

Teaching about Prayer

2013-02-18 14:02:58 Neil MacQueen

This article is my contribution to all the other prayer resources out there. It addresses some key issues and shares some **unique lesson techniques** and for teaching about prayer in a Sunday School classroom. This article also includes references to three of my software programs that have content "about prayer" or can be used to generate it, namely, [Galilee Flyer CD](#), [Let's Talk CD](#), and [Say Your Prayers CD](#).



I've also included a lesson idea for teaching about *how to pray the Lord's Prayer in a way that's always different* -based on the way I myself pray it to keep it fresh.

Hope this helps. <>< Neil MacQueen

Prayer Goals for Sunday School:

We need to teach "about" prayer,

-what it is, why we pray, and the power of prayer.

We need to demonstrate how to pray,

-the posture, the language, the subject matter, what to expect.

We need to practice praying with children.

We need to teach children how **to remember to pray on their own.**

And we need to remember to **pray for** and **with** our children.

Initial Comments

I've been teaching Sunday School since 1977, seen a lot of curriculum, worked to rebuild Sunday Schools in several churches as a volunteer and as a pastor. I've also been a leader in the Workshop Rotation movement (rotation.org) and through my Sunday Software work. What I've seen and experienced is that **"About Prayer" often gets left out of curriculum and/or left un-discussed with our teachers.** This article was originally written to help that situation.

Some teachers may be assuming that "because we pray with them" -then the kids must know what prayer is and how to do it. They assume "somehow it must be rubbing off." But in fact, because of the way most teachers incorporate prayer in their lessons, our students are exposed to a limited understanding and practice.

Some wrong ways to teach about prayer...

Wrong Way #1:

Always leave it to "the last thing". It sends the wrong message when we save prayer to the end, and the kids are looking at the clock, mom is at the door, people are getting their coats on, and of the sudden somebody says, "let's pray!" It teaches that prayer is an interruption, ...an after-thought, something to quickly "tack on". -and that's wrong.

Wrong Way #2:

Many teachers use prayer to "summarize the lesson", or slip in content they forgot to include earlier. Pastors make this same mistake in worship, -repeating their sermon points. Rather than conversation with God, we turn prayer into our "conclusion" or "the teacher's final comments" ...and that's wrong.

Wrong Way #3:

Because the teacher is rushed, or because they are trying to summarize, or because the kids don't feel comfortable joining in, the teacher prays and the kids merely listen, -and that's wrong too because prayer is something you do, not just listen to.

You and I could add more to this list, but let's move on...

Here's a Starter List of Guidelines for Classroom Prayer...

- Prayer in the Sunday School should not be left to the very end of every lesson.
- It should be participatory, -without putting students on the spot.
- It should feature age-appropriate language and concerns.
- Prayer should include time for personal silent reflection. (After all, that's how most of us pray)
- Prayers should be offered through a variety of creative approaches and expressions. (see my techniques below for ideas about this)
- Prayer should be prepared for and discussed. This includes pre-prayer briefing and de-briefing the prayer. (ex. "What should we pray for today?" "How would you say that in a prayer?" and "I noticed in your prayer that you said....")

Below you will find some techniques and ideas that address these guidelines.

GETTING KIDS TO PRAY

...one of the “Holy Grails” of Sunday School

It's not always easy, especially in some traditions, and if you're approaching it the wrong way. Unfortunately, a lot of classroom prayers have devolved into “**listening to the teacher pray,**” or “**a few minutes of awkward participation.**”

In the next section of this article, you'll find a number of good techniques to get kids to pray. They come right out of my own 30+ yrs of classroom experience. Some of my insights were born out of frustration and trial and error.

I stumbled upon one of my BIGGEST INSIGHTS about helping kids pray in class...

Like many teachers, I was ‘saving’ prayer until the last minute or two of class and summarizing the lesson in the guise of a prayer. It was a typical rush job. Then I did a unit on The Lord's Prayer in my computer lab (circa 1995) and had the kids re-write it using a simple “text-to-speech” program found in Windows. **This let them type their prayer and make the computer speak it out loud.** (FYI: Several pieces of our software have this capability built into them.)



And as we heard their prayers via the computer, the proverbial light bulb went on. With about 7 minutes left in the lesson, I had them pick a line from the Lord's Prayer and personalize it, then play it back for everyone to hear. **Just like that, I had kids praying “out loud” through the computer –who had never before participated in group prayers.**

The Insight: make prayer an activity in the lesson, not a last-minute “Add-On”

Like most adults, kids are squeamish about praying in front of others, so I needed to remove the “in front of and on the spot” as much as possible. **I needed to make the prayer an ACTIVITY in the lesson** and not something we rushed through at the end with some words.

When we were in the computer lab, that often meant using the computers to help us pray. And if we weren't in the computer lab, I used other activities and techniques to help kids form and express prayer. I'm a Workshop Rotation Model guy, so that meant that in the Art Workshop we often used an art technique to express a prayer, or in the Bible Games Workshop we might use a game technique to come up with prayer. **The point is to quit thinking of prayer with children as merely something you ask them to say ON THE SPOT.**

A Software Aside...

It should come as no surprise that in my Sunday Software ministry I have two programs which have “text to speech” modules built-into them... allowing the computer to speak aloud whatever the kids type on the screen. Using the Talk Now module in our **Let's Talk software**, students can type a prayer and play it back for the class to hear. The teacher can prompt them to respond to one prayer question or prayer line at a time.

You can do the same with the talking text feature in **Kid Pix**. The kids can also illustrate their spoken prayer prior to playback. (But take note: they'll want to focus more on the drawing tools than text tools, which makes Let's Talk a better overall choice.)

[You'll also notice that I've put some “text to speech” or “rewriting” activities in some of our other software. Fluffy and God's Amazing Christmas Adventure, for example, has a text-to-speech activity I call “Fluffimations.” The point being “how to get the kids to express their thoughts/concepts through the computer, which they otherwise wouldn't say in front of the entire class.”]



Here's why it works:

- 1) It makes the kids less self-conscious. Kids are naturally self-conscious about expressing themselves. Allowing the computer to speak for them removes a big obstacle, especially for those with lesser verbal skills.
- 2) Less pressure. Kids are not natural public speakers. Put on the spot, they often don't know what to say. At the computer, they can take the time to TYPE their prayer, get help crafting their prayer, and then play it back when prompted.
- 3) Less threatening. Kids need help expressing themselves. When you create the prayer on the computer, the other students and the teacher can become part of the process. Rather than correcting their speech, you can simply correct their typing, or suggest improvements.
- 4) More Fun. Kids view the keyboard as a toy, and it's fun to make the computer speak their words. It's computer MAGIC really. And they'll want to do it again!

How it works in a lesson:

When it's time to pray either at the beginning of the lesson, or toward the end of it, (and not when kids are trying to leave!), the teacher sits students at computer stations where they turn on either Kid Pix or Let's Talk. The teacher explains that they are going to lead the students through a "guided prayer" —one line at a time. The teacher will speak a line, and the kids will have one minute to complete it by typing their content onto the screen.

Then when everyone has finished typing, point to a team to press their 'play' button to hear their prayer response to your original prayer prompt. Repeat the prayer prompt prior to each playback. After everyone's prayer answer has played, provide the next prompt. You can usually do about four or five of these in 10 minutes.

Prompt Examples:

Prompt 1: O Lord, I thank you for my three favorite things in my life...

Prompt 2: O Lord, in today's lesson I heard your voice telling me that I need to

Prompt 3: O Lord, I'm having this problem in my life and need your help with it. ...

Prompt 4: O Lord, I will now silently share the name of the person who I am having trouble with...

Of course, you can have the kids type full prayers and have them play them back. Your choice. The "prompting" idea, however, helps guide the kids. See more about "prompting" below....

[Learn more about Let's Talk CD](#)



A Few Prayer as an "Activity" Suggestions

Fear of speaking in public is common, and it is made worse by fearing what your peers will think of you. That's why traditional group praying often fails with children (and many adults). Rather than stumble over their worst fears, there are several different things you can do. These include: prayer prompts, and alternative ways of expressing a prayer.

1. Prime your prayer time by creating "prayer prompts" and give kids a moment to prepare what they're going to say.

An un-friendly Prompt usually goes like this:

Teacher: "Jenny, would you like to start us off with prayer?"

Jenny: "No."

Teacher: "Let's hold hands, I'll start, and then we'll go around the room and each of you can add to the prayer."

Students: (collectively) "Gulp!"

A "Prayer Prompt" can be as simple as a stack of 3x5 cards you hand to kids and give them a moment to fill in, such as,

"Today, I'd like to thank God for _____, because, _____."

"Dear God, help me to be more like _____ in today's lesson. Help me to be more _____."

A Prayer Prompt can be as simple as a question or two written on the board that you give students a moment to silently answer. Then during the prayer, you repeat the question and prompt the kids to "whisper" the name of the person they're having trouble with,

A Prayer Prompt can be as simple as a prayer "jar." Kids like to pull prayer slips out of a jar or hat too. The point is to remove the fear of peer judgment or not knowing what to say when it's "your turn."

2. Have them use words instead of sentences.

For example, tell them we'll be going around the circle and when it's their turn, they can only pray one word from the lesson, preceded by the phrase, "God, thank you for...." Give them a moment to scan the lesson handout, board, or Bible verse. In a lesson about the Beatitudes they might then pray, "God, thank you for meekness."

Do several "rounds" of word prayers. In the second round, tell them to come up with a word that describes how the lesson makes them "feel." In the third go-round, have them say, "God, help me with _____ from this lesson." Your statements and the kinds of words you want to solicit will depend on the lesson you have taught.

3. Include Non-Verbal Ways of Praying

Prayer is sometimes too deep for words. A drawing can be a prayer. So can sharing a posture, or hand position, or facial expression.

Example of a Posture Prayer from one of my classrooms:

Teacher:

Show me with your arms how you feel about God.

Show me with your facial expression how you think God feels about you.

Show me with a sound how you are feeling about your life right now.

Show me with your hands how you feel about how much God cares for you.

Show me with your whole body what kind of life you think God wants you to live for him.

The first time through it took a bit for the kids to get the hang of this, but they catch on.

Praying through the use of typed content is another "non verbal" way to pray. It gives them composition time, removes the

pressure of having to come up with something in front of their peers, and when the computer plays the prayer, it allows everyone to hear what people have to pray.

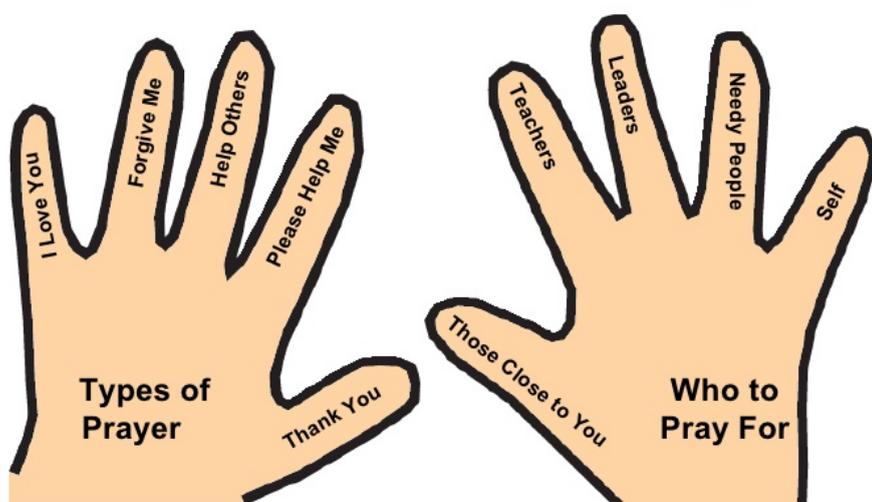
4. Use a Prayer Prop

One creative teacher of mine created "Prayer Dice". She had two large boxes decorated with Prayer Starter Sentences on each face. The kids would role the dice and get to choose which starter sentence they wanted to finish. The teacher would occasionally change the statements. Starter statement examples: "Thank God for something you are really happy about right now." "Turn to the person on your right and whisper the name of someone you have been mean to recently and need their forgiveness." "Share several words from today's lesson or scripture and finish by saying 'thank you God for this lesson.'"

Alternate Prayer Box: On each of the six sides write a statement derived from today's lesson that the student will complete. For example, a "Beatitudes Prayer Box" might have the following on it: Lord, help me with Beatitude # ___. (On the board you have written and numbered the Beatitudes.) "Lord, I wish more people were # ___."

I don't know where I found this, but it's awesome. Should be turned into an activity...

Hands For Prayer



Prompting Children to Pray for Themselves and Others

Prayers should not be generic or merely focused on the day's lesson. Prayer is primarily personal, and we need to encourage children to pray for themselves, those they are close to, and concerns in the world.

Here's a "Prompted Public Prayer" Example:

Teacher: In a moment, I'm going to have you repeat after me. When I get to the part where I say "put in a name" I want you to put in the name of someone you are not getting along with. You can say that person's name as quietly or as loudly as you want to. I'm also going to list on the board several things God could help us with, and when I get to that place in the prayer where you ask God for help, say out loud the thing on the board which you want to ask God for. (examples of "things to ask God for" on the board could include: listen better, have more patience, work harder, forgive, spend more time with, stay away from, pray for strength).

Prompted Silent Prayer Example:

The Teacher is Praying: "I want you to think of a problem you're having right now at home (with a friend, at school). Close your eyes and think of it. (*Give them 7 or 8 seconds.*) Now repeat after me: God, help me to solve my problem. Help me to not worry about it so much. Help me to heal the problem by being more loving and forgiving. And even if the problem doesn't get better, let me know that you still love me, and will help me get through it."

Teacher: Don't afraid to make your prayer INSTRUCTIONAL. In the middle of your prayer thanking God for the Beatitudes, you can speak to your students and say, "Lord, we take a moment to look at the Beatitudes, and pick one out to thank you."

Prayer That Goes Home

We all need reminders. Most of us respond to visual cues. Thus, in the rest of your teaching about prayer, you'll want to have students regularly create things that remind them to pray. The younger they are, the easier it is to come up with ideas. The older they are, the "cooler" your ideas need to be.



In one church where I served, we had families create colorful plastic prayer jars filled with all sorts of prayers, including prayers from other families in the church. These were very popular at the dinner table.

For a home clock, we created a sign on clear sticker paper that read, "Any time is a good time to talk to God."

Creating a Prayer "Mezuzah" for your bedroom doorposts is both biblical and fun. Decorate a small tube of PVC pipe and place a special prayer in. Add a small piece of double-sided tape to fix to the doorpost.

We've made prayer rocks that the kids wrote "hopes" on, then buried at the church in the "prayer rock garden." (every time they walked by they remembered).

Teach How Prayers are Answered

Children do not intuitively understand how we "listen" for God's "voice" inside us, or through others, or how we hear him amidst the daily events of our lives. They don't yet understand how we hear God talking to us in a baby's cry, or in a sunset. They don't yet comprehend how a feeling of confirmation after prayer and reflection can be interpreted as God's answer to prayer. They are focused on the "concrete" things ...the asking for, -which often reflects the "my will" instead of the "thy will" be done, which Jesus spoke about.

Jesus says, "ask and you will receive." But he also taught us to ask for what we "truly" need, and not for something ridiculous. God answers us by giving us what we need (bread) rather than stones (things that we really don't need). Part of prayer instruction is helping kids decipher what it is we really need to ask for, versus what we "think" we need. The teacher can discuss some options of "what to ask for" prior to the group's prayer.

Jesus also taught us that WE were part of God's answer to other people's prayers, -this is why God commissions us to care for others.

Prompted Prayers-Answered Examples:

Example:

The teacher says: "During our prayer, I'm going to stop so you can mention the name of someone who needs your help. Maybe its a brother or sister, or parent, or neighbor, or friend at school. Say their name silently when I prompt you to." The teacher continues... "Lord, each of us now is thinking of a person at our school who needs a friend, listen to us as we silently speak their name (silence, and then...) God, we write their names on a piece of paper and stick it in our pocket to remind us to go to this person the next time we see them. And help us to be a friend to all, and not be bullies or talk bad about others. (etc)."

Teaching "About" Prayer *with software*

Many of us use The Lord's Prayer as an opportunity to formally teach our kids "about prayer." And while you certainly don't want to limit your "about prayer" teaching to just this time and story, it's a great opportunity, in part, because this prayer is central to Christian worship. Thus, any lessons we can "hang on it" in the learner's memory, will get recall. (see my personal note about recall below)

The Lord's Prayer was Jesus' response to the Disciple's request that he teach them how to pray. It's a "template" that teaches us what our priorities in prayer should be, what we should ask for, the kind of language we should use, and the personal nature ("Abba") of prayer.

We have a fun game called [Galilee Flyer](#) CD which teaches the Lord's Prayer, and also "About Prayer." Not only does the game teach the Lord's Prayer into memory, but it has many Q & A pop-ups and Comment pop-ups that illuminate the topic of prayer.



It takes about 35 minutes to play the Lord's Prayer in Galilee Flyer. Younger children will need navigational help. It's not only a good program "about prayer" -it would make a good lesson in a larger SET of lessons about prayer.

Galilee Flyer is good for ages 9 to 17, and it also has three other "Jesus subject" games that cover important Jesus teachings.

A Lord's Prayer Lesson I've Never Forgotten

I don't remember a lot of what my old Sunday School teacher, Irv Tingley, taught us, (Irv was so old! -he was probably at least as old as I am now, hahaha), but I have never forgotten "the trick" Irv taught me about praying the Lord's Prayer.

We were complaining about how "BORING" it was to say the same thing over and over again. And that's when he taught us his trick:

Every time Irv prayed the Lord's Prayer, Irv would emphasize different words in each phrase or line.

One week in the first line he'd emphasize, "Our FATHER who art in heaven"
and the next week he'd emphasize, "OUR Father who art in heaven"
And the next week he'd emphasize "HEAVEN" etc.

I now realize Irv was teaching us a way to "game" the saying of the prayer. But this way of "gaming" doesn't diminish it, in fact, it makes the Lord's Prayer even more powerful to say, and here's why...

Irv said, "**Your mind can think amazing thoughts in the blink of an eye, right in the middle of that prayer before you get to the next word.**" **It can think about what emphasizing "DAILY" instead of "bread" might mean to you. It's like slowing down**

time."

Our class started practicing it with him, and immediately I could see that Irv Tingley was right! We formed a circle and started saying the Lord's Prayer -one line at a time until each person had said it -and said it with different EMPHASIS. It was almost like a game -how many different inflections can you give the phrase "give us this day our daily bread."

Example of how you can emphasize different words:

**GIVE us this day ~ Give US this day ~ Give us this DAY
OUR daily bread ~our DAILY bread ~ our daily BREAD.**

(we did this with EVERY line until we finished the prayer)

Here are some of the thoughts that can go through your head when you emphasize different words. Irv taught us some of them, and many more have popped into my adult brain over the years.

OUR -what does God give all of us, not just me?
DAILY -what should I expect or need or savor today?
BREAD -what can God remind me to do today that will feed my spirit?

After we got through the prayer once, Irv had us do it a second time, only this time each student was assigned a different line, got to choose the way they wanted to say it, and knew that Irv was going to stop them after they said it to ask them what thought or meaning did their inflection/emphasis give to the line? i.e. what new meaning might mean.

Irv also took the time to help us THINK about what those different emphases might mean. **He primed our thoughts** so those thoughts could fire in the blink of an eye as we emphasized different words. (In brain science we'd say he was teaching us to harness the power of our associative memory.)

And this is still the way I pray the Lord's Prayer out loud to this day.

Ever since that day in Irv's class, when I pray the Lord's Prayer I consciously emphasize different words and phrases, and I can hear my mind conversing with those different emphases in that moment of frozen time. "OUR *Father ...not just my Father, we are all God's children, this is my family.*" "Hallowed be *THY* name ...and my own not so much!" "THY will be done... not MY will." Yes, even to this VERY DAY, this is what's going on in my brain and voice when I say the Lord's Prayer.

I've adapted Irv's lesson on the computer lab too. I've had my kids type lines of the Lord's Prayer emphasizing different words with different fonts, bolds, capitalizations, etc, ...and include their thoughts on what the new meaning of their emphasis might be. We'd hear each computer speak it out loud, then discuss it.

I have taught Irv's technique to a dozen Confirmation classes, and hundreds of Sunday School kids over the years. In addition to Irv's technique described above, I will often teach it this way:

I speak a line of the Lord's Prayer in a flat monotone, then point to someone who would repeat it with one word emphasized. then I'd point to another student who would have to emphasize it differently. Then another. Then another. Then we'd backtrack and I'd ask the kids to chime in with what they thought the new spoken emphasis brought to the Prayer. It was powerful stuff.

Irv died many years ago, but I think of him every time I pray this prayer. Thanks Irv!

Neil MacQueen

Neil MacQueen is a Presbyterian minister specializing in Children's ministry, Bible software, and curriculum development.