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*We could pray...if only  
we'd be children*

Children are so unself-conscious.

I remember a three-year-old Chinese child all dressed up for Sunday school. Pleased with herself and eager to show me a new item of clothing, she reached to her ankles for the hem of her *cheong-sham* (long outer garment) and with one swift movement lifted her skirts up over her face—exposing her short panties and her bare midriff. All this to show me her new stockings! But more important, to share with me her great delight and joy.

Children have no self-consciousness. Adults are plagued with it. This is one of the reasons why adults find communication difficult. Oh, to be a little child in God's presence!

When Jesus answered the question, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven?" He called a child, set him in front of them, and said, "I tell you this: unless you turn round and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Let a

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man humble himself till he is like this child, and he will be the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven" (Matthew 18:1-4, NEB).

We are self-conscious because we are not child-like.

We are self-conscious because we are aware of others and their reactions to us, chiefly their approval or disapproval. So the rat-race of self-deception and mask-wearing goes on!

We aim at perfection but are easily discouraged. One friend told me that after she's prayed aloud in the presence of others, her mind would be full of questions: "Did I do it right? I wonder if I said the right things? What did Mrs. So-and-so think of me? What a fool I made of myself!"

Unable to recognize the "voices" within her, she could not tell whether she was talking to herself, or whether "another" was using her inner self to project failure so that next time she wouldn't even try. The false motive of "approval by others" can cloud the issue with confusions. I've learned that when I turn my thoughts to Jesus Christ (who alone knows my motives) I am able to reject false ideas and hold steady.

*Prayer is when you talk to Jesus*, said a child, when asked for a definition. Prayer is also when you think of Jesus. For some adults prayer is more difficult than making a speech in public.

In a little town in Wisconsin I held a prayer workshop for women of a Classis of the Reformed Church. The pastor's wife told me of an elderly lady who had longed to pray, but so far had been unable to do so. Each week before she came to prayer meeting, she would carefully write out her prayer, memorize it and put it in her purse. During the

prayer-time, with trembling fingers cold as ice, she would unfold the little slip of paper—which she already knew by heart. Try as she might, she was unable to lift her voice to even read what she had so carefully prepared. Furthermore, so preoccupied was she with this effort that she scarcely heard the prayers of others. Each time she went home, she secretly hoped that the next time she might be able to participate.

I also recall an older woman in a New England town who found the love of the group gave her courage to start to pray audibly. The next morning she came back relaxed and smiling. "I slept last night without sleeping pills for the first time in five years! More than that, when my favorite granddaughter called this morning from college, (as she usually does) she said, 'Grandma, what's happened to you?' When I asked what she meant, she replied, 'You sound so relaxed, your voice sounds soft and different?'"

If you are agreeing with what I've written, why not ask God to help you be creative enough to find His way to set up a prayer service in your church? Ask His guidance that even the most fearful will want to participate and thus begin to find freedom. Why should any prayer meeting result in people carrying away more self-condemnation than they brought with them?

If prayer is talking to Jesus, why not stop *trying to pray*, and just talk to Him? Why should anyone condemn themselves for the way in which they do or do not pray? Whose approval do we want? There is no special way to pray that wins God's approval. He loves us no matter what we do, or how we pray.

**Children are not self-conscious**

We could learn to pray, if only we'd be as little children—unself-conscious. Children don't think beforehand what they will say to Jesus. They just say it. Whatever comes to their minds, whatever is in their hearts—they say it. They do this instinctively because they are aware of His love, and feel no need to protect themselves. Self-conscious protection is the farthest idea from their little minds.

Children do not think in theological terms of God, but rather in the love-terms of the heart. They have an inner sense about people and know when they are liked or disliked. I'm not suggesting that we ignore our minds, and throw out our theology, but we do suffer from "adulthood"—the lack of being loved. We lack the simplicity to follow our hearts into the presence of Jesus who is always ready to make known His love for us.

Childlikeness is a state of mind within us. When my mother was 83 she made this remark: "I sometimes can't believe this old body is mine. One thing I know, it is not *me*. The real me is still like the little girl who ran around my father's farm in Minnesota." My mother's active mind had a mental picture of herself which gave her an openness and a teachableness which kept her young in spirit.

By contrast there was the friend who drove me to several cities in the east. He has a "block" in his mind because of a mental picture of himself, but I don't think he was aware of it. He was an older man of considerable weight but not much height. On one occasion as he wedged himself behind the wheel, he laughed and said, "Funny thing, I know I ought to take off some weight, but in my own mind I am still a slim young man in my 20's!"

In plain English, one of these was childlike because of an open mind, while the other was childish because of a closed mind.

### The power of Imagination

This is another quality which children possess which I'm learning to develop, mainly because it makes God more real. There is no problem about praying or prayer when God is real. Children have no difficulty in believing Jesus is right there with them. To them all of life is a fairy story. Imagination is a gift we should help them cherish and channel.

One evening last year a child forced me into an imaginary situation which taught me a great deal about the release and freedom which can accompany imagination. I had not seen Paul and Marie Little since their marriage, so it was with real pleasure that I accepted their invitation to dinner. I sat in the living room while Marie got dinner and Paul and little son were in the garage. The five-year-old daughter came into the room but paid no attention to me, although we had been introduced upon my arrival.

Thinking to make friends, I said encouragingly, "Hi, how are you?"

She continued to ignore me completely. Rather shyly, as if she were alone, she went from one chair to another, touching and patting one arm after another, all the while avoiding my eyes as if I weren't there. I waited, delighted at the quiet opportunity to watch such a charming child. She went to the window, lifted the curtain lightly, looked out a moment, put it down, stood there another moment, and then suddenly without a trace of shyness walked over, sat down beside me and spoke.

"What's your 'maginary name?"

I rose to the occasion and said the first thing that

popped into my mind. "My 'maginary name is Margery. What's yours?"

"Mine's Barbara."

She then settled back against the cushions quite secure in her 'maginary role. As two imaginary people we had real conversation. No strangeness, no shyness, but freedom to talk, to laugh, and to make up anything we wanted to say. She was a different little girl because she could get outside of herself in her role as Barbara, and she could accept me as a friend she knew, not a total stranger.

If we could but transfer the idea inherent in this story to the practice of prayer, and imagine ourselves little children in the presence of Jesus (who loves little children) prayer would be more relaxed and natural than even talking with each other.

For children, the power of imagination carries over into religion, as it also should for adults. I want to say more about this subject of "imagination in prayer" in a later chapter, when we talk about God's presence with us, to show how God wants our minds as well as our hearts. In fact, He needs our minds and our imaginations to make Himself real to us. He created our minds in the first place in order to communicate with us.

One reason it is difficult for adults to pray is because our Father seems so far away—away up in heaven somewhere! The "Person" we are addressing is not present, or so it would seem, if we would listen to the tone of our voices and the content of our words.

### **Pray with your children**

Did you ever stop to think how children pray? And to whom they pray? Whom does your child address when he prays? "Dear Jesus . . ." Have you

ever considered why children pray to Jesus, while their parents pray, "Our Father"?

I'll tell you why. Because Jesus is real to children. They come home from Sunday school with pictures of Jesus blessing the children, Jesus healing the sick, Jesus teaching and feeding the crowd. They sing about Him: "Jesus loves me this I know." "Jesus loves the little children of the world."

Listen to them pray and you'll know Jesus is real to them. They tell Him everything and no subject is considered out-of-bounds until they begin to imitate the prayers of their elders. Then too often they begin to lose interest in church and religion altogether.

Recently as a guest in the Glenn Torrey home in Kansas, I was invited to teach the family conversational prayer. We had just finished supper.

"Shall we pull up that chair for Jesus?" I suggested to the five-year old. Sliding off her chair, she pulled the empty one from the wall to a place beside her own. Then sitting down, she looked dubiously at the chair and then at me.

"Will Jesus sit in a high-chair?" she asked.

"Why don't you ask Him?" I replied.

Looking at the chair a moment while we waited, she began to nod her head, "Yes, He says He will."

Prayer begins with the presence of Jesus with us, "whom having not seen, we love."

Perhaps you could begin to pray by praying with children—yours, or someone else's. I remember a father I met in Bermuda who told me it was impossible for him to pray when others were present because he didn't have the right language. (He meant the King-James Shakespearian language.) Then he amended his statement.

"Well, I do pray with my two boys. They're eight and ten. When I pray with them, I'm one of them.

That's the best time of the day for me, because I can talk to Jesus right from my heart like the boys do."

I couldn't resist asking, "What do you think might happen between your wife and yourself, if you two could communicate through prayer-dialogue like that?"

He threw up his hands and shook his head. "Impossible! Neither of us could be like children with each other!"

Impossible? What is not possible with man is possible with God. In His loving presence it is not necessary to wear a mask for protection, for prayer is an open highway for the expression of love from His heart to ours.



They brought children for him to touch; and the disciples scolded them for it. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant, and said to them, 'Let the children come to me; do not try to stop them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. . . .' And he put his arms around them, laid his hands upon them, and blessed them.

Mark 10:13-16, NEB.



When love is present, the message is heard.

