

JACK'S CORNER

QUESTION: My wife and I have noticed that our son's prayers are just "give me" this and "give me" that. How can we teach him to focus on other things?

ANSWER: Listening to someone's prayers (or lack of prayers) speaks volumes about his character, level of spiritual maturity, empathy and awareness. Jesus said: "Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks." A person's words, especially to God, are windows to observe his heart. Your concerns are valid.

Sadly, it is quite common for children (and many adults) to focus on "gimme" prayers. In addition, it is popular in many churches to emphasize the "bless me" aspect of our prayer relationship with God. We are selfish and self-absorbed by our very nature. In suburbia, our affluence and busy-ness exacerbate and amplify this problem (sin). In contrast, altruism and empathy are to an overwhelmingly great extent learned behaviors. Parents have the godly responsibility to teach and model these behaviors.

Even without knowing your son's age, I can tell you that any child over 3 can understand the concept of at least two kinds of prayers: "help prayers" and "thank you" prayers. As you pray with your son every night, spend equal time on both. Ask him to think of people and situations that need "help" from God and situations that deserve a "thank you". Teach him the "Lord's Prayer" with some age appropriate explanation. As he grows older, memorized prayers are a source of familiarity, security and comfort. On the other hand, impromptu prayers are important to develop thoughtfulness and ease in situations where praying is done out loud.

By ages 8 to 10, you can help him use and understand a variety of prayers using the "ACTS" acronym (prayers of Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication). Have your son watch the news with you to help develop empathy and compassion for our world as well as to provide material for prayers. Appreciativeness and thankfulness will come along in the package. Most churches also have some kind of a weekly prayer list that you can read over with your son for some closer to home prayer ideas. Involve you family in a variety of service opportunities to provide more prayer material. Keep a prayer journal so your son can track God's responses and can remind himself of specific ongoing prayers. Don't

forget to share with your son the Bible stories and promises relating to steadfast and godly prayers. Finally be prepared to answer his questions about why prayers are not always answered the way we would like.

We know from research that parents are the most influential and powerful assets in the lives of their children. A father's influence on his son is incalculable. Model thoughtful, compassionate and thankful prayers as you pray aloud. Fathers should be the initiators and leaders of prayer in their homes. Your son will listen to what you say and remember under what circumstances you say it. Watch for opportunities to pray! When you leave for a trip, spend some time in prayer in your car before you leave. When you narrowly miss an accident, stop and say a prayer of thanksgiving. Say a prayer of blessing and thankfulness out loud over you son everyday. When you have enjoyed a great experience, don't forget to stop and thank God. When you wrong your son, pray a confessional prayer with him. Let your son see you as a man of prayer in everything you do.

Bottom line: you can't make your son's heart pray like Christ. Only the Holy Spirit can do that. You can, however, watch for pray for and create opportunities where prayer is attractive and powerful. You can be a parent whose prayer life is wonderfully seductive to your son. As with most struggles involving our children, God will do as great a work in you as he will in your son!

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