfills his purpose for me.*
(Psalm 57:2, italics added; see also Proverbs 3:4–6 and James 1:5)

6. Provision

Our children pray to a loving Father, who has both the desire and

power to grant them all that they (and we) need. All they need to do is ask for His provision. As Jesus told His listeners, if a son can rightly expect his earthly father to give him food and good gifts, “how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!” (Matthew 7:9–11, italics added).

Here are two New Testament passages that note how our gracious God will give to those who seek after Him:

So do not worry, saying, “What shall we eat?” or “What shall we drink?” or “What shall we wear?” For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, *and all these things will be given to you as well.* (Matthew 6:31–33, italics added)

He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, *graciously give us all things?* (Romans 8:32, italics added)

7. Fulfillment of Desires

Another benefit of prayer is that God fulfills our desires. Through prayer and a deepening relationship we learn to delight in Him and He begins to fulfill the desires of our hearts:

Delight yourself in the LORD and *he will give you the desires of your heart.* (Psalm 37:4, italics added; see also Psalm 21:2 and Proverbs 10:24)

8. Help and Encouragement

Through their prayers, our children can find help and encouragement for their everyday activities. As a Father, God listens, comforts, and sheds grace upon our children as they pray to Him:

Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may *receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.* (Hebrews 4:16, italics added; see also Psalm 10:17)

9. Promotion and Honor

Finally, God exalts and honors those who honor Him:

No one from the east or the west or from the desert can exalt a man. But it is God who judges: He brings one down, *he exalts another.* (Psalm 75:6–7, italics added; see also 1 Samuel 2:7)

Humble yourselves before the Lord, and *he will lift you up.*
(James 4:10, italics added)

If I said to you, “I have the secret that will help you raise children who are at peace inside, are always growing personally, are courageous, have a strong character, stay out of trouble, and steer clear of evil,” would you want to know that secret? If this secret also gave your children a solid sense of direction and purpose—all that they need and then some—and would make them honored and thought highly of by their friends and peers, would you want to know it?

The secret is simple: Teach them to pray.

Made for Prayer

If we go back to the very beginning we see that prayer, communication with God, has always been central. Adam and Eve’s relationship with God developed through conversations with Him—through prayer. We know they were accustomed to spending

time with God in the garden for they recognized His presence because of a familiar sound and did not show any surprise when He talked to them (Genesis 3:8–10). However, the straightforward, loving communication between God and humankind was short-circuited because of sin, guilt, and each person’s desire to seek self. But God created us to communicate with Him.

Humans are engineered for religious faith.

We are designed for prayer. Therefore,

even though sin has interfered with the communication channels, the call in our hearts to pray still survives.

Prayer is a concept that every culture and every people throughout time have understood. As far back as historians and archaeologists can find, there is evidence that people had some concept and practice of prayer.²

Today, prayer is a hot topic. “Faith and Healing” became the *Time* magazine cover story for the June 24, 1996, issue. The subtitle for the lead article read, “Can prayer, faith and spirituality really improve your physical health? A growing and surprising body of scientific evidence says they can.” The article reported

the highlights of some of the more than two hundred studies that have been done on the role and effect of religious issues in our lives. Those studies consistently concluded that religious faith, church attendance, and prayer seemed to increase the quality of life.³ Prayer is everywhere today because it works!

Harvard's Herbert Benson, author of many studies on the effects of religious faith on healing, tells us another reason prayer is so pervasive: We are actually engineered for religious faith. "Humans are . . . wired for God."⁴ God created men and women to communicate with and receive from Him. That was the original intent of prayer.

The purpose for creation was to serve people. The purpose for people was to be God's children and to receive His love.

Our Greatest Blessing

Jesus said that the two greatest commandments were to love God and to love others (Matthew 22:37–40). Since we know that God is love and, therefore, completely unselfish, we know that everything He requires of us is for our own good and benefit, not His. Therefore, God's greatest commands must point us toward life's greatest blessings.

The greatest and highest blessing and pleasure that we can have is to have a healthy, growing relationship with God our Father and Creator. The second greatest blessing is to have healthy, growing, loving relationships with others. These are to be the two focal points of our existence, and the keys to our fulfillment. Everything else is sets and props.

Since this is true, and we see all around us the spectacular balance, intricacy, and interdependence of creation, it's easy to conclude that God designed everything else in harmony with these two original objectives or ultimate blessings.

All the studies being done today in the name of science and medical research confirm again and again that this is true. When we function according to God's design, with faith in Him and at peace with others, we are healthier, live longer, and enjoy life.

God, in designing us, designed every part of us and everything around us to be in harmony and absolute agreement with the purpose and blessings for which He created us. It's like the cars we drive. When cars are built, the goal is practical conve-

nience and enjoyable transportation. Everything that is built into cars is put there to serve this purpose and to work in cooperation with every other part. In a similar way, all the natural factors around us, and especially in our own bodies, cooperate with God's design. We pray. We relax. Peace comes.

When we teach our children to pray, we hand them the keys to life. When we don't, they possess a beautiful car designed to take them practically, conveniently, and enjoyably on life's journey, yet they are forced to walk because they don't have the keys.

Like us, our children are designed for prayer. Jesus invites all of us to enter into the greatest blessing we can experience: a relationship with God. In that relationship, all things become possible.

- Prayer reveals God's favor and purpose.
- Prayer demonstrates God's love.
- Prayer offers us access to truth, wisdom, and understanding.
- Prayer lets us enter into real life.
- Prayer brings joy and peace.
- Prayer offers us guidance and direction.
- Prayer gives us strength to resist temptation and to avoid evil.
- Prayer helps us to avoid and/or solve troubles and problems.
- Prayer transforms lives by God's grace at work in hearts.
- Through prayer, we receive answers to everyday requests.
- Through prayer, miracles become possible.
- Through prayer, the desires of our hearts are granted.

Prayer Is Not the Goal

Now, in case you're wondering, I am not saying that prayer is an end in itself or something that we just add into the mix of our children's lives to give them yet another advantage among advantages. In fact, I'm saying the opposite. Prayer is not an addition to their lives. Prayer is part of the very foundation of their lives. It is one of the most important things our children need to learn.

Also, the long list of advantages we've considered doesn't just happen because we teach our children to spend a certain amount of time on their knees repeating prayers or giving God today's shopping list. Although extended time and multiple requests sometimes are part of our prayers, those times in themselves are

not prayer. Teaching our children to pray is teaching them to communicate and grow in a relationship with God as they seek Him and His will. It's a life of prayer or growing with God that yields these benefits.

Prayer is not an end in itself. Nor should it be a way of merely accessing these benefits. Prayer is the gateway to God's love.

Questions

1. List five ways you can give prayer a more central role in your family's life.

2. What are some things—such as a busy schedule, misplaced priorities, or financial concerns—that get in the way of your family's prayer life?

Take time to set these things before God in prayer and ask Him to help you incorporate more time for prayer into your family's daily and weekly routine.

Ideas for Prayer

- Thank God for the joy of spending time with Him in prayer.
- Ask God to help you give your children the best, in everything.
- Ask God to help you make spiritual teaching and training a priority in your home.

Prayer for Kids

Here is a sample prayer your children could pray.

“Thank You, Lord, that You want to be my heavenly Father and take care of me and show me how to be wise. Please help me to do things Your way. Also, please help me learn how to pray. In Jesus’ name, amen.”

1. “The Parenting Poll,” *Parenting*, December/January 1996, 123.
2. Plutarch, the Greek biographer and historian who lived almost two thousand years ago, said, “If we traverse the world, it is possible to find cities without walls, without letters, without wealth, without coin, without schools or theaters: but a city without a temple, or that practices not worship, prayers and the like, no one has ever seen.” C. L. Sulzberger, *Go Gentle into the Good Night* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1976), 24.
3. Claudia Wallis, “Faith & Healing,” *Time*, 24 June 1996.
4. Quoted in Wallis, *Time*, 24 June 1996, 61.