

“Blessing of the Students”

Lamentations 2:19

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Almost twenty years ago, I began a tradition at the beginning of the school year. I asked all the school age children to come to the platform at the end of a worship service so we could pray for them. As the years went by, I added other components to this student blessing. I recognized teachers and administrators and included them in the prayer. I asked a photographer to take a group picture of our children. I requested that the names of the children be printed on slips of paper so that church members could take one home and pray for that child throughout the school year.

I recall being influenced by Jeremiah’s challenge to his people recorded in Lamentations 2:19. “Lift up your hands to Him for the lives of your children.” What better time to do this, I thought, than the beginning of the school year. I am pleased that my former church continues this tradition and we adopted it when I moved here.

Why do we need to pray for our children? For the same reason Jeremiah instructed his people to pray for their children. Times were hard and he realized parents and their children needed help.

It was a time of chaos, confusion and danger in the Holy Land. Jerusalem lay in ruins in 587BC after the Babylonians destroyed it. Many citizens were exiled to Babylon and those that remained in Jerusalem lived in fear and want.

Jeremiah knew the children were most vulnerable and needed protection from harm, provisions for their physical needs, peace in the midst of turmoil, strength in a time of adversity, guidance in a fog of confusion, confidence in the face of challenges and hope in the midst of despair.

These were overwhelming needs and could not be satisfied by even the most loving and responsible parents. They needed help, divine help and Jeremiah was aware of it. “Lift up your hands to Him for the lives of your children.” That was good advice for those adults. It is good advice for us.

For what do we need to pray? What do our children need in these unsettling times? While our situation is certainly different from Jeremiah’s, I suspect the needs of our children are similar. In many ways, our children are also growing up in a world acquainted with chaos, confusion and danger. Terrorist attacks, sexual predators, drug dealers, drunk drivers, abusive parents and negative peer pressure are contributing to the risks. The pitfalls and challenges facing our children are daunting, for them and us. We all need God’s help to steer us safely through these turbulent waters.

Allow me to suggest some things you might want to include in your prayers. Of course, you will need to be more specific as you become aware of particular concerns.

Pray that our children will understand that they matter to God and all of us. Many children struggle with self-esteem issues, especially as they age. Ask God to help them realize how important they are to Him and us, even as He helps us to demonstrate our love and appreciation for them.

Ask God to help our children to see their potential. One reason children underachieve is because talents are not recognized and cultivated. Pray that God will use school teachers, church leaders, parents and grandparents to help each child see his or her abilities so that honorable goals can be set and pursued.

In many communities in Japan, it is the custom to tear down and rebuild wooden temples at certain intervals. This is done for two reasons; to teach the younger generation how to build and to give them the confidence they need to do so.

Three generations of master craftsmen are employed: the apprentices who are learning the trade; the master craftsmen of the middle years who have already lived through one rebuilding; and the older generation who has been through this procedure twice and serve as coaches. What a practical way this is to bring generations together to teach a skill and instill confidence in the young.

Ask God to help our children dream and plan all their lives. Kids have vivid imaginations that transport them into the world of a better tomorrow. Pray they never lose it.

Much attention has been focused this summer upon the fortieth anniversary of the first moon landing. As you know, Neil Armstrong was the first man to walk on the moon. One reason he accomplished this feat was because of the dreams he pursued.

One night in the spring of his senior year of high school, he went to see his physics and chemistry teacher, Mr. Crites. They visited on the front porch, as was the custom in his small Ohio town.

When it came time for Neil to leave, they stepped down from the porch into the light of a great silvery moon. "Neil," Mr. Crites asked, "what are you going to do with your life?" Neil smiled and looked up at the moon. "Mr. Crites," he responded, "I'd like to visit the man up there." That was 1946, twenty-three years before that first moon landing.

Pray that our children never quit dreaming and pursuing them with the same kind of determination that Neil Armstrong did. It is not easy to have faith in your own ideas, especially when surrounded by skeptics.

Ask God to give our children wisdom to make good decisions. Potential is also unfulfilled because bad decisions are made that have devastating consequences. As adults, we know that we can be our best friend or worst enemy. Children fail to realize this sometimes.

Ask God to help our children stay away from those things that would sabotage their future, especially in our permissive society. Ask Him to help them discern between good and bad and see the consequences of both. Only God can give them the desire and courage to resist temptation, saying no to things that are harmful and yes to things that are good. Ask Him to help them make healthy choices that will open doors of opportunity for years to come.

It has been reported that Abraham Lincoln voiced a prayer for his young son, Robert Todd, as he began school. "Teach him that it is far more honorable to fail than to cheat," was a part of that prayer. Lincoln knew the connection between character and success. I hope we do, too, and pass it on to our children.

Ask God to bring positive influences into their lives, good teachers, role models and friends. Ask Him to help our children recognize whom they can trust and follow.

Several years ago a sociology professor had his class go into the Baltimore slums to get case histories on 200 children. They were asked to write an evaluation of each child's future. In almost every case, the students wrote, "This child doesn't have a chance. I see nothing but problems ahead."

Twenty-five years later, another professor sent students out of the classroom to find these individuals to see what happened to them. They located 180 of the 200 and were shocked. One hundred seventy-six had achieved phenomenal success and were outstanding citizens of their communities. Each was asked, "How do you account for your success?" In each case, the reply came with feeling, "I had a teacher that cared about me and made a difference in my life."

Ask God to help our children recognize garbage and trash when they hear and see it, because the world is full of it. The Internet, radio, television and theaters have no shortage of moral pollution that can mislead and confuse our children. Ask God to help them turn away from it.

Ask God to give them discipline to be good students. Our children face so many distractions that would keep them from seeing the importance of their studies. They need God's help to stay focused.

Referring to Lincoln's school prayer for his son, he also said, "Teach him the wonder of books." It appears that Lincoln believed that a hunger for learning would lead to self-discipline. I believe it will, too.

Ask God to give them the confidence needed to accept and tackle challenges that will be placed before them. Many children struggle with inferiority. It is natural for them to compare themselves to others that excel and feel inadequate. It is normal to be gripped with the paralyzing fear of failure and avoid challenges that would unleash hidden abilities. Ask God to give them the confidence they need to pursue excellence, take risks and go down uncharted paths. Ask Him to go with them, especially when they must go alone.

Once again, Jackie and I are praying for a child in school. Last weekend, my youngest, Josh, called me while he was driving to Austin, Texas. Josh lives in Houston and works for Spectra Energy. He was beginning classes for his MBA, which he will take in Houston after the initial week in Austin.

He confessed that he was both excited and a little nervous. "I've been out of college seven years," he said. "I understand," I told him. "I went back to school to get another degree at your very same age. I had butterflies in my stomach, too. I'll be praying for you everyday."

Even twenty-nine year old students need our prayers. There is no age limit on praying for children in school, is there?

Ask God to encourage our children when disappointments come. A small child was having a bad week and said to her teacher, "Some days you need a Saturday on a Wednesday." Don't we all?

Every venture or relationship will not succeed, resulting in great disappointment. It is easy to give up when things don't work out as expected, especially if you did your best. Ask God to be close to our children when their dreams are shattered, hearts are broken and egos are bruised. Ask Him to help our children learn from failure and disappointment so they will be stronger and better prepared for the future.

Ask God to help our children have fun and enjoy these years. School days can be some of the best in a person's life as he or she develops lasting relationships and spends time with friends. Children need God to help them choose good friends and engage in healthy activities, though.

Ask God to help our children be positive role models and Christian witnesses in the classroom and at all school activities. Positive peer pressure is just as strong as negative. I grinned when I recently heard an interview with a young person that said, "I rebelled against bad behavior!" What a great way to talk about resisting negative peer pressure. Ask God to give our children this kind of courage.

Ask God to forgive them when they make mistakes and let them know they are still loved. Children need to be affirmed, especially after they have done wrong. They need to know that God's love is unconditional and that His grace is sufficient to rebuild their self-esteem and lives. Ask God to help this church to be a safe place for children to fall where unconditional love is modeled.

Ask God to give our children peaceful homes that foster growth and learning. Ask Him to provide every child with parents that make their well-being a priority, even if their parents are divorced or have re-married.

Finally, pray that God will protect our children from evil and harm. Jesus included this in his model prayer when he said, "Deliver us from evil." We all know that schools are not as safe as they once were and our children need divine protection.

I'll conclude with one of my favorite verses about children penned in The Prophet by Kahlil Gibran.

"Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of life's longing for itself. They come through you but not of you, and though they are with you, yet they belong not to you. You may give them your love, but not your thoughts, for they have their own thoughts. You may house their bodies, but not their souls, for their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams. You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you. For life goes not backwards nor carries with yesterday. You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth. The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite and he bends you to his might that his arrows may go swift and far. Let your bending in the archer's hand be for gladness, for even as he loves the arrow that flies, so he also loves the bow that is stable."

Will you join me in praying for our children as they begin another school year? If so, take one of the slips of paper as you leave that has a child's name on it. Keep it in your Bible or devotional material as a reminder to pray for this person. If you want to let this person know you are praying for him or her, see Kellie, Amanda, Kara or Carra about how to contact them. I'm sure they will be glad to hear from you.

"Lift up your hands to Him for the lives of your children." Let's do it again this year.

