

FAMILY CONNECTIONS

THE PRAYERS OF PARENTS

by Calinic Berger

The Bible gives us several examples of parents whose faith and prayer on behalf of their children were more powerful than those of the Apostles themselves. We know very little and even next to nothing about most of these parents. We can assume they were ordinary people. However, they were people who had reached their limit, a point of desperation, with regards to the most important persons in their lives: their own children.

A common characteristic of these parents is that they did not quit. Take the father of the "lunatic" son (Mt 17:14-21). This man approached Jesus and said, "Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is a lunatic and sorely afflicted: for often he falls into the fire, and often into the water. And I brought him to your disciples, and they could not cure him." This poor father had a boy who Matthew says was held by some form of demonic possession. Whatever the condition of the son, it is clear that the boy was engaging in self-destructive behavior. The father was at his wits' end. He brought the boy to the disciples, to whom had been given power to cast out demons, but they could do nothing. The father then took the matter himself to God. Jesus healed his son.

The most notable detail in the healing of this boy was that it was not the faith of the boy himself that healed him. He did not even want to be healed. Nor was it the faith of the priests (i.e., the Apostles) to whom the boy was brought, who could do nothing for him. Rather, it was the faith of the parent. What kind of faith? The boy's father came kneeling before the Lord, entreating him with his whole soul. He would not take "no" for an answer. The disciples themselves were amazed and asked Jesus why they themselves could not heal the boy. "If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you shall say unto this mountain, Be removed hence to another place; and it shall be removed; and nothing shall be impossible unto you. However, this kind does not go out but by prayer and fasting."

What kind of faith did the Lord call for? This faith can be small like the mustard seed, which is almost invisible to the human eye. However, when crushed and broken, the mustard seed gives off fire in

its taste. So was the heart of this father: crushed, broken, in desperation for his son. In this state, his prayer had the fire of a fervency that carried his faith. He did not say about his son, "He's hopeless," "It's been this way for years," "It's up to him to want to be healed," or "He's his own man."

Mark tells us an additional and important detail about this father: he realized that his own faith in God was not perfect. Mark tells us that "the father of the child cried out and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief" (Mk 9:24). The father took all his own imperfections and inner failings, known to himself alone, and laid them down at the feet of Jesus. Then he asked again on behalf of his son. Jesus healed him. God always hears the selfless prayers of parents who do not quit.

Another example is the woman of Canaan (Mt 15:21-28). She was not Jewish, meaning, not right in her religious status. She came to Jesus without a husband with her, for whatever reason. Perhaps she was a sinner. She confessed Christ's identity: "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is grievously afflicted with a devil." The Lord at first ignores her, answering her not a word. How often does a parent feel ignored by God! Like the father of the lunatic, this woman also went to the Apostles, who grew weary with her and even asked Jesus to send her away!

Why did the Lord ignore her? She was suffering on account of her daughter. We can only imagine the state of this woman, especially if it may be assumed that she had no husband and a severely afflicted daughter. The Lord ignored her petition. Her heart then broke: "Then came she and worshipped him, saying, Lord, help me." Jesus answered her with an insult: "It's not right to cast the children's bread to dogs." A child was the most important person in the family whereas a dog in Palestine was a scavenger, often considered to be like a rodent. Yet Jesus' words did not deter this woman. A broken, humble heart is unaffected by insults, just as it is unaffected by praise. She had nothing of herself left on behalf of her daughter. If Christ was referring to something about her personal life, she was willing to confess it: "Yes, it is so, Lord."

Yet she did this in the context of her selfless prayer for her daughter. "And her daughter was healed from that very

hour." She did not quit.

Neither of these parents was a saint. One lacked faith, the other was possibly unrighteous. What they had in common was a love that would not quit. This love drove them to kneel before the Son of God, confess their imperfections and beg healing for someone other than themselves. God never ignores a "broken and contrite heart" (Ps 50:17). According to St. Cyril of Alexandria, such is the only sacrifice God accepts. Neither does God ignore the fervent, unwavering prayer of a desperate parent. But offering this prayer is a crucifixion that must be suffered to win the resurrection of the child. Without the crucifixion, there is no resurrection.

The Old Testament also tells us of many unrighteous parents whose repentance and fervent prayer to God on behalf of their children was heard. Jacob and David are the prime examples. When God gives a gift to a child on behalf of the prayer of a desperate parent or grandparent, that gift is never taken away. True, the child can use, misuse, or not use at all that gift. Whatever the case, he will always have it.

Prayer is an essential component of parenting. So it could be said: on the one hand, one must not spare the rod (Prov 13:24), but on the other, one must get down on the hands and knees in prayer. Parents should talk to their children about God, but also need to talk to God about their children. The balance between these two is up to each parent, as each parent and each child is unique. But one should not neglect fervent, consistent prayer. Unlock its power. While healing does not always depend on the faith of oneself or others but also on the mysterious will and purpose of God, nevertheless, our prayer is an indispensable component in working with God. God acts when we persistently pray (cf., Lk 18:7-8).

To those who are not parents: remember to pray selflessly for others. It's one thing to pray for ourselves but quite another when we pray selflessly for others. A prayer from another is something every one of us needs.

God hears persistent, selfless prayers. If we do not feel the faith to

offer such prayers, let us too cry out, "Lord, I believe – help my unbelief!" If when drawing near to God we feel our unrighteousness, let us confess our failings and weaknesses, laying them down at the feet of Jesus and again crying out, "Lord, help us!"

Fr. Calinic (Berger) is the pastor of Holy Cross Romanian Orthodox Church in Hermitage, Pa. His article is published in Challenges of Orthodox Thought and Life: Reflections on Christian Foundations and Living Traditions (Jackson, Mich.: ROEA Publications, 2011). Reprinted with permission.

FAMILY GOSPEL LESSONS

This Center for Family Care resource will guide your family through Pentecost based on each Sunday's Gospel reading. Ideal for families to use with the purpose of preparing for Divine Liturgy. Each lesson contains the Gospel reading, brief information about it, discussion questions, activities, a final quote or story, a prayer, and further resources. Currently available online at www.lent.goarch.org/family/

Family Connections is a ministry of the Center for Family Care of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America.

For more information about the center's ministries please contact the center at:
79 Saint Basil Road
Garrison, NY 10524
Phone: (845) 424-8175
Fax: (845) 424-4172
Email: familycare@goarch.org
Website: www.familygoarch.org

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A PRAYER FOR PARENTS

O Lord, Heavenly Father, You have blessed us with the gift of family and have entrusted us with their spiritual upbringing. You commanded that we should teach our children about You in our lives: when we sit in our house, when we walk by the way, when we lie down and when we rise. Guide us O Lord every moment of the day as we work toward this awesome task.

Let the words of Christ dwell in us, so that we may teach and guide our family, through our words and deeds, to the saving knowledge of Your everlasting kingdom. Help us, O Lord, be compassionate, kind, and patient throughout our days. If one of us has a complaint against another, help us to forgive each other; as You have forgiven us. Let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts. Above all, help us remember to put on love which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

We thank You, Lord for the many blessings and mercies You continually bestow on us. In everything we do, in word or deed, may we always do so in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through His Holy Spirit. Amen.

– Taken from *The 2004–05 Planner; The Orthodox Daily Calendar and Resource Guide* by the Department of Youth and Young Adult Ministries.