Living beyond Obligation

Unselfish love shows that we are God’s children.

- In today’s gospel, Jesus reminds us that God’s love is universal—God sends rain and sunshine on those who do good and on those who do evil.
- Jesus asks the same unconditional love of us...and this can be a challenge for all of us, child and adult alike.
- The session invites primary children to consider how they can extend God’s unconditional love to others.

Question of the Week

What can I do to change my attitudes toward my “enemies” and treat them as Jesus would?
Getting Started (5-10 minutes)
Welcome children. After they’re seated, discuss:
◆ How do our friends act with us? What do we do together? How do we act around our friends?
◆ How do our enemies treat us? (Emphasize that the children should not use names when discussing enemies; if necessary, define enemies as people who do not like us or who are mean to us.)
◆ What do we do when we are with our enemies? How do we act around our enemies?

Explain:
◆ Jesus once told a story about friends and enemies—and that’s the story I want to tell you today.

Gospel Story (5 minutes)
Sun and Rain and You
Jesus sits on a hill. His friends gather around, listening to him. Some people who have just met Jesus stop to listen, too. You sit down right at his feet, wondering what he will say today.

“Loving your friends is good,” says Jesus. “You think of your best friend and smile. It’s easy to love your good friend. Loving our family is good,” Jesus goes on. “But I want you to love your enemies too.”

You think about someone you don’t like at all. Love that person? You will never feel about that person the way you feel about your friend. You don’t even want to. What does Jesus mean?

“How about the Romans?” Peter asks. “They bully us—order us around. Do you want us to love them?”

“They put my brother in prison,” says Joanna angrily. “I will never be able to love them, not a single one of them.”

Jesus listens closely. Then he points to the bright sunny sky. “The sunshine is beautiful today,” says Jesus. A few people murmur yes.

“We are having a good time in this sun together,” Jesus goes on. “But the sun is shining on the Romans, too. The sun is shining on every bully in town.” Then Jesus looks right at you as he says, “The sun is shining just as brightly on every person you don’t like.”

Joanna frowns, as she thinks over what Jesus is saying. Then Jesus says, “God gives you sun, whether you are kind or not God sends rain for you, whether you are doing right or wrong. God loves you, whether you are good or bad.

“God does the same for everyone. God gives sun and rain to all people. God loves every one of us and,” Jesus waits to make sure everyone hears this, “God loves every one of our enemies.”

Joanna’s face is troubled, but she keeps listening. Jesus smiles gently at her, then looks at you again while he says, “Be like God. Find a way to live with all people, your friends and your enemies both.”

Sun and Rain Art (10-20 minutes)
Discuss:
◆ What does God give to all people? (love, rain, etc.)

Create pictures of God giving rain or sun to all people:
◆ Rain Pictures
  — Cover a sheet of paper with bright crayon colors. Fill every bit of space with color.
  — Now cover these colors with solid black crayon, until no color peeks out.
  — Take a tissue and blot the surface of the paper.
  — Use a pointed instrument to etch a picture of rain falling on many different people. The pointed instrument will scrape away lines of black, leaving a picture drawn in bright colors showing through a black foreground.

◆ Sun Pictures:
  — Take a sheet of waxed paper. Use grated crayon and pieces of yarn to make a picture of the sun shining on many people. The yarn outlines shapes; the crayon lays down areas of color.
  — Carefully lay a second sheet of waxed paper on top of the design.
  — Gently press an iron set at the lowest possible heat on the waxed paper, to melt the crayons.

Praying Together (5 minutes)
Close by praying:
◆ We thank you, God, for loving (children name people whom God loves). Thank you for sun. Thank you for rain. Thank you for your love. Amen.

Note: Distribute this week’s At Home with the Good News to group members as they depart (or e-mail it to families after the session).
Welcome the Good News  
(5-10 minutes)
On page 1 of today’s Welcome the Good News you’ll find a simple illustration of Matthew 5:42. Read the text with children, then ask:
◆ What’s going on in this picture?

Children can then work in pairs to complete the Choices activity on page 2, which invites them to draw two ways to respond to two pictured situations; for each situation:
◆ What might revenge look like?
◆ What might forgiveness look like?

Children will also find With Your Family, an activity they can lead at home.

Singing Together  
(5-10 minutes)
From Singing the Good News you and the children can sing together:
◆ “Sing with Joy” (p. 15 of the songbook, also available as an MP3)
◆ “Sun and Rain” (p. 32 of the songbook)

Note: To access both the songbook and its attached MP3 files, open your Winter-A Seasonal Resources folder, then click on Singing the Good News.

V.I.P. Badges  
(5-10 minutes)
Children make badges to use in today’s V.I.P. Roleplay activity.

Before the session print the two V.I.P. Mini-Posters, attached to this document.

In the session, display the first of the two V.I.P. Mini-Posters (the one with only the initials). Ask:
◆ Does anyone know what V.I.P. stands for?

If children do not know what V.I.P. stands for, display the second of the two V.I.P. Mini-Posters (the one with the words spelled out). Read the words from the poster, then explain:
◆ Jesus says God loves each one of us.
◆ That makes each one of us a V.I.P.—a Very Important Person.
◆ Let’s make badges to remind us that we are very important people.

Directions to children:
◆ Cut or tear a sun shape or cloud shape from construction paper; this will make the badge that you will wear.
◆ On the badge, write the initials V.I.P.
◆ Write your own name on the badge, too. (Offer tactful help as necessary for nonwriters.)

Help children attach their badges to their shirts using loops of masking tape.

If you include the following activity, V.I.P. Roleplay, ask children to continue wearing their badges for that activity as well.

V.I.P. Roleplay  
(5-10 minutes)
Children interview people whom God loves.

Ask children to seat themselves as if they were an audience. Use a tube as a mock microphone.

Ask a volunteer to come to you. Say to the other children:
◆ Hello, and welcome to Someone God Loves, the talk show that brings you interviews with very important people whom God loves.
◆ And here’s one now! Can you answer questions for our audience, (name the child)?

Use several of these or similar questions:
◆ What’s your name?
◆ How old are you?
◆ What color do you like best?
◆ What food do you like best?
◆ What food do you dislike the most?
◆ What’s your favorite thing to do after school?
◆ Do you have any closing words for our audience?

Invite children from the audience to ask questions of the volunteer. Then invite the first volunteer to be the next interviewer.
**Bible Skills for Third Graders**  
(10-20 minutes)

Third graders invent roleplays about enemies.

Help children find Matthew 5:44 in their Bibles. Ask children to follow along as you read aloud the verse.

Discuss:
- What kinds of enemies can you name? *(People who fight with each other, people from countries that are at war, etc.)*
- How do enemies usually act toward one another?

Divide children into pairs. Directions to the pairs:
- Invent a roleplay about the verse we just read.
- Pick the parts of two enemies.
- One enemy will decide to follow Jesus’ advice; decide which of you will do that.
- Act out your roleplay.

After 2-3 minutes, suggest that children switch parts so that both children can experience what it means to try to follow Jesus’ advice with an enemy.

After another 2-3 minutes discuss:
- How did you try to follow Jesus’ advice? What did you do?
- What was hard about following Jesus’ advice?

**Children and the Gospel**

In today’s gospel, Jesus extends the formidable challenge to “love our enemies.” Children—as well as adults—may well find this difficult and frustrating. Throughout today’s session, listen carefully and without making judgements as children express their difficulties.

You may hear much skepticism about whether or not anyone can follow Jesus’ advice. A teacher reports, “One child said to me, ‘Jesus was unreal.’ I was so tempted to reply with a lecture about how Jesus’ advice was the only way to solve our problems, how it would bring peace, and blah, blah, blah.

“But I know from experience that children tune me out when I lecture. So I didn’t. I just listened at first. I thought about how hard it really was to follow Jesus’ advice; I have an enemy I’ve been praying to forgive for 10 years, and I haven’t yet.

“Then I said to the child, ‘I think this is the hardest teaching of Jesus I have ever tried to obey.’ I thought again a minute, then said, ‘But I wonder what the world would be like if everyone did try to obey.’ The child’s immediate answer: ‘No more wars!’

Jesus’ challenge may be hard to obey, but not hard to understand. And for all of us—adults and children alike—that’s a start.

**Where You’ll Find Everything Else**

- Attached to this Session Plan you will find:
  - Backgrounds and reflections for today’s readings, titled More about Today’s Scriptures.
  - A handout of today’s Gospel Story, to distribute or e-mail to children and families.
  - An optional activity that further explores today’s gospel titled Sun and Rain Chants.
  - Two printable V.I.P. Mini-Posters to use in the optional V.I.P. Badges activity.
  - A family paper, At Home with the Good News, to print and distribute or to e-mail to families for use at home.

- Open your Winter-A Seasonal Resources folder, then click on Seasonal Articles to find:
  - Information on Winter-A’s Models of the Faith.
  - An article exploring The Catholic Church as Steward of Creation.
  - A printable article with more on Paul’s Corinthian Letters.
  - The Introduction for Primary for Living the Good News.
More about Today’s Scriptures

Today’s readings urge us to go beyond our obligations to the challenge of loving. In Leviticus, God calls the people to be holy and to live in love. Paul reminds the Corinthians that all things belong to those who are in Christ. Jesus declares that for his disciples, unselfish love shows that we are God’s children.

Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18
The book of Leviticus is part of the strand of priestly material that is interwoven throughout Genesis to Joshua. Leviticus blends together cultic requirements for purity and ethical obligations of righteousness. Today’s reading is drawn from the holiness code (chaps. 17–26). The holiness enjoined in these chapters is not achieved by the actions or qualities of human beings, but by God’s act in separating out a people and binding them to God in a special covenant.

Chapter 19 echoes the provisions of the Decalogue (Exodus 20). Special attention is given to the needs of the disadvantaged. Each member of the community has the responsibility to correct a fellow-member in love. Leviticus 19:18b, joined with Deuteronomy 6:5, is the basis for Jesus’ summary of the law in the New Testament.

1 Corinthians 3:16-23
Paul seeks to overcome the community’s divisions by reminding them that they are God’s building. He then draws certain conclusions based on the metaphor of God’s building in which the only true foundation is Jesus Christ.

Paul then addresses the Corinthians directly reminding them of the type of building they are: “you (plural) are God’s temple.” The idea of individuals (6:19) as temples for the god dwelling within was common in Hellenism, but Paul’s primary reference for the image here is the community, the local church. Those who destroy the Christian community by fostering a spirit of quarreling and arrogance face judgment from God.

In verses 18-23 Paul returns to the themes of 1:10-29, quoting Job 5:13 and Psalm 94:11 to show the futility of human wisdom. Relationship to a particular leader is nothing to boast of (1:12); rather, leaders belong to the Church as servants (3:5). “All things” are in the Corinthians’ grasp, but as God’s gift (4:7). They are Christ’s possession, as Christ is in union with God.

Matthew 5:38-48
Today’s reading presents the last two of the six antitheses (5:21-48). The fifth antithesis (5:38-42) amends the limiting letter of the law in favor of a spirit of generosity and forbearance. The principle of retaliation (Exodus 21:24) was originally intended to limit the pursuit of boundless vengeance in a blood feud. Jesus’ command is to forego all acts of retaliation.

Jesus’ asks the disciples not to resist the insulting back-handed slap, to allow a creditor to take not only their coat (the undergarment) but even their cloak (the heavy overgarment), to go an extra mile when the Roman troops forced them to carry their gear, and to make their resources readily available to those in need.

The final antithesis, on love of one’s enemies, is the most challenging of all. Jesus’ quote echoes Leviticus 19:18 which commands the love of neighbor, but there is no command to hate one’s enemies, which justifies doing evil to them. The call to “be perfect” echoes Leviticus 19:2. The word “perfect” translates a Hebrew concept meaning “be complete, whole, undivided, and conforming to God’s will.”
Reflection

Peace activist Hildegard Goss-Mayr tells the story of the Russian army entering her village during World War II. Because the soldiers were victorious and hungry, everyone expected them to loot and destroy. Yet, when they pounded on her unlocked door, her father opened it and welcomed them like guests. He invited his family to create an atmosphere of trust for the dreaded Russians. Accordingly, the soldiers did not plunder or rape but, seeing that the family were weak and thin, they shared their own meager supply of food.

Why does it surprise us to hear the words of today’s gospel thus translated into actuality? When Jesus challenges us to surpass the law of vengeance, it is rare that anyone responds. It is more likely for us to sympathize with the underground forces who bomb the occupying army, the police who kill the murderer, or the victim who secures his revenge. At movies where the bad guy gets his due, we applaud heartily. These natural inclinations point up the distance between God’s perspective and ours. God’s gifts come as generously to the undeserving as they do to the deserving. And yet, Jesus reminds us, in God’s design, no logical calculations compute. God always throws in a surprise twist and comes with utterly unexpected largesse. All we can hope to do is share in God’s goodness. But it is inspiring to know that vast reserves of divine goodness exist and that we are called to participate in them. We can never reach the end of God’s love; we are always called to a higher perfection.

The Scriptures and the Catechism

Today we hear the Old Testament aim to be holy as God is holy. This demands loving our neighbor as our self (CCC, #2196; 1822–29; 2052–55). Jesus issues an even greater challenge for his disciples who are not only to love their neighbors but also their enemies (CCC, #1825)! This is probably the most difficult thing Jesus asks of us. When we move beyond labeling others as enemies and so thinking ourselves as justified in doing evil to them, we are on the most difficult way of Christlike behavior. When we can do this we will be whole, complete and integrated. So Jesus sums up the aim of Christian discipleship as being whole or mature and perfect as God is perfect (CCC, #2012–16).

The World of the Bible

Love Your Enemies

This is probably the most challenging thing Jesus demands of his followers and runs against everything they were accustomed to. In the biblical world, love and hate, friends and enemies, were strict opposites. Love was the fierce attachment to one’s group, especially the family. Hate was the disattachment or alienation from one’s group. These attitudes were matched by actions. Love disposed one to do good for those in one’s group, hatred prompted evil. A Greek proverb summed up the result: “Help a friend, harm an enemy.” Nothing illustrates the demands of conversion to Jesus’ values more strongly than this summons to love the persecutors whom you have every reason to hate.