

Ten Ways to Give the Greatest Gift

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Only 18 ... 17 ... 16 ... more shopping days! And you still have to find, buy and wrap all the gifts your children have been hinting about—if you're going to have a good Christmas, this year.

Or so it seems.

As the days count down, the stress piles up. You still want to find the perfect present—the greatest gift ever!

So, what *is* the greatest gift you can give your child?

Ask a room full of parents and you're liable to get a wide range of answers: love, acceptance, confidence, a strong self-image. How about quality time? Attention? Material wealth?

These are valuable and important. But which is the greatest?

Perhaps this hint from God's Word will help: "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?" (Mark 8:36).

The greatest gift Christian parents can give their children is what you might call "soul food." It's to make sure they get the nourishment they need for their faith to grow. Yes, only God can give the gift of faith. But He cultivates that faith through the work of parents, Sunday-school teachers, pastors, Lutheran day-school teachers, and fellow Christians.

Still, raising children in our fast-paced society is demanding. To be a "good parent," mothers and fathers often feel they have to be able to do it all—sports, scouts, academic competitions, birthday parties, music lessons—the job description seems endless. How can we even begin to meet all the needs our children have? It seems the harder we try, the more they need. No wonder parents often "meet themselves coming and going."

As Jesus told Martha, though, "You are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed" (Luke 10:41-42).

Imagine parents raising well-adapted children who grow up with a good education and a strong self-image. Now, imagine that these parents never brought their children to the life-giving waters of Baptism. Imagine they never taught them anything about God's Word at home or took them to church. Perhaps such children would grow to do wonderful things in the world. But would they have what they need most?

“What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?” Now, perhaps you’re thinking to yourself, “How can I add one more thing to my life?” Rest assured, this is not something you “add” to your life. It’s a matter of prioritizing your life. Since *the most important thing* we can do for our children is to bring them up in the Christian faith, to give them as many opportunities as possible to grow in that faith, our priorities must change. Faith-full things take on a new priority; other things become less important.

Many parents have been trying to be “Super Parent,” when being a Christian parent clearly means going to church together, talking about Jesus, doing family devotions and encouraging our children in their faith. It’s not your taxi-driving time or your gift-shopping talent that make you the parent God wants you to be. It’s teaching your children what it means to be forgiven, living in that forgiveness, and sharing it with others. Indeed, if we succeed at this, our children will be set for much more than a good temporal life. If you’ve been scrambling to give your children everything you think they need, if you’ve been trying to be “Super Parent”—STOP! That’s too much pressure. Trying to do it all has likely made you irritable and impatient. It’s probably been the cause of many sins parents commit against their children.

Instead, opt for the “easy life” in Christ. Forgive yourself for past failures. Remember, Christ’s death and resurrection for us means we don’t have to beat ourselves up over the times we’ve blown it in the past. Our Lord’s full and free forgiveness now gives us the freedom and strength to live a new life in Christ.

So are you giving your children the greatest gift? Here are 10 gifts that you can give your children to nourish their faith and actually reduce the stress in your family:

- 1.** Make use of time in the car with your children to talk about your faith.
- 2.** Pray together in the morning, before meals and at bedtime. Use written prayers as well as prayers “from the heart,” giving each person a chance. Look at Luther’s morning and evening prayers, the Lord’s Prayer and other favorites.
- 3.** Make your faith an integral part of resolving conflict in the family. End arguments by forgiving your children and asking them to forgive you when appropriate.
- 4.** Encourage your children in their relationships with your pastor, their friends and families at church.
- 5.** Write notes and letters telling your children over and over again that they are loved by God and special to you.
- 6.** Make time for family devotions. Encourage questions. Explore subjects your children suggest. Make that all-important connection between faith and everyday life. Use the catechism.

- 7.** Make Sunday school and church something your family does together. If children ask why they have to go to church, answer them by explaining, “This is what our family does on Sunday morning to grow in our faith.”
- 8.** Take your child to youth-group activities and other events at church. These are often considered “extras,” but having Christian friends can be crucial for a child’s spiritual nourishment.
- 9.** Send your child to a Lutheran school if there’s one in your area.
- 10.** Don’t quit nourishing your children just because they are confirmed. Keep going to church together as long as they’re living at home—and even after.

This Christmas, as we celebrate once again the Greatest Gift the world will ever know, may the Lord bless you as you continue to help your children grow in their understanding of that precious Gift.