

# Total Family Makeover



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# Total Family MAKEOVER

8

Practical Steps to Making Disciples  
at Home

Abingdon Press  
Nashville

TOTAL FAMILY MAKEOVER  
8 PRACTICAL STEPS TO MAKING DISCIPLES AT HOME

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*To my mentor Deb Taylor. You are who I want to be when I grow up. Your authenticity, generosity, and love for people is contagious. Thank you for loving me so well for so many years and showing me what a family following Jesus looks like!*



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## FOREWORD

I have struggled with nighttime anxiety for years. I wake up and I think of all the ways in which I'm failing as a mom and what I need to do to be better. There's so much it seems, and I keep dropping the ball. I feel responsible to teach and train my children, and it's true: I am responsible. God made me my kids' mom. But I have been carrying a weight God didn't intend. I can't be a perfect mom, and I won't get it all right. I remember I had a mentor in college and I asked her, "What do you wish you would have done better as a parent?" And she answered, "I would have done everything right." Isn't that just the thing? We wish we could get it all right? But Melissa reminds us in *Total Family Makeover* that even though God modeled perfect parenting, and He loved perfectly, His children still disobeyed. We can guide and instruct and do our best with who we are and what our capacity is, through God's grace and strength, but at the end of the day, we cannot save our children. We cannot carry the weight of their ultimate behavior, whether good or bad. It's the Lord's kindness and grace and the work of the Holy Spirit that will mold their hearts for His glory.

But there is still this instruction in Scripture to teach and train our children. And I want to tell them about the God I love, but sometimes I feel like I'm floundering. How exactly do I disciple my children? For some of us, discipleship in a family was never modeled. Maybe like me, you weren't brought up in a Christian family and so you're figuring it all out as you go along. You're not alone. Or maybe you were in a wonderful Christian family, but you still

## FOREWORD

feel a bit lost. Melissa offers us a practical, grace-filled “track” as she calls it to run on. She shows us through example and Scripture eight ways to disciple our children. And it doesn’t feel heavy or legalistic, but doable and true and freedom-based. I love how Melissa encourages us to shift our focus from our children’s behavior to the joy-filled adventure of teaching them. Yes, that’s what I want! I want to experience joy and freedom in teaching and leading them to God’s heart so that they may know Him intimately.

*And Solomon, my son, learn to know the God of your ancestors intimately. Worship and serve him with your whole heart and a willing mind. For the LORD sees every heart and knows every plan and thought. If you seek him, you will find him.*

(1 Chronicles 28:9a)

*Total Family Makeover* is much-needed truth for moms. Melissa’s words are like hands that gently lift the heavy burden so many of us wear.

As she says, God doesn’t grade himself according to his children’s successes and failures, and neither should we.

Enjoy this book, friends, it is a gift. We don’t need to make discipling complicated or painstaking or figure it all out perfectly. We begin by taking one step. And then a second. And when we’re ready, a third. Let this beautiful book be one of your guides.

Sarah Mae

Coauthor of *Desperate: Hope for the Mom Who Needs to Breathe*

# INTRODUCTION

## YOUR KIDS ARE NOT YOUR REPORT CARD

**O**ne day during church a children’s ministry leader motioned for me to leave the service with her. In the hallway, she asked if I knew the parents of a certain child and requested my help in locating them. Their daughter had been scratched in the face by another three-year-old in class, and she needed to inform the parents. She didn’t know the details or which child was the scratcher. When we arrived at the classroom, I discovered that my daughter had been the culprit! After profusely apologizing to the parents, I packed up all four of my kids and scooted home as quickly as possible. I felt that if I were to get a “mom grade” that day, it would be an F.

Another time I sat in a school assembly during which they awarded the citizen of the year award to only one third-grader in the entire school. When my son was chosen, I beamed. Arriving home after being congratulated many times over, I felt like an A parent—at least until one of the twins threw a tantrum.

It’s easy to fall into the trap of seeing our kids as our report cards. God calls us to answer their questions, train them, and lovingly discipline them without exasperating them. So when they obey, that must mean we are succeeding; and when they disobey, we’ve missed the mark. Right?

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Wrong. I've come to understand and embrace something profound. God modeled perfect parenting. He walked in the garden in close relationship with Adam and Eve. He clearly trained them, giving instructions about which tree was off-limits. Even though he loved his children perfectly, they still disobeyed. God continues to discipline, instruct, and walk with his children. But he doesn't grade himself according to his children's successes and failures. And neither should we.

When we use the behavior of our children as our parenting measuring rod, we find ourselves

- passing judgment on others when their children struggle, rather than encouraging and praying for them;
- yo-yoing between pride and shame according to our children's behavior;
- envying our friends when we read social media posts about the academic, athletic, and other achievements of their kids.

The result is disappointment and discouragement. So what can we do? How can we shift our focus from our children's behavior to the joy-filled adventure of teaching them what it means to follow Jesus? How can we give ourselves a total family makeover as we seek to train our children in the faith and make disciples at home?

I find that I compare, measure, and worry less when I hold onto this promise from Proverbs 22:6 (NKJV): "Train up a child in the way he should go, / And when he is old he will not depart from it." God calls us to do all we can to train our children spiritually, but the goal is not their perfect behavior now; it is their desire to follow him long after they have left home. Rather than worrying about how we're doing in the moment, we need to strive to lead our kids to know and love God over the long haul. How? I believe the answer is to teach them the spiritual practices or disciplines that will help them down the path of loving God.

Now, that can be an overwhelming thought, because we're not sure where

to begin and wonder if we'll forget something important. We might hope that grandparents or the church would do this important job for us, but the truth is that the primary responsibility for the spiritual nurturing of our children resides with us and begins at home. Just as we are careful to take care of our children physically, in the same way we can be intentional in modeling and teaching good spiritual practices. We just need a way to begin—a “track to run on,” if you will.

I've found great success in other areas of life by having a track to run on. In finances, for example, my husband and I found a place to begin and a system for slowly working through the steps toward financial health. Those steps have required patience, flexibility, and perseverance through the years, but they have produced real changes in our spending, saving, and giving. The same is true when it comes to nurturing our children spiritually. With patience, flexibility, and perseverance, we can follow some basic steps that over time will transform our families—beginning with us!

This book gives you a track to run on by suggesting eight practical steps to making disciples at home. These steps revolve around basic spiritual practices or habits that we want our children to embrace in their walk with God—both now and after they leave home. Each chapter in this book focuses on one of these eight practices:

- 1. Spending time in prayer.** Jesus modeled the practice of prayer and taught his disciples how to pray. After looking at these biblical examples, you'll find practical ideas to enhance your own conversations with God as well as a guide to use in teaching your child to pray—tools that will equip your family to follow Jesus into the practice of prayer.
- 2. Reading God's Word.** Just as our children require physical food, we also need to help them learn to feed themselves spiritually. As you let biblical truth sink deeply into your own life, you can share what you are learning with your child through a simple daily application. You'll also find practical ways to implement daily Bible reading into your

## INTRODUCTION

busy schedule as well as help your child discover the power of the living Word of God in his or her own life.

- 3. Growing through mentoring.** Jesus demonstrated the importance of mentoring through his relationship with his disciples. He taught and encouraged them as they did life together, pouring into them until they were ready to be on their own. You are your child's first mentor. After discussing how to find a Christian parenting mentor for yourself, we'll apply those principles to coaching your child. Suggestions for special dates with your child as well as mentoring questions will enhance your relationship with your child. Children who are mentored at home learn the value of this important spiritual discipline and are more likely to seek out spiritual mentoring relationships when they are grown.
- 4. Finding community in the church.** God loves community. We are designed to live in relationship with others, not in isolation. Today we see a shift in the cultural view of the posture and purposes of the church. In order to prevent our kids from looking at the church as a commodity to be consumed, we need to be intentional in teaching them to find a place where they can connect with other believers and participate through worship, fellowship, and service. You'll find ideas for helping your child develop nourishing friendships as well as ways to foster intergenerational relationships within the church.
- 5. Serving others.** Jesus showed us that joy comes from serving. We'll examine his example and see how our lives can reflect his attitude of service. Just as Jesus taught his disciples to serve through hands-on practice, we'll consider ways that we can include our children in serving opportunities. A serving debrief worksheet will help you follow through in seeing your child realize the pleasure to be found in helping others.
- 6. Taking time to rest.** With our hectic lives, we often unconsciously teach our kids that they should fill every waking hour with activity. Yet Jesus valued rest. We'll take a look at the Sabbath concept from the Old Testament and how that translates into New Testament living.

You'll find help for identifying the unique ways each person in your family experiences leisure best by trying some simple ideas, such as taking a walk together, heading out into nature, or putting away electronics so that you can engage in conversation.

- 7. Giving back to God.** In a world consumed with having more, our children need guidance when it comes to money. Jesus had plenty to say about finances. He warned about the dangers of loving money and celebrated the blessings of generosity. You'll find ideas for age-appropriate chores and encouragement to incorporate regular compensation so that your child can learn the value of saving as well as the rewards of generosity.
- 8. Sharing your faith.** One of the marks of a disciple is the ability to "reproduce." Jesus commissioned his disciples to tell others about him. Our children need instruction for sharing what they believe with respect and kindness. In a world that labels Christians as judgmental and pushy with our beliefs, we want our kids to understand that our desire for others to know Jesus springs from our love for them. You'll find help for sharing your own faith as well as age-appropriate ideas for teaching children how to make this important practice a natural part of their lives and relationships.

Certainly this isn't an exhaustive list of spiritual disciplines, but these eight basic habits will provide a strong foundation for growing in faith. They are meant to be a lifelong pursuit, not a list to check off and then expect instant results. Whether our children embrace Christ or any of these disciplines isn't up to us. So instead of worrying about how they respond, we can shift our focus to our own spiritual habits and seek to be intentional and consistent in both modeling an authentic relationship with God and training our children in his ways. With prayer and persistence, we can be confident that God will honor our efforts and begin to transform our lives, our families, and our homes.

In the following pages you'll find a very practical approach. Each chapter has two major sections, Modeling and Training, and includes Scriptures to help us see how Jesus modeled and trained his own disciples in the practice.

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You'll find help and suggestions for modeling the habit yourself, as well as proactive ways you can focus more on the task of training your child in the spiritual practice. Practical ideas and activities are highlighted throughout with the heading "A Practical Approach."

We don't have to know all the answers, but we can be open and ready. Our children need us to dialogue with them, listen, and help them learn the spiritual disciplines that will draw them closer to God. Jesus said, "Go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). Notice the word *make*. Disciples are made, not born. Our kids will not automatically default to a life of prayer, serving, and generosity. God calls us as parents to be key disciple-makers in our children's lives.

Whether you have a babe in arms, a toddler, a tween, or a teen, I encourage you to go beyond reading this book. Resolve to implement some of the ideas and activities. Plan some family service projects, use the worksheets provided, or take the challenge to spend time with God every day for thirty days. Ask yourself the tough questions about what you are modeling. Are you spending the amount of time with God each day that you hope your children will spend with him when they are grown? Get alongside some other parents and encourage one another to persevere in modeling and training for a real relationship with God. (You'll find group discussion questions and study helps at the end of each chapter.)

Together we can make God our parenting audience of one so that we care more about what he thinks about our kids than what the watching world thinks. So the next time you're concerned about a disrespectful tone or a bad test score, don't give yourself an F in parenting for the day. Instead, pray for perspective and persistence to keep loving and parenting with complete dependence on the Holy Spirit's guidance. And remember, God calls us to be faithful to him, not to produce perfect children. Though we are instructed to train and lead them to Jesus, our kids are not our report card. That frees us to parent them with love and patience, trusting God to do the rest!

# CHAPTER 1

## SPENDING TIME IN PRAYER

**M**y twelve-year-old daughter sobbed as she asked why all of her hair was falling out. I held her close and wept with her. She told me she talked to God about it all the time, but he didn't seem to be answering. It can be rough to help our children learn to hear God's voice—especially during seasons when he seems silent.

The good news is that we don't have to make excuses for God or be embarrassed about his apparent lack of communication. He is real, and he does speak to us. At times we may not understand, but we can help our children learn to seek God in prayer.

When my daughter's hair was falling out due to an autoimmune disorder called alopecia, I searched his Word to hear what truth we could cling to in the situation. He doesn't promise to always heal, but he does say that he is a rewarder of those who sincerely seek him (Hebrews 11:6). God's Word also says, "The eyes of the LORD search the whole earth in order to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him" (2 Chronicles 16:9a). These are truths we can rely on—especially when God may seem quiet in our difficult circumstances.

Kids are great about being honest when they don't feel as though they hear God. Recently I taught a Sunday school class the story of Elijah. In

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1 Kings 19, God says he will show himself to Elijah. First there is a mighty wind, then an earthquake, and afterward a fire. Yet God was not in any of those things. He was in the still small voice. I encouraged the boys and girls in my class not to always look for God in big, showy ways but to spend a few moments every day getting quiet before him. We took a minute to just sit quietly and practice listening. I loved it when a sweet six-year-old boy jumped up immediately afterward and proclaimed, “Well, I didn’t hear God say a thing!”

There is no magic formula for hearing God. There’s no checklist that will guarantee a message from the Lord. Still, we can cultivate a relationship with God that creates room for dialogue. When we know someone well, our conversations move to greater depth and intimacy as we share our joys and fears with them. But how do we get to know a God we can’t see? Just as we deepen our relationships with others through spending time together and dialoguing about things that are important to us, so we can get to know God better by spending focused time with him.

## MODELING

Let’s look at the example Jesus set for us by spending time in prayer.

### **1. Jesus intentionally pulled away from other responsibilities to spend time alone with the Father.**

Jesus left some very worthy pursuits to make time with his Father a priority. His disciples needed direction. The sick needed healing. The hungry wanted food. The crowds were anxious for teaching. Yet Jesus purposely abandoned these tasks to demonstrate our need for time alone with God.

Sometimes Jesus prayed in the early morning hours: “Before daybreak the next morning, Jesus got up and went out to an isolated place to pray” (Mark 1:35). Other times he stayed up late into the night to pray: “After sending them home, he went up into the hills by himself to pray. Night fell while he was there alone” (Matthew 14:23). We also learn from Luke’s Gospel that

Jesus prayed frequently: “Jesus *often* withdrew to the wilderness for prayer” (Luke 5:16, my emphasis). Jesus set the example for us, showing us our need to connect with God in prayer. I believe that in addition to communing with the Father, Jesus wanted us to know that time spent talking and listening with God is vital to a disciple of Christ.

As parents, our greatest enemy of time in prayer is often the endless list of tasks and responsibilities. The laundry buzzes; the phone rings; the baby cries; the work e-mails pile up; and someone always seems to need another piece of us. The tyranny of other things can be our biggest barrier to time alone with God. Yet Jesus, the Son of God, who went place to place teaching, healing, and feeding people, found it important to take time away from those pursuits and make prayer a priority.

As you think through your days, what is God calling you to pull away from for just a few minutes every day so you can spend time with him? God would rather have a few minutes with you than none at all.

I’ve often made prayer too complicated. I think that if I don’t have a good block of time or complete privacy, then I can’t pray. Susanna Wesley is said to have sat in her rocking chair with a shawl over her head to spend time with the Lord. When my kids were little, I would sometimes steal away to my room in desperation to get on my knees and pour out my heart to God. After just a few minutes, they would break into the room and climb onto my back, using me for a jungle gym. That was okay. Even just a few minutes of connection with God gave me the strength I needed for the moment. I decided that I would rather have interrupted prayer times than no prayer times at all—and that it was a good thing for them to see me praying.

Making time for prayer may mean getting our sleepy selves up a little earlier in the morning or burning the midnight oil. If we’re honest, we make time for what we value. When there is a television show I really want to see, I find the time to watch it. If my budget finally allows for new carpet, I somehow find the time to research the different choices and colors available. If we really want to know God and hear his voice, we will make the sacrifices necessary to

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connect with him. Jesus modeled it for us so that we could learn to talk with God. In the same way, we can show our kids that prayer is a priority in our lives by doing it.

When was the last time your kids discovered you praying? Whether you were on your knees, on your face, or in the car with your eyes closed while you were waiting for them, your example shows your children that you talk to Jesus regularly. We can model the importance of spending time with God by intentionally laying aside other tasks and pursuits—even good things—to make prayer a priority.

### **2. Jesus communicated to his disciples that he was praying for them.**

Another way Jesus set an example for us was by talking about his prayer life. Now, Jesus was no prayer bragger. Unlike the Pharisees who recited their spiritual pedigrees, Jesus didn't feel the need to make himself seem spiritual by mentioning his long hours in prayer. In fact, it is only because others observed him praying and made mention of it in the Gospels that we have a record of his prayer life. But Jesus wasn't ashamed to tell people he was praying for them. Jesus encouraged Peter with prayer: "But I have pleaded in prayer for you, Simon, that your faith should not fail. So when you have repented and turned to me again, strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:32).

How do you think it encouraged Simon Peter to know that Jesus was pleading in prayer for him? Has anyone ever stormed the gates of heaven on your behalf?

When my daughter was five years old, she was very ill and spent six days in an intensive care unit. She breathed with a ventilator and fought for her life. The outpouring of support from our church family with meals, notes, and much prayer on her behalf was incredible. But the most memorable and tangible encouragement for me during that time was from a man I had met only once. He sent a note saying he had felt led by the Spirit to take a day off work to fast and pray for my daughter. I still get tears in my eyes just thinking about it. It meant so much to know that someone else was seeking God so fervently

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on our behalf. Our daughter was healed and completely restored to health. As the years have passed, I've never forgotten the sacrifice of that man.

As I've watched friends, relatives, and my own children walk difficult roads, at times I've communicated with them that I was taking some time to fast and pray on their behalf. When we feel helpless to do something to ease the burdens of others, we can always pray. Prayer is not "nothing." It is a big something!

Not only did Jesus pray for those around him when he walked the earth; he also prayed for *you*! Jesus had a lengthy dialogue with the Father in front of a crowd after teaching about the coming of the Holy Spirit and future events. He said, "I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message. I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me" (John 17:20-21).

Jesus prayed for everyone who would believe in him. He prayed for you. How does that encourage you? Do you regularly let your children know that you are praying for them? While they may roll their eyes or brush it off, it means something to them.

We occasionally have a family meeting where Sean and I ask everyone to share one prayer request. Then I record their answers in my journal and try to follow up with them later. I want them to know that their dad and I pray for them. The blessing for me is that when I pray more, I tend to worry less. What we model for our children can be caught easily, and I want my children to catch the habit of prayer rather than the habit of worry.

I remember when our youngest daughter used to say the word *ridiculous* as a three-year-old. We all laughed because it was my husband's word of choice when he saw a mess left in the house. He didn't work with her on saying that word. She just heard him say it and started using it herself. That memory makes me laugh, but it also reminds me that I don't want my kids to see me worrying and pick up the habit.

Sometimes it's so hard not to worry, isn't it? Right now I've got a few

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things rolling around in the back of my mind, threatening to send me into full-on worry mode. Is my son doing okay in college? How are his grades, his laundry, his friendships? How will I respond to that e-mail with tact? Will my daughter ever see God's love in the midst of her alopecia? I want to trust God with every bit of it, but I must wrestle in prayer to actually turn it over to God, just as each of us must.

I can help my kids learn the power of prayer as I tell them how I am praying for them and then back up my example with faith instead of fear. I can be honest with them about the struggle to trust rather than worry, but I must ask myself which one I will let win—faith or fear? Kids are smart. They know when we are wearing a mask and when we really believe what we say. As we lift up their struggles to God, we model for them a life of dependency and trust instead of worry.



### *A Practical Approach: Praying for Your Child*

What is your child facing right now that you need to pray for more consistently?

What's a practical way you can make a more intentional effort to pray for your child?

How will you let your child know that you are praying for him or her? Here are a few ideas:

- Set an alarm on your phone to pray for your child daily. If you have more than one child, choose a different time of the day or a different day of the week to pray for each one.
- Keep a prayer journal with your child's requests.
- Pick one day of the week that you will communicate that you are praying for your child or children.
- Choose one word for each child as a prayer theme for the

year. I have four children, and I am praying for purity for one, humility for another, obedience for another, and healing for my daughter with alopecia. I present specific requests to the Lord as well, but these key words help me focus on broad needs.



### **3. Jesus taught us to pray in faith.**

Jesus told a story to teach about persistent prayer:

Then, teaching them more about prayer, he used this story: “Suppose you went to a friend’s house at midnight, wanting to borrow three loaves of bread. You say to him, ‘A friend of mine has just arrived for a visit, and I have nothing for him to eat.’ And suppose he calls out from his bedroom, ‘Don’t bother me. The door is locked for the night, and my family and I are all in bed. I can’t help you.’ But I tell you this—though he won’t do it for friendship’s sake, if you keep knocking long enough, he will get up and give you whatever you need because of your shameless persistence” (Luke 11:5-8).

Shameless persistence! He wants us to ask and keep asking. Jesus went on to say, “And so I tell you, keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door will be opened” (Luke 11:10-11).

If we want our kids to be the kind of Christ-followers who pray this way, we need to model shameless persistence. We don’t give up when the going gets tough as parents. We pray with shameless persistence:

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- when our child is sick again
- when our marriage gets tough and tougher
- when the finances don't add up
- when we feel like getting a black-and-white-striped shirt because all we do is referee arguing
- when friendships end
- when we have to move

Whatever it is, we keep asking, seeking, and knocking. Rather than a last resort, prayer is what we do with shameless persistence.

- Is there an area in your life that seems out of control?
- How have you been trying to manage it, manipulate it, or fix it yourself?
- How can you begin to model shameless persistence and include your children in the prayer process?

Jesus's story about persistent prayer communicates to us that nothing is too small a reason to beat on God's door. We are not nagging or irritating him when we pray persistently. When my kids ask continually for something, I have to admit, it drives me nuts. But God isn't like me. He is patient and loving and wants us to know that our shameless persistence isn't an irritation. In fact, he welcomes us to confidently come to him: "So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most" (Hebrews 4:16).

It's so incredible to know that we find mercy at God's throne—not judgment or condemnation, but grace when we need it most. Even when we are questioning and doubting, God wants to help us believe. Thomas was one of the disciples who didn't believe Jesus had risen from the dead after the crucifixion. He said he wouldn't believe unless he put his fingers in the nail holes of Christ's hands. Here's what happened: "Eight days later the disciples were together again, and this time Thomas was with them. The doors were locked; but suddenly, as before, Jesus was standing among them. 'Peace be with you,' he said. Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here, and look at

my hands. Put your hand into the wound in my side. Don't be faithless any longer. Believe!" (John 20:26-27).

Notice that Jesus didn't shame Thomas but helped him believe in the midst of his doubts.

- How does Jesus's reaction to Thomas encourage you to press on in prayer?
- In what situations have your doubts kept you from coming to God?
- Take a few moments now to bring any doubts and fears to God, asking Jesus to help you trust him when you can't see.

I hope it encourages you to remember that we can pray and seek God even in the midst of our doubts.

#### **4. Jesus prayed out loud in front of others to build their faith.**

We find several instances when Jesus offered public prayers. When his friend Lazarus died, "Jesus looked up to heaven and said, 'Father, thank you for hearing me. You always hear me, but I said it out loud for the sake of all these people standing here, so that they will believe you sent me'" (John 11:41-42). Did you notice why Jesus prayed out loud? He did it to increase the faith of those around him.

When it comes to our own prayer lives, many of us are uncomfortable praying out loud. We feel it is a personal thing. If we are shy and don't like praying in large groups, that is understandable. But when it comes to our own children, we would be wise to get over ourselves and learn to pray alongside our kids. They need to hear us talk to God reverently but also personally and authentically.

Your prayer life can be one of the ways God chooses to build the faith of your child. God can use anything. He spoke through a donkey once, and even the rocks will cry out with praise if we don't worship him. Yet he desires to use *us*. God calls us to be his hands and feet in modeling prayer and training our children in this important habit.

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When is the last time you prayed with your child? It's never too early to start. You can start a bedtime prayer routine as you are rocking your infant. It's also never too late. You can begin a daily prayer time with your child at any age. Our family has done different things in different seasons of life. When I drove the kids to school every day, we prayed in the car on the way. We've also had a nighttime prayer habit because it's the most consistent routine of our day. Check out the practical prayer ideas in the Practical Approach section on page 12.

As we pray out loud in front of our children—whether at meals, at bedtime, or in impromptu moments such as when we see a car accident ahead—we can plant seeds of faith that will sprout and bloom in our children's lives. Though we plant the seeds, it is God who makes them grow.

### **5. Jesus prayed for God's will.**

When Jesus faced a time of great suffering, he wanted God's ultimate best instead of immediate ease. In Luke 22 we read, "He walked away, about a stone's throw, and knelt down and prayed, 'Father, if you are willing, please take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine'" (vv. 41-42).

This is a tough prayer to pray. I just finished praying with my girls at bedtime. Oh, how I want God to give my daughter hair again. She also has some normal high school struggles. Her twin sister has two bald spots where she, too, has lost hair, which I am asking God to restore. The thought of another girl going through that pain of wigs and fake eyelashes makes me want to scream "NO!" I know alopecia is not the worst thing in the world, but it's our thing. And it's no picnic.

I don't want my kids to suffer. No parent does. But if I really want to pray like Jesus, then after asking with shameless persistence I must add, "Yet I want your will to be done, not mine." I know that his will is best. Jesus's death on the cross brought us freedom from sin and reconciliation with God, but it came at a high price with an amount of suffering we can't even begin to wrap our minds around. Still, he knew the suffering was worth what God would bring through it.

## SPENDING TIME IN PRAYER

Isaiah 55:9 tells us, “For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, / so my ways are higher than your ways / and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.” God may have plans and purposes for things that, from my vantage point, look like useless suffering. As we pray with our children, we boldly ask, but we also surrender our wills to God knowing that sometimes what is gracious from heaven’s view seems awfully tough from ours. We are watching through the knothole, but God sees the whole parade.

In prayer we express our deepest longings, but ultimately we must trust God’s action or inaction in our lives as his best for us. It sure is easier to write those words than to live them! Sometimes this is where we learn a lesson from our children in choosing simple faith over complicated attempts to understand.

- What prayer request do you have right now that you need to surrender with the words, “Yet I want your will to be done, not mine”?
- How will adding this statement to your prayer times with your children help them to learn that God is not like a cosmic vending machine?
- Can you think of some helpful examples kids can relate to that might help bring this principle to life?

One example that comes to mind for me is the movie *The Karate Kid*. Mr. Miyagi has Daniel doing all kinds of hard work such as washing cars, cleaning floors, and painting fences. Daniel becomes so frustrated, thinking this work has nothing to do with karate. Yet Mr. Miyagi has a plan in mind all along to strengthen his muscles and reflexes, preparing him to fight.

Though God is certainly not the author of evil, sometimes God allows hardships and uses them for his purposes. When it comes to praying God’s will over my own, I have to trust that God will bring good even from what is frustrating or difficult at the time.

First Corinthians 15:58 says, “So, my dear brothers and sisters, be strong and immovable. Always work enthusiastically for the Lord, for you know that nothing you do for the Lord is ever useless.” If we believe God doesn’t waste anything—not our suffering, not the bad things other people do to us, not the good times—we can more easily ask for his will over our own.

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Your child may not be familiar with this movie, but he or she can understand a coach who has the team practice hard to prepare for a game. Perhaps your child cares for a pet and realizes that sometimes he has to make the pet do things it doesn't want to do for its own good (such as take baths or stay out of the road). Other kids might relate to the doctor giving them medicine that tastes bad in the moment, but ultimately it will help them get better.

Think of a way you can help explain praying God's will to your child. What story or example can you use from your own life? How can you talk about trusting the heart of someone who has your best interests at heart?

It isn't easy to believe when we can't see or understand the reasons for our pain. But our faith can grow as we seek God in prayer, asking for his will over our own.

- Review the five principles of prayer that Jesus modeled. Which one resonates most in your life right now?
- What is one change you'd like to make related to how you set an example of prayer for your children?



### *A Practical Approach: Organizing Your Prayer Life*

Have you ever felt the sting of wanting to tell someone you prayed for them, but you know you really didn't? How about when you open your notes at Bible study or small group and find where you wrote all the prayer requests from your last meeting, but you haven't prayed about a single one? It's tough to stay on top of our own families' prayer needs, let alone lift up other requests to God! Not only that, but some needs are ongoing (such as our children's spiritual growth or a specific health need) while other needs are short term (such as the sale of a house or the need for a job). How can we keep track of it all?

Since college I have kept some kind of journal or notebook in which I write my thoughts, keep to-do lists, take sermon notes, and organize prayer needs. I use the last few pages in my journal for prayer needs so I don't have to flip through the book to find them.

The first page in this section is for daily requests. I attempt to pray for my husband, my children, and my church every day. (I don't always do it every single day, but this is my desire when I'm in my normal routine.) I write two or three key requests I have for each of them—such as time management for my husband, college concerns for my son, good friends for my daughters, and so forth.

The next page is a weekly list. I assign a day for different things. For example, I might pray for the families in my small group on Wednesday or for my extended family on Friday. This way I don't feel that I need to be praying for everyone, everywhere, every day. (That would be a surefire way never to get started in praying for people!)

The last page is for short-term requests. This page usually has a lot of things that have been crossed off as needs are answered or no longer current. For example, I prayed for my friend's divorce hearing as she asked. When it was over, I drew a line through that request. I also prayed many months for my friend Lee, who was struggling with cancer. When Jesus took him home, I didn't need to pray for his healing anymore, because Lee is fully whole in heaven with his precious Savior. Sometimes things stay on this list for days, weeks, or even a year.

When the rest of my journal is full with written prayers, to-do lists, sermon notes, book ideas, or important phone numbers (which I can never seem to find—not a good system for that!), I decide it's time to get a new journal. I then rewrite my three prayer pages at the back of my new journal. By then it's time to update things and reorganize anyway.



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This is just one prayer organization system that has worked for me. Many people use different prayer tools with success.

- Some people keep an electronic prayer journal on their computer or tablet, and others like to use prayer journal apps.
- My husband uses the calendar in his phone to set reminders to pray for different people and situations.
- My mentor, Deb, uses sticky notes. She has them on her bathroom mirror, car dashboard, and different places around her home. She has tried other systems, but she finds she is most consistent with prayer when she has a request on a sticky note.
- Other people write requests on index cards and put them in their Bible. Then when they do their daily Bible reading, they pray for others.
- One of my friends uses her Bible study workbook. She writes requests at the top of the daily homework so she'll see things to pray about during her study time.

There are many different systems for keeping up with prayer requests and being diligent in prayer, and no one is more right or wrong than the other. The important thing is that we make an effort to pray consistently.

If we want to tell our children that we've prayed for them, we need to be intentional about implementing prayer into our schedule. If you are more of a free spirit and less of a planner, you might simply pray for each child as you fall asleep at night. It doesn't have to require a complicated system. In fact, the less involved and rigid your system is, the better. You'll be more likely to stick with it if it isn't overwhelming to you.

As you think about your personal prayer life—especially in regard to your prayers for your children—what do you think might help you become a more consistent pray-er? Think of one practical idea you can implement into your prayer routine.

## TRAINING

We certainly spend a lot of time teaching our children how to put their clothes away, change the toilet paper roll, and say please and thank you. Teaching them to pray is even more important!

I began teaching my children to pray when they were very small, but as they grew, I realized the need for more instruction in prayer when I began to notice repetition in their nightly prayers. For several nights in a row, they prayed, “Lord, I just thank you for this wonderful day today, and I pray we’d have a wonderful day tomorrow. Amen.” So I decided to ask them if they had anything else they wanted to talk to God about. I noticed that if I made suggestions, they were very open to adding them, but they were reluctant to initiate deeper conversation with their Maker. So I concluded that perhaps they needed intentional training in prayer.

The truth is, all of our children need intentional training in prayer. Other than teaching them simple prayers they can memorize and recite, which is often what we do with very young children, what might intentional training in prayer look like?

### **1. We can follow Jesus’s example when teaching our children to pray.**

Though Jesus modeled prayer, he also gave his disciples some practical training in how to do it. Both Matthew and Luke record a teachable moment when Jesus told his disciples how to pray.

In Matthew 6, Jesus initiates the lesson by teaching them what prayer is not. Basically, he tells them:

- Don’t pray publicly just so you can be seen by others and thought spiritual (v. 5).
- Don’t babble on, repeating the same words over and over (v. 7).

In Luke’s Gospel, the disciples say to Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples” (11:1b). In each account, Jesus then teaches them the Lord’s Prayer. In Matthew 6, it reads like this:

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Our Father in heaven,  
    may your name be kept holy.  
May your Kingdom come soon.  
May your will be done on earth,  
    as it is in heaven.  
Give us today the food we need,  
and forgive us our sins,  
    as we have forgiven those who sin against us.  
And don't let us yield to temptation,  
    but rescue us from the evil one. (Matthew 6:9-13)

Jesus didn't intend for them merely to repeat these words over and over. In fact, he had just warned them not to babble on and on, repeating the same words as the pagans did. Instead, he was teaching them some basic elements that should be included in our dialogues with our gracious and loving God. The acrostic ACTS captures these elements. It stands for the following: **A**doration, **C**onfession, **T**hanksgiving, **S**upplication.

These were big words at the time for my then five-year-old daughter, eight-year-old twin daughters, and eleven-year-old son. So I asked God to help me teach them to pray in a way that would go deeper than their surface prayers for a good day without being insincere, fancy words they simply repeated with little understanding.



### *A Practical Approach: Teaching ACTS*

Here's how I broke down the acronym ACTS for my kids:

#### *Adoration*

Sometimes my children could be silly when we closed our eyes to pray. Though I didn't want them to think that God and prayer aren't fun, I did want them to know that when we get quiet to pray, we need to remember that God is holy—which means

“set apart.” When we talk to God, we need to remember we are addressing the God of the universe and praise him for who he is.

I thought about how my children could praise God each day in a way that wouldn't get rote or mechanical. I got a piece of construction paper, and we spent one night brainstorming words that describe God, such as *powerful, loving, awesome, holy*. They had fun coming up with these words. Then I asked them some of the names for God found in the Bible. With a little coaxing, they thought of *rock, shepherd, Jesus, King of kings*. Soon we had filled the page with different ideas. I bought a cute white frame and hung up the list in their room. At bedtime they could each pick one of the things on the list to begin their prayer.

### *Confession*

This part turned out to be the most surprising. The first time we talked about confession, none of them could recall any bad thing they had done that day. I was floored. I had a long list for each of them fresh on my mind! I held back as long as I could, but then I asked one of them, “What about hitting your sister today?”

“Oh, yeah.”

Then on to the next child: “Remember how you threw that fit and got in trouble this morning?”

“I had forgotten about that.”

They were all very willing to confess their sins to God and were even excited that they had something for this part of the prayer. They just needed some training and direction.

### *Thanksgiving*

Giving thanks came more naturally. They were always grateful for the “wonderful day.” Now we tried to be more specific. What are we thankful for? Yes, we had trips to the park, friends over, and new toys. But we talked about some basic things that we often take

for granted: freedom to worship, our own copy of God's Word, clean water, food, eyes to see, legs to run. Their tender hearts were telling their Creator that they had much to appreciate. Children don't always remember these blessings in day-to-day life when surrounded by ads and commercials tempting them to want more. But at night when their hearts are soft, they often recognize God's provision when a loving parent reminds them of all he has done.

### *Supplication*

Big word. I told them we were basically just asking God for things. He invites us to ask with shameless persistence. We can ask for things we need or want, but we also want to pray for others. A friend of mine shared a great system that she used to help her kids remember what they were praying for each day. We made another poster for the wall that looked like this:

*Monday: Missionaries.* Here we wrote the name of two specific families we know and support. We prayed for their children and tried to remember to share any details about their families we received in regular prayer updates in e-mails or letters.

*Tuesday: Teachers.* Each child prayed for his or her own school teacher. We also listed the names of their piano teacher, Sunday school teachers, and coaches. If they didn't know what to pray, we asked God to give their teachers wisdom and endurance. (They can always use a little more of that, right?)

*Wednesday: Widows and orphans.* We prayed for specific ones we knew. We prayed for Great-Grandma, a woman at church, and for little Alex and Robelina, whom we support through an organization that provides opportunities to sponsor needy children. (Our son and the twins have since been able meet Alex personally on mission trips to Guatemala. It was incredible for them to meet the boy we had prayed for on so many Wednesdays.)

*Thursday: Those who don't have a relationship with Jesus.* The children had plenty of people who were school friends, neighbors,

or extended family members whom they hope will accept Jesus's gift of salvation and choose to follow him. It made the celebration that much sweeter when we saw a family we had been praying for in our neighborhood place their faith in Christ.

*Friday: Friends and family.* We listed all the cousins, aunts and uncles, and grandparents, and each child picked one or two special friends to include. Living in Ohio with my family in Texas and my husband's family in Canada, praying for family helps my kids feel more connected with people they may get to see only once a year.



After we implemented our new approach to prayer, we found that our kids' prayer lives were growing stronger. It hasn't been a perfect system. Still, the kids have learned that prayer is talking with God about anything and everything. They have practiced remembering who he is, where they fall short, and what they are thankful for, and they have asked for God's help for others. Though we no longer have the lists on the wall, they have long since moved past talking generically about a "wonderful day" to deeper connection with Christ. (We're still working on that toilet paper roll, though!)

## **2. We can invest our time and creativity in teaching our children to pray.**

Whether God leads you to implement the ACTS approach to teaching your child to pray or another practical method, it's important to give both your time and creativity as you model and train in the importance of prayer. Without prayer, we drift away from God just as we do from friends we rarely talk to anymore. We don't want our children to just know about God; we want them to have a close relationship with him.

Spend some time now asking God this question: What approach would you like me to take in teaching my children about prayer? Channel some of the

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creativity energy you typically expend on decorating their rooms or finding the right birthday party favors to coming up with some engaging ideas to teach them about prayer. Maybe you could start a Pinterest board of prayer ideas that you find. Many of our family prayer ideas were short lived. We implemented them for only a few months or possibly even a year. Yet I'm glad we did each and every one and wish we had attempted even more. Don't wait until you find the perfect system, and don't be discouraged if it dies out with time and life transitions. Celebrate what you did for even a short amount of time.



### *A Practical Approach: Other Prayer Ideas*

Here are some other practical prayer ideas we've used for different seasons in our family:

- Put all of the Christmas cards/pictures received in a basket. Have a child draw one at dinner and pray for the family.
- Use a story from the book *Window on the World: When We Pray God Works* (Daphne Spraggett and Jill Johnstone, [Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2007]) to learn about different countries and assign one prayer need from the list to each child during mealtime (great for widows and orphans on Wednesday). The website [www.reachthepoorthisweek.com](http://www.reachthepoorthisweek.com), which lists a story of a real child in a developing country and gives prayer requests, is another great resource.
- Make journals and let every child write down prayer requests.
- Get in the living room and let every child take a different posture during prayer time (lying down, kneeling, standing). Teach them that they can pray in any position and at any time.
- Pray immediately when something bad happens.



## SPENDING TIME IN PRAYER

That last idea brings back a wonderful memory. One day we gathered and prayed for God to return our bird, Monty, that had escaped from the cage. Of course, I remembered to add, “If it is God’s will for him to be in our family.” Monty did come back after several days of the neighbors letting us know his movements around the street. The yellow Conure stood out with his bright color and shrill shriek. I’ll never forget my children’s heartfelt prayers and excitement when he came back. (Although, truthfully, I could have easily accepted that it wasn’t God’s will for Monty to be a Spoelstra.)

We certainly didn’t always follow through with all of our prayer plans; busy schedules often got in the way of consistency. Yet we never stopped talking about prayer and trying new things to make prayer a priority in our home. As you spend time talking to the Lord, I hope you’ll be inspired to pursue teaching your child with all your creative energy. When your child has a specific need or a question about prayer, you’ll be ready to answer through modeling and training. Take a few moments right now to pray Paul’s prayer for the Ephesian believers on behalf of your child or children:

When I think of all this, I fall to my knees and pray to the Father, the Creator of everything in heaven and on earth. I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit. Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God’s love and keep you strong. And may you have the power to understand, as all God’s people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God. Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think. Glory to him in the church and in Christ Jesus through all generations forever and ever! Amen. (Ephesians 3:14-21)

# DISCUSSION TOPICS

## **Group Discussion Questions**

- Who taught you to pray? When and how did they do it?
- What kinds of questions about prayer have your children asked?
- Jesus intentionally leveraged time away from people and tasks to spend time in prayer. What are some people and things you may need to give yourself permission to withdraw from in order to make prayer a priority in your own life?
- What are some ways you have organized daily and weekly prayer requests to help you stay consistent in prayer?
- What have been some of your most memorable teachable moments with your kids related to prayer?

## **Getting into God's Word**

- Look up Matthew 6:5-13 and read it together. What about Jesus's teaching on prayer challenges you to make changes in your own times of prayer?
- Look up John 17 and read the chapter together. How does Jesus's prayer reveal the depth of his relationship with the Father and his desire for us to know him too?
- Which one of these principles from Jesus's prayer life resonates most with you right now?

## SPENDING TIME IN PRAYER

1. Jesus intentionally pulled away from other responsibilities to spend time alone with the Father.
  2. Jesus communicated to his disciples that he was praying for them.
  3. Jesus taught us to pray in faith.
  4. Jesus prayed out loud in front of people to build their faith.
  5. Jesus prayed for God's will over his own.
- What is one new practical approach you would like to take in training your child or children to pray?

### **Digging Deeper**

- Read aloud as a group some of the great prayers recorded in Scripture that are listed below. Look for any elements of Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication in these prayers.
  - o Daniel's Prayer: Daniel 9:1-19
  - o Habakkuk's Prayer: Habakkuk 3
  - o Jehoshaphat's Prayer: 2 Chronicles 20:5-12
  - o Hezekiah's Prayer: 2 Kings 19:15-19
  - o Mary's Prayer: Luke 1:46-55
- Discuss how these prayers challenge you in your own personal time alone with God.