

Way to Pray!

How to make the ACTS prayer method accessible to your child.

By Greg Asimakoupoulos

When Norma Steven's four children were younger, she had a clever way to make them mind their manners. Using the tune to "Jesus Loves Me," Norma would sing, *"Please and thank you, pardon me, very little words you see, yet they can distinctly tell if a child's been brought up well."*

The rote prayers we use to introduce our kids to communicating with God are just as catchy. But children need to learn how to talk to God about more than eating and sleeping. Meaningful conversation with the Lord is more than parroting "God is great, God is good" before diving into a plate of spaghetti.

Although I've benefited from the ACTS (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication) method of prayer, it's far too complicated for young children. After all, the words *adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication* aren't part of their basic vocabulary. Curiously, each of those four categories relates to a phrase with which our children are quite familiar—and can open the door to genuine communication with their Heavenly Father.

I love you!

Adoration is nothing more than telling God we love him. Kids know what it means to express love to those they care about. They demonstrate their heartfelt affection to pets, grandparents, and parents (if not their siblings!) with hugs, drawings, or priceless words.

For children, communicating love is a natural response to feeling loved. So we need to help our little ones see the many ways God shows his love to them. Reminding them God sent Jesus into the world is a big part of that assignment, but there's more. God's love is seen in his desire to forgive us when we make mistakes. It's also seen in the beauty of his creation and in his provision of family and special friends.

When we help our kids understand how much God loves them, they'll be more inclined to express their love to him. Along with saying "I love you" to your kids daily, why not encourage them to tell the Lord how they feel about him every day?

For Jody Moreen, expressing affection to God is a priceless privilege. Having grown up without a relationship with her birth parents, she never was able to tell her earthly dad she loved him. But

she could tell her Heavenly Father. While Jody and Scott Moreen raised their three boys, they determined to teach their kids how they could communicate love to God.

"We told our boys prayer was as normal as breathing," Jody explains. "To model that, we intentionally prayed simple prayers at meals, bedtime, and before school. We wanted them to know God is our 24-hour Wonderful Counselor, and that he's accessible anytime."

I'm sorry!

Children aren't capable of understanding the theological basis and consequences of confession and absolution, but they sure do know what it means to say, "I'm sorry." Our calling as parents is to move beyond coaching our kids to apologize to a sibling or a friend to explaining that all misdeeds ultimately are an offense against a holy God. We're to help our kids seek the Lord's forgiveness by encouraging them to ask to be forgiven.

For David Brown, pastor to children and families at the Evangelical Covenant Church in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, prayers of confession need to be kept simple. "I've always encouraged parents to help their kids see how uncomplicated prayer is," Brown says. "I tell them God wants to hear the feelings of our heart in our own words. And that includes what I call 'sorry' prayers. When we confess our sins to God, it should be just as straightforward as when we tell others we're sorry for something we did wrong."

Once our sons and daughters know that admitting guilt results in feeling clean inside, they'll be more eager to say, "I'm sorry, Lord!" Obviously, if we're quick to wipe the slate clean when they apologize to us, they'll be more inclined to take their chances of confessing mistakes to a Father they cannot see.

Thank you!

Thanksgiving isn't a once-a-year holiday for pigging out. It's an action that indicates our awareness of God's goodness. Fortunately, if we've been manners-conscious in our parenting from the get-go, our kids will have learned the importance of expressing gratitude to those who act generously toward them early on.

My friend Dave Veerman wanted to find a practical way to help his daughters open their hearts to the Lord about the little and big issues of their young lives. He knew that Kara and Dana were exposed to prayer. He was even convinced they realized the importance of prayer. After all, the girls heard their dad and mom pray all the time.

"My girls knew prayer was a value in our family," Dave told me, "but passing on a value is not the same thing as teaching a skill. I knew I needed to find a way to help them grasp the mechanics of talking to God."

One day when Dana said "thank you" to her dad when he helped her with something that was too hard for her to do on her own, Dave had an idea. If his little girl knew how to express appreciation to her parents for the good things they did for her, she surely could use the same two words to let her Heavenly Father know she was grateful. He encouraged her to be mindful of

ways God was looking out for her and letting him know she appreciated it with a simple "Thanks, Lord!"

For Dave, helping his daughter understand the "thanksgiving" component of ACTS was achieved by piggybacking on a concept with which she already was familiar. By seizing the opportunity of an unplanned moment, a dad taught his daughter how easy it is to express thanks to God at any time.

Using the ordinary events and conversations of everyday life to convey spiritual truth isn't a new concept. That's exactly what the Lord instructed Moses to pass on to the children of Israel three thousand years ago. In Deuteronomy 6:6-7, God said, "These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up."

Finding teachable moments may not be as difficult as you might think. For my buddy Dave, teaching the simplicity of prayer was as easy as catching his daughter being grateful and taking his cues from that.

Please!

Supplication is what "S" stands for in the ACTS prayer acronym. It's just a fancy word for respectfully asking a favor. The operative adverb is *respectfully*.

If you're like most parents, your first attempts at civilizing that self-centered descendent of Adam in diapers involved the word "please." "Say please, Nathan," you countered as that strong-willed son of yours asked for something you alone could provide. Even if the object your toddler requested was something as benign as more milk or another glass of apple juice, you did well to insist on a less demanding petition. By insisting on "please" when petitions are made of others, we teach our kids they aren't as entitled as they might think they are. We help them place themselves in a position of undeserving dependence.

Our task is to help our kids see that a one-word prayer such as "please" is one God applauds. After all, Jesus encouraged us to ask, seek, and knock for what we believe we need. He also challenged his disciples (and us) to think of themselves as children who readily ask their Heavenly Father for all the necessities of life.

"Please" is a prayer our children should be empowered to pray everyday. It's a word that reminds them to ask for whatever they feel they need. From the courage to stand up to the schoolyard bully to praying for a grandfather who's recovering from heart surgery, our kids need to know God wants them to approach him with their hearts' desires.

Isn't it amazing? Words we've normally associated with growing polite kids actually serve to help them grow in their ability to talk to the Lord. These phrases can simplify the mystery of prayer so our kids can pray throughout the day without the need for a huge theological vocabulary.

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