



Early Childhood Leader Guide

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Neighbors are more than the people who live next door.

Neighbors are more than the people in our families or communities. Through five carefully chosen Bible stories, *Who Is My Neighbor?* VBS leads children on a journey to discover more about God's great love. From looking at how to be a neighbor to diving into what it means to live out our faith, this interactive VBS series will lead children deeply into Bible stories focused on God's care and compassion for neighbors close at hand and around the world. Join us as we discover neighbors near and far!

About Early Childhood VBS

The five sessions in *Who Is My Neighbor? Early Childhood Leader Guide* have been developed especially for children ages 4–5. Each session includes:

- **Gathering**—Children gather and are welcomed to vacation Bible school. They will sing and give toward an offering project.
- **Bible story**—Children hear the Bible story and make connections between the Bible story and their lives.
- **Activities**—Children do activities that reinforce the day’s theme, including working in *My Book of Stories*, doing crafts, playing games, singing, and more. A snack is eaten during this time.
- **Sending**—Children gather after doing the activities, and receive a sending blessing.

Each session plan includes the day’s Scripture, Bible backgrounds, purpose statement, and Bible memory passage. Read over these sections so that you are familiar with the focus of the day.

Schedule

Who Is My Neighbor? is designed for a 2-hour-and-15-minute vacation Bible school program, but some programs may be longer or shorter depending on the amount of time available. The Early Childhood curriculum has plenty of ideas each day, but check with the VBS director to find out how long each day will be so that you know how much material to plan. Choose activities best suited for your schedule, space, and the children attending vacation Bible school.

The *Who Is My Neighbor?* curriculum for the K–5 program includes a Worship session, along with a drama that illustrates the day’s Bible story. Though worship and dramas are intended for older children, they are also appropriate for this age group. If you choose to attend Worship with the larger group, take time later to talk about worship and the dramas to be sure the young children understand them.

Room arrangement

Be flexible as you set up the meeting room space and organize a schedule. While some children can engage with stories and activities for longer periods of time, other children have shorter attention spans and will need to move around more frequently. Organize the space to accommodate the different needs and interests of the children, and to allow opportunity for movement between activities. Invite youth and adults to help you with the children, especially during the snack, craft, and game times.

If space is available, set up the following areas:

- **Story area**—This space will be used during the gathering and sending times, as well as when the children hear the Bible story. Place blankets, rugs, or carpet squares on the floor for comfortable seating. If you are able to provide a carpet square or individual towel for each child to sit on, it will give children a contained area and limit their distractions.
- **Table area**—Tables will be used when children make crafts and when they eat snacks.
- **Play area**—This area will be used for games and other movements. Some activities are suitable for outdoors, so in addition to having an indoor play area, you may want to designate an outdoor play area, too.
- **Quiet time area**—You may use the story or play area spaces to provide a place for children to rest after eating their snack. Have blankets, pillows, and towels on hand to make the quiet area comfortable.

Storytelling

Use a sandbox to help you tell the Bible stories. Fill a clear, shallow, plastic container with sand. Sand depth can vary, but it should be deep enough to hold figures upright when telling the story. For Bible story figures, use straight wooden clothespins and add faces and clothing with a marker and bits of fabric and glue. An alternative to a sandbox is to cover a flat tray with playdough in which to stick the clothespins.

Practice telling the stories, figuring out the best ways to move the clothespins so that the children can see the action in the sandbox.

Activities

Games, crafts, and other ideas are suggested each day as a way to respond to the Bible story. Numerous options are offered, and you will need to choose what you can do with the time and space available. Feel free to adapt activities to meet the needs of the leaders and children. You may want to do activities as one large group, or you might break into smaller groups, each doing a different activity at the same time. Ask several youth and adults to lead the small groups, then rotate the children from one activity to the next. The youth and adults can also help children understand directions, and cut and glue as needed for craft projects.

A media list is included each day, should you want to present the Bible story and its ideas in another format. The media lists come from a variety of different sources that may change over time. Always check a website ahead of time before sharing something with your group.

My Book of Stories

The student booklet, *My Book of Stories*, is a key component of each day. It provides illustrations of the Bible stories as well as activities to help children remember the stories. If possible, make sure that each child receives *My Book of Stories* and have extra copies on hand in case there are any visitors. Send the booklets home with the children on the last day of VBS.

Name tags

Name tag templates are on page 45 as well as in the electronic files. Make one for each child, and have extras on hand in case one is lost or there are visitors. Help children write their names on the tags, and provide crayons so that children may decorate them.

Fasten name tags to shirts with safety pins or tape. Or you may punch holes in the name tags and string them with yarn so they can hang around the children's necks.

Collect name tags at the end of each day so that they can be reused throughout vacation Bible school. Send them home with the children on the last day.

Snack and rest time

Each day's session plan includes snack options. You may use these suggestions or plan your own snacks. Invite youth and adults to prepare and serve the snacks and clean up afterward. Have napkins or small plates on hand, as well as cups for juice or water. Make sure children either wash their hands or use hand sanitizer before eating.

Offer a prayer of thanks as you begin snack time.

- Your parish may have a favorite spoken or sung prayer that children can learn and repeat together.
- Invite children to lead out in prayer, saying prayers they have learned at home or making up their own prayers.
- Offer a simple prayer, such as: *Dear God, thank you for vacation Bible school, where we can learn about our neighbors. Thank you for this food. Amen.*

Be aware of children with gluten intolerance or nut or other allergies. Have alternative foods on hand if necessary.

After enjoying the snack, have a quiet time when children can rest. Provide blankets, pillows, or towels so the children can rest on the floor.

Music

Invite a singer or music team to lead children in singing the included VBS songs or use the sing-along videos or recordings. In addition, sing favorite songs of your church or group. The following are especially good for ages 4–5:

- “Everybody’s Always Welcome Here”
- “We Are the Light”
- “A Better Place”
- “Love Like That”

Bible memory

The same adapted Bible memory verse will be said each day so that by the end of vacation Bible school, the children will know the verse. The verse is from the New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition. You may use a preferred translation.

Love the Lord your God. Love your neighbor as yourself.
—Mark 12:30, 31, adapted

Offering project

Contact your diocese, Catholic Relief Services, local Catholic Charities, or other agency to find out about projects your VBS program can support. Choose one that suits the needs and interests of your church, and ask the agency for information and stories about the project that can be shared with the children.

Offering visuals

Plan a visual way to recognize the amount of money contributed during VBS. Be sure to update the visual each day and point out the progress that is made. Be sure to thank children for their generosity!

Here are some ideas for an offering visual:

- Draw stick figures (neighbors) on a poster board, each figure representing a certain amount of money.
- Cut out footprints and make them “walk” around the room, each print representing a certain amount of money. The footprints symbolize walking to our neighbors.
- Cut out handprints and post them around the room, each hand representing a certain amount of money. The handprints symbolize reaching out to neighbors.
- Fill in a chart or graph according to how much money is contributed.
- Create a paper chain, each link representing a certain amount of money.

Day 1

Love God and Your Neighbor



Today's Bible experience

Mark 12:28-34

Jesus speaks of the importance of loving God and loving neighbors.

Purpose statement

To discover Jesus' instructions to love God and neighbor

Bible memory

Love the Lord your God. Love your neighbor as yourself. —Mark 12:30, 31, adapted

Fratelli Tutti

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Bible background

Today's Scripture from Mark and its parallels in other Gospels raise questions that have dogged readers for 20 centuries: What does it look like to love God with every fiber of our being? Who is my neighbor? Who is it that we are to love and tend as faithfully as we feed and groom our own bodies? These are questions that every generation needs to revisit.

Mark's version of the dialogue about the greatest commandment moves slowly and has a contemplative feel to it. Earlier in chapter 12, hostility underlies the verbal sparring between Jesus and the religious authorities, but here, the questioner seems sincere. Perhaps he intends to make peace by focusing everyone's attention on what matters most. At any rate, a sense of awe descends as we tiptoe through this passage, wondering what it means to love God with all our strength, heart, and mind.

In some ways, Jesus' answer is conventional: even the smallest Jewish children would have known the command to love God with all your heart, and they would have seen it written on doorframes, as is described in Deuteronomy 6:4-8. However, the command to "love your neighbor as yourself" occurs only once in the Hebrew Bible (Leviticus 19:18). It comes from a rather obscure

passage about not taking revenge. Jesus binds love of God and love of neighbor together in a fresh way that reshapes our understanding of both kinds of love.

In Luke's version of this conversation, the emphasis shifts to loving our neighbors, and Jesus is pushed to define what he means by that. His out-of-the-box reply features a compassionate Samaritan acting as neighbor to the victim of a crime, which we will explore in Day 2 of VBS.

Learning to love God and others is a lifelong pursuit. Children can show their love for God through peaceful and loving relationships with others. They can show their love for others through simple actions that help make the world a good place for themselves and others to enjoy. Throwing away trash, watering a garden, and caring for pets are practical ways for children to nurture God's world and thereby show love for God and others. They can imagine that God longs for a life-giving, beautiful earth to be enjoyed by children for many years in the future.

Use this session to help the children think about concrete ways to show love to others. Make sure that the children feel loved, too.

Advance preparation

Supplies

- Bible
- Name tags (p. 45 or from electronic files); crayons; safety pins, tape, or yarn
- Sandbox and Bible story figures
- My Book of Stories* (one per child)
- Snack, juice or water, cups, napkins or small plates
- Hand sanitizer or wet wipes
- Offering containers

Preparation

1. **Pray for the adults and children** who will participate in VBS. May they be open to discovering who their neighbors are and how to be a good neighbor.
2. **Read Mark 12:28-34 and the Bible background** (p. 6) to become familiar with today's story. Read the daily plan and practice telling the Bible story.
3. **Prepare items for snack** (p. 10). If you are preparing one of the snack suggestions during class, try the recipe first to iron out any difficulties. Be aware of children who may have food allergies or gluten intolerances. Have alternate foods on hand, if needed.
4. **Choose activities from pages 10-11** and gather necessary materials and supplies. Some of the activities require advance preparation. Be sure to make a sample craft in advance so that you understand the directions. Show the sample to the children so that they can see what they will create.
5. **Create name tags for all the children.** You can use the name tag template on page 45 or in the electronic files. Have several blank name tags on hand in case you need to make a replacement or have an extra child one day.
6. **Plan to present the offering project to the children.** Prepare a visual for the offering project (p. 5).

Daily plan

Gathering

1. **Greet children as they arrive** and welcome them to the first day of vacation Bible school! Invite them to find their name tags and decorate them with crayons. Pin or tape the name tags to clothing, or place them around children's necks if name tags are strung with yarn. Make sure adults wear name tags, too.
2. **Invite children to sit in a circle on the floor.** Explain that they will find out what it means to be a neighbor during VBS. One way to be a neighbor is to learn each other's names. Go around the circle and greet each child by name. (*You may need to look at the name tags.*) Invite everyone to repeat the child's name. For example, say:

Hello, Grace. Welcome to vacation Bible school!

Everyone: *Hi, Grace.*

Hello, Mateo. Welcome to vacation Bible school!

Everyone: *Hi, Mateo.*

3. **Invite a singer or a music team** to teach the children the VBS songs. The following are especially good for ages 4–5:
 - “Everybody’s Always Welcome Here”
 - “We Are the Light”
 - “A Better Place”
 - “Love Like That”
4. **Lead a movement prayer.** Invite the children to repeat it after you and to do the motions. Pray:

God, we are here to learn about you. (*Extend arms straight forward.*)

We are here to grow in our love for you. (*Reach arms up.*)

We are here to grow in our love for our neighbors. Amen. (*Extend arms out to sides.*)

Bible story

1. **Gather in the story area** if you are not already there. Ask the children if they can think of a rule they need to follow at home. Allow time for the children to share some of their rules. You may need to give an example of a rule in your household, such as: We try to remember to say “please” and “thank you.” After the children share, say:

We have rules to help us know how to be kind to one another. Not only do we have rules at home, but long ago, Jesus gave his followers some rules, too. Listen closely to today’s story and you will find out what Jesus’ rules are.

2. **Open your Bible to Mark 12** and explain that this is where Jesus’ rules are told. Tell the Bible story.

[You will need the following figures to tell the Bible story: Jesus—wrap with white fabric and a tie at the waist; man—wrap in brown fabric; crowd—plain, undecorated clothespins.]

This story comes from the Bible. It is a story of Jesus.

Wherever Jesus went, people came to hear him. (*Place Jesus’ clothespin in the sand. Slowly add other figures, walking them toward Jesus.*) A man came to Jesus and listened to what Jesus said. (*Move man figure next to Jesus.*) The man leaned in as close as he could so he would not miss hearing a word that Jesus said. He asked Jesus which rule was most important.

Jesus said, “You have one God. The first rule (*hold up one finger.*) is to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.” (*Arrange the figures into a heart shape.*) Jesus said, “The second rule (*hold up two fingers.*) is to love other people as you love yourself.” (*Touch the tops of the figures.*)

The man said, “You are right! Loving God and others is more important than anything else!” (*Trace the heart with your fingertips.*) The man said, “We should love God with our heart, soul, mind, and strength. And we should love other people as we love ourselves.”

After telling the story, you may want to invite the children to move the figures as you retell it, or allow the children to retell the story in their own words.

3. **Give children time to think about the story** by asking some of the following questions. The children may share their responses or think quietly.

The man asked Jesus for one rule. (*Hold up one finger.*) I wonder why Jesus told him two. (*Hold up two fingers.*)

- I wonder how I can love God with all my strength. (*Make a muscle.*)
- Jesus said, “Love your neighbor.” I wonder who Jesus meant.

- I wonder how I can show my love for God.
 - I wonder who I can show love to today.
4. **Pray.** Explain that when people talk to God, it is called praying. Praying is one way we can show that we love God. Demonstrate that when people pray, they sometimes fold their hands and close their eyes. Pray:

Dear Jesus, thank you for telling us to love God and love our neighbors. Help us to love them. Amen.

5. **Introduce the Bible memory verse, Mark 12:30, 31.** Explain to the children that during VBS they will learn some of the words they heard in today's Bible story. Say the verse out loud one time. Invite the children to repeat each line after you. Add motions.

Love the Lord your God. (*Clap your hands above your head, once per word.*)
 Love your neighbor (*join hands and gently swing them*)
 as yourself. (*Hug yourself.*)

Memory verse: Love the Lord your God. Love your neighbor as yourself. —Mark 12:30, 31, adapted

6. **Introduce the offering project.** Explain that one way we practice loving our neighbors is by sharing what we have with others. Explain how the offering will be collected and how the visual represents the total amount of money collected each day. Collect today's offering.

Who Is My Neighbor? activities

1. **Choose several activities from pages 10-11** that suit your group and your space. Be sure to include a snack and rest time, and have adults and youth on hand to help with games and crafts. If you have a small group of children, you may want to do the activities as one group. If you have a large group, however, consider dividing the children into smaller groups and having them rotate among several activities.
2. **At the end of activity time,** sing the following song (*to the tune of "Row, Row, Row Your Boat"*) to signal that it is time to clean up:

We will tidy up,
 tidy up this place.
 We will put our things away
 and help each other, too!

Demonstrate your expectations for putting away supplies and cleaning the area. Make sure names are on projects, and put them in a safe place so they can be taken home.

Sending

1. **Gather in the story area.** Review the Bible school time by asking the children one thing that they will remember about today.
 Let the children know that during each day of vacation Bible school, they will hear a Bible story about how we can love God and love our neighbors.
2. **Collect name tags** to use during the next VBS session. Thank the children for coming to VBS and tell them you look forward to seeing them again.
3. **Give this blessing** to the children individually as they leave:

(Child's name), may you find good ways to show that you love God, love your neighbors, and love yourself.

Who Is My Neighbor? activities

Snack: Cinnamon Toast Hearts

- Bread
- Heart-shaped cookie cutters
- Butter
- Cinnamon-sugar mixture in a shaker
- Knife
- Toaster oven or oven

Give each child a slice of bread and a cookie cutter. Demonstrate how to use a cookie cutter to make a heart of bread. Put the hearts in the toaster oven until toasted, then place them on napkins and return to the children. They will spread butter on their slices, then sprinkle them with the cinnamon-sugar mixture.

Be aware of anyone with food allergies or gluten intolerance. Have alternative foods on hand, if needed.

Media list

- *Pearl Barley and Charlie Parsley* by Aaron Blabey
- *Whoever You Are* by Mem Fox
- *Love the Lord Your God!* by Heidi Larson
- *Horton Hears a Who* (book or movie) by Dr. Seuss
- YouTube search for “The Greatest Commandment, Hillsong Kids”
- YouTube search for “Kidmo: Johnny Rogers: Love God, Love Others”

Media lists can be used depending on how much time is available. They come from a variety of different sources that may change over time. Always check a website ahead of time before sharing something with your group.

My Book of Stories

How can we show we love our neighbors? Turn to page 3 and talk about which of the children are showing they love their neighbors by helping them. Have children color the pictures.

My Neighbors Are . . .

Materials

- Paper (one sheet per child)
- Crayons or washable markers

Talk about where the children live and about the people who live near them. Explain that people who live near us are called our neighbors. Give each child a sheet of paper and crayons or markers. Invite them to draw a picture of their street or apartment building and the people who live there. After the children are finished, invite some of them to share their drawings with the group. You may want to hang the pictures on the wall for the remainder of VBS.

Read a book

Jesus' call to love our neighbors is not limited to the people who live near us. Read *Whoever You Are* by Mem Fox, a book that describes similarities and differences of children around the world.

We Love Others Tree

Materials

- Poster board or butcher paper
- Crayons or washable markers
- Paper leaves (several per child) (template p. 44)
- Tape

Loving others creates a more beautiful world. In preparation, draw a tree trunk and branches on a poster board or a large sheet of butcher paper. Write “We love others” at the top. Use the leaf template on page 44 to cut out leaves from construction paper, several per child. Invite children to name people they love and draw a picture of one person per leaf. Tape the leaves to the tree.

We Love! Movements

Have the children practice the movements from the memory verse.

- Love God. (*Clap your hands above your head.*)
- Love neighbors. (*Reach for a neighbor's hand.*)
- Love me. (*Give yourself a hug.*)

As leader, call out one cue and have children do its movement as quickly as possible. As children become more familiar with the game, call out two movements and have them do both movements quickly. Give each child an opportunity to be the leader.

Neighbor Rhyme

Sit in a circle and say a rhyme and do its motions with the children.

Knock on the floor. (*Rap knuckles on the floor, once for each word.*)

Knock on your knee. (*Gently rap knuckles on your knee, once for each word.*)

Look around the circle for a neighbor to see. (*Shade eyes with one hand, like a visor. Look from side to side.*)

Hello, _____. Hello, _____. (*Wave at each named person.*)

We're glad you're here. God loves you so! (*Cross arms across chest.*)

Love God, Love Your Neighbor

1. Have the children sit in a circle on the floor. Invite a child be It.
2. It will walk behind the circle and gently tap each child on the head. With each tap, It will say, "Love God." However, when It changes to "Love your neighbor," the child who was tapped will stand up and chase It around the circle. It tries to run around the entire circle and sit in the spot where the other child had sat. If It successfully reaches the spot the other child vacated, the other child is the new It. However, if the child tags It, he or she remains It for another turn.

Jumping Hearts

Materials

- Three large paper hearts or mats
- Tape

In preparation, make three large paper hearts and tape them to the floor, a short distance apart. Invite the children to jump from one heart to the other while saying, "Love God," "Love others," and "Love me."

Prayers of Love

Materials

- Blocks (several per child)

Express love for God through prayers of gratitude. Give each child one or two large interlocking blocks. Demonstrate the prayer by stacking two blocks and saying, "Thank you, God, for _____." Then one at a time, children can add a block and say, "Thank you, God, for _____." If some children are hesitant to talk in the group, simply have the child add the block while the group says, "Thank you, God, for _____ (child's name)."