

Matthew 5:1-16 and 38-48; 6.

Aim of lesson

To show the children how followers of Jesus should behave in order to please God and be blessed by him.

Background study

Exodus 20:1-17; Matthew 4:23-25; Philippians 4:8-9; Hebrews 12:11.

Suggested outline of lesson

Jesus wanted to guide his disciples

Because of the great things that Jesus had done, "healing every disease and every infirmity among the people", he became famous throughout the country, and a great multitude of people followed him from many districts. These people had heard of his works in Galilee and they wanted to see and hear him for themselves. On one occasion Jesus withdrew from the crowd and went up into a mountain because he wanted to speak to his disciples (and to others who would listen) about how people should behave in order to please God and feel happy within themselves.

Disciples should have the right attitude

Jesus spoke of many things; there were some stern warnings of what his followers would have to face, rules of conduct, caution, compassion, encouragement and hope. Matthew 5:3-12 constitutes a lesson in happiness (blessed = happy). These verses are not easy for children to understand. It will be necessary for you to study them and have the meaning clear in your own mind in order to explain the blessings that come from a wholehearted following of Jesus - blessings now and blessedness in the future. Happiness will come to those who, poor-spirited in the world's estimation, have ceased to strive for wealth and influence and have concerned themselves wholly and humbly with God's way, for in the end they will inherit far greater than the world could ever offer. Those who mourn because of sin in themselves and in the world, and devote themselves to the pursuit of righteousness, will live to rejoice and will receive all their desire. Those who exhibit the godly qualities of mercy, purity and peace will be received with mercy by the Lord God in the kingdom of peace. Those who, because they follow the example of Jesus, are made to suffer by ungodly people will, when the wicked have been overthrown, be given the victory in the kingdom. Indeed, they can feel happy even while they suffer because the promise is firm and the future blessing assured. It is not an easy path to tread and courage is needed; but there will be happiness for those who keep on trying to follow Jesus' example, and they will make others happy, too.

Disciples should be examples of good behaviour

Matthew 5:13-16 provides a vivid lesson of example. Explain to the children that it is no good just saying that we believe in Jesus and going to Sunday School if, for the rest of the week, we are selfish and unhelpful or unkind to others. Help them to see that by losing our temper, being rude, or by not doing the things we are asked to do, we are letting Jesus down because we are not doing as he has asked. At this point, the significance of verse 15 can be demonstrated by lighting a candle and showing how it will soon go out if placed under a pot or jar. If we are to be lit with the love of Jesus, we must let it show all the time. A number of hymns and choruses will spring to mind on this theme, and the idea of being a shining example is a concept easily understood by children. Read verse 16 to the children, and ask them to try and remember that whatever they do, to do it as if for God, so that he may be praised.

Disciples should practise love to all

Ask the children if they have a special friend, then ask if there is someone they don't like very much, someone they never speak to or play with. Explain to them that we are all in the same situation; we do not have a natural liking for everybody. It is very easy to be kind and happy with people we like, but Jesus tells us that we must love everyone, which is not at all easy. Explain that Jesus goes even further than this (5:38-39) by showing the ideal way to behave towards those who hurt or bully. The natural response would be to retaliate rather than submit, and children especially would think that was fair. Ask them whether getting one's own back ever resolves the matter or improves the situation. Jesus teaches that to hurt others is wrong, and that to retaliate when we are hurt makes us as bad as the bully. Discuss with the children that this is a problem faced by children and adults, all of whom need courage to try to live up to the standard that Jesus set, not only in his teaching but by example. Show how, if we make a real effort to be kind to our "enemies" (and pray for them), we may find we could love them after all. That would make us and them happy and, more importantly, it would please Jesus.

Disciples should be generous

Jesus taught that his followers should be kind and generous to those who need help, but that kindness should be shown for the right reasons; these are sympathy and genuine care for others. Those who make a show of giving, in order to impress others, do not impress God, and are giving for the wrong reason. The kind of people we are is seen not only in what we do, but in how we do it.

Disciples should be sincere

The same is true of prayer. God is not impressed by clever words that are not sincere. Tell the children that in giving his disciples the Lord's prayer Jesus was, in fact, teaching them what sort of things they should pray about. It would be interesting to hear what the children understand by the words of this prayer, which they may already know, and to correct any misapprehensions.

Disciples should work for real treasure

People tend from a very early age to equate possessions with happiness, and many children's stories foster this idea. The teaching in Matthew 6:19-21 is that riches can be of a different kind, and one needs to choose which treasures to seek. Those who spend all their time and energy accumulating material wealth have no time and consequently no desire to attend to the much more important work of becoming rich in wisdom and goodness. The following few verses demonstrate that a choice has to be made between serving God and satisfying one's own material desires. It is not possible to do both.

Disciples should learn how to trust God

Matthew 6:25-34 is an ideal passage for reading in class prior to a discussion on its meaning. We should trust in God and not worry, for God knows our needs. The lesson ends on a very encouraging note, that those who look to the things of God will be looked after by him.

Relevance to the children's lives

Jesus taught us to be kind to everyone, not just to our friends. It might be a good idea this week to make a special effort to try to do as Jesus says, and be especially kind to someone whom we don't like very much. Can you think of ways in which you could do this?

Worksheets

These should be self-explanatory.

Prayer

Dear Lord God, thank you for the teachings of Jesus. Help us to be kind and loving to one another, just as he was. Amen.

Memory verse

"Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).