



the complete guide to
Godly Play

Jerome W. Berryman

An imaginative method for presenting scripture stories to children

Orientation Session

Beginning the Godly Play
Church School Year



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INTRODUCTION

This Godly Play Orientation Session is part of *The Complete Guide to Godly Play*, a collection of over 100 Godly Play lessons and Godly Play support materials available from Morehouse Education Resources, a division of Church Publishing Incorporated.

The last two pages are the *Parent Pages* that go with the session. Using *Parent Pages* will help children recall—and in a sense *relive*—the Godly Play presentation at home. With this in mind, each *Parent Page* begins with suggestions for encouraging this sharing, then offers a condensed retelling of the story. Each *Parent Page* give parents information to help them understand Godly Play's methodology and purpose.

Developed by Jerome Berryman, God Play is an interpretation of Montessori religious education, which means it is more like spiritual guidance than what is typically thought of in the church as children's education. It involves children and adults, as guides, moving together toward fluency in the art of knowing how to use Christian language to nourish their moral and spiritual development.

If you are not an experienced Godly Play teacher, we strongly encourage you to first download and digest *How To Lead Godly Play Lessons*, available at: www.ChurchPublishing.org/GodlyPlayDigital. *How To Lead Godly Play Lessons* will explain the background of Godly Play, its methodology and clear guidelines for its use. You will need this grounding before attempting to lead Godly Play sessions or establish a Godly Play program in your church.

There are additional Godly Play resources available from Morehouse Education Resources at the site from which this lesson was downloaded. You will find these at: www.ChurchPublishing.org/Godly-PlayDigital.

In addition, you can learn more about Godly Play at the website of the Godly Play Foundation, found here: www.godlyplayfoundation.org. The Godly Play Foundation also offers Godly Play training for those interested in becoming Godly Play teachers and/or starting Godly Play programs in local parishes.

Beautifully crafted materials for telling Godly Play stories are available from Godly Play Resources. Visit them at www.godlyplayresources.com.

Enjoy the wonder of Godly Play, and blessings on you and the ones you lead in this transformative experience!

ORIENTATION SESSION

BEGINNING THE GODLY PLAY CHURCH SCHOOL YEAR

OPENING CELEBRATION AND ORIENTATION

We suggest you begin a Godly Play year by gathering the whole Sunday school together on the first Sunday of your education program. In your hall or other community space, set up one table per classroom. The pair of coteachers for each classroom can sit at their assigned table to meet the children and their parents.

OPENING

Provide an extra table near the entrance for session hosts, who can “direct traffic” to the appropriate class tables. In addition to meeting children and parents, teachers can give families useful handouts for the church school year. *Examples:*

- a schedule of Godly Play sessions (Handing out refrigerator magnets with these would be a nice touch.)
- “The Ten Best Ways for Parents”
- parent education schedule (This should include times for the Godly Play Parent Sessions described below.)
- guide to your church’s complete program for children and families (Godly Play is not a complete program; emphasize this fact by providing information on children’s choirs, vacation Bible schools, family nights, annual pageants and so on.)

FEAST AND ROOM VISITS

After children and parents meet the teachers, they can share conversation, a simple snack and beverages—a beginning “feast” to celebrate our church year together. Once all the parents have arrived, teachers should feel free to mingle.

Teachers leave the celebration a few minutes before parents to go the classrooms. Parents can then have the opportunity to tour the classrooms at the end of this orientation session. Children who have been in Godly Play rooms before will often want to act as tour guides for their parents: “This is where we keep the clay!”

FOLLOW-UP TO THE OPENING DAY FOR PARENTS: GODLY PLAY PARENT SESSIONS

Parents naturally want to know what goes on during a Godly Play lesson. Welcome this opportunity to invite parents into the Godly Play experience. For each session,

you will need to provide alternative space, leaders and activities for the children, so that their parents can fully enjoy together the Godly Play room. We suggest that you offer these sessions first to the parents of the youngest children, then work your way up to classes of older children.

In your invitation to parents, explain that they will experience a full Godly Play session: building the circle, hearing the lesson, responding with art or play, sharing a feast and saying goodbye. Emphasize in your invitation to parents that they need not—and should not—roleplay the parts of children during this time. They can also sit in chairs, if they wish, and not on the floor. This is their opportunity to experience, as adults, exactly what happens during a Godly Play session. You can make time available after the session to answer parents' questions about the experience they have shared.

SAMPLE HANDOUT

THE TEN BEST WAYS FOR PARENTS

One Godly Play lesson tells children about the “Ten Best Ways” to live. This is the story of the Ten Commandments that God gave to God’s People.

Here we offer “Ten Best Ways” for parents—not commandments, but ways we invite you, the parent, to share more fully in your child’s Godly Play experience.

Godly Play, Jerome Berryman’s interpretation of Montessori religious education, is an imaginative approach to working with children. This approach supports, challenges, nourishes and helps guide their spiritual quest.

Godly Play assumes that children have some experience of the mystery of the presence of God in their lives, but that they lack the language, the permission and the understanding to express and enjoy that spiritual experience in our secular culture. In Godly Play, we enter into our parables, sacred stories, silence and liturgy in order to discover God, ourselves, one another and the world around us.

THE TEN BEST WAYS FOR PARENTS

- Godly Play sessions take place on *(days and dates)* from *(starting time)* to *(ending time)*.
- Please help your children be on time. They won’t want to miss a minute!
- The Godly Play circle is built slowly and lovingly, to welcome each child, one at a time. When children arrive, they wait outside the door while the teacher helps them get ready to join the circle.
- Please say your goodbyes at the door, and know that the teachers are ready to make the next hour a safe and welcoming time for every child.

- When you pick up your child, keep in mind that young children will not always be able to tell you what they learned, because what they learned was *how* to learn about the powerful language of the Christian people.
- Also keep in mind that children will not always be able to show you a physical product for their “work” that day, because some of what they’ve learned cannot be put into words even by adults. In Godly Play, we focus on our relationship with God and the depths of relationships in the community of children.
- Please don’t come into the room during class because we want the Godly Play room to be a special place for the community of children. Even the teachers keep their profiles low during a Godly Play session!
- We would be happy to welcome you on a visit to the Godly Play room outside of session time. Call us at *(phone number)* to arrange a visit or to ask any questions you might have about the program.
- We welcome volunteers to support the teachers and the community of children by preparing the weekly “feast,” by taking care of the classrooms and materials and by making materials for teachers to use. Call *(phone number)* for more information.
- We hope you will attend a parent orientation class on *(date)*, at *(time)*. This is your chance to experience the Godly Play environment and process together with other parents.

Beginning the Godly Play Church School Year

Welcome to Godly Play!

Godly Play offers a creative, child-honoring way of entering into and experiencing the biblical story. In Godly Play, we play with the language of God and God's People: our sacred stories, parables, liturgical actions and silence. Through this powerful language, through our wondering, through the community of players gathered together, we hear the deepest invitation of all: an invitation to come play with God.

What Happens in a Godly Play Session?

At the Threshold

A doorkeeper waits by the door to the Godly Play classroom, warmly welcoming children as they arrive. He says (of course, "he" could also be a "she"), "I'm so glad you're here. Are you ready to be part of a Godly Play classroom?"

Building the Circle

Children make their way into the room and sit in a circle around the storyteller. She talks (of course, "she" could also be a "he") quietly and easily with the children, building a community where each and every participant is warmly welcomed.

The storyteller says, "We need to get ready for the story." She shows how by sitting quietly, legs crossed, hands at the ankles. Conversation yields to silence. She smiles and says, "Watch where I go to get this story."

Presenting the Lesson

The storyteller goes to get the materials for the day's presentation—a box, a basket or a tray. She brings these materials to the circle.

Slowly, deliberately, she brings out the story figures and objects, gently moving and arranging them as she tells the story. The children's eyes focus where her eyes and hands focus, on the small wooden figures, painted plaques or beautifully finished props moving in the circle.

The lesson continues, moves forward...and concludes.

The storyteller sits back, but keeps her eyes on the figures. "I wonder," she says. "I wonder what part of this story you like best?" There is silence for a moment, and then a child answers...and then perhaps another. The storyteller affirms each answer.

"I wonder what part is the most important?" Children name different parts. Every serious struggle to answer is affirmed.

"I wonder where you are in the story or what part of the story is about you?"

"I wonder if there is any part of this story we could leave out and still have all the story we need?"

The storyteller listens respectfully to every answer, repeating it, never calling one response good or another wrong. It is the child's effort to speak theologically in a seriously playful way that is being supported.

Response

The wondering sinks into silence. The children watch as the storyteller puts away the lesson. She invites them to think about what work they would like to do in response to the lesson. The children have been involved in the story and the wondering. Now that absorbed involvement continues as they, one by one, name what response they choose to make. Some

play mindfully with the materials from the presentation or from other presentations. Other want to paint. Still others work with crayons. For at least a quarter of an hour, they work at their responses.

The Feast

The storyteller turns the room lights off: a silent signal. She waits a moment, until all eyes are on her, then invites the children to put away their work and gather for the feast.

One child-server spreads a napkin in front of each child. Another puts down a healthy snack, and a third a cup of juice. After all have been served, a prayer is said, and the feast shared.

Saying Goodbye

When the feast is finished, the storyteller draws the attention of the group: "It's time to

say goodbye." One by one, children go to the storyteller and she holds out her hands. Some children take her hands, others lean forward and hug her. With each person she looks into their eyes, smiles and says a quiet goodbye. "It was a pleasure to have you here today. Thank you for being with us."

The Ten Best Ways for Parents

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Here we offer "Ten Best Ways" for parents, not commandments, but ways we invite you, the parent, to share more fully in your child's Godly Play experience.

Ten Best Ways for Parents

- 1.** Godly Play sessions take place at these times: from _____ to _____.
- 2.** Please help your children be on time. They won't want to miss a minute!
- 3.** The Godly Play circle is built slowly and lovingly, to welcome each child, one at a time. When children arrive, they wait outside the door while the teacher helps them get ready to join the circle.
- 4.** Please say your goodbyes at the door, and know that the teachers are ready to make the next hour a safe and welcoming time for every child.
- 5.** When you pick up your child, keep in mind that young children will not always be able to tell you what they learned, because what they learned was how to learn about the powerful language of the Christian people.
- 6.** Also keep in mind that children will not always be able to show you a physical product for their "work" that day, because some of what they've learned cannot be put into words even by adults. In Godly Play, we focus on our relationship with God and the depths of relationships in the community of children.
- 7.** Please don't come into the room during class because we want the Godly Play room to be a special place for the community of children. Even the teachers keep their profiles low during a Godly Play session!
- 8.** We would be happy to welcome you on a visit to the Godly Play room outside of session time. Call us to arrange a visit or to ask any questions you might have about the program.
- 9.** We welcome volunteers to support the teachers and the community of children by preparing the weekly "feast," by taking care of the classrooms and materials and by making materials for teachers to use. Call _____ for more information.
- 10.** We hope you will attend a parent orientation class on this date: _____, at this time: _____. This is your chance to experience the Godly Play environment and process together with other parents.