

My wife, who is an artist, and I were asked to help teach in the art station segment of a children's Bible class. My job was to introduce the theme by telling a Bible story that was the centerpiece of the lesson.

On one particular night my goal was to explain to first and second graders the full meaning of the Ten Commandments. I had a few minutes to try to present a grander view of them than just a list of rules. I wanted them to see that these were fundamental principles that should guide us in our relationships with God and other people, and that they did not just constitute a mindless checklist.

I began with the idea that in the beginning there was only rule, and that Adam and Eve could not even keep that. I likened this to the trouble I had in keeping them quiet and still so that they would listen.

I had them consider situations that weren't covered by the Ten Commandments, and several had ideas of an eleventh commandment that they thought should be added. I then told them that there were many other rules that God gave to Moses as well. But even that was not complete, and I explained about the daughters of Zelophehad who asked if they could receive an inheritance, since they had no brothers (no firstborn son). Moses asked God about it, and He approved of this as a new rule.

In thinking about this incompleteness, I began asking the children to perform simple math problems. But the first graders did not know multiplication yet, and the first child I asked didn't understand 1 times 1. I backed up a step and tried to make the same argument with addition: what is $1 + 1$? How about $2 + 2$? And $2 + 3$?

I thought I was being pretty clever, and was really doing a good job teaching this lesson when one child raised his hand frantically. I thought that he had something very meaningful to say. When I asked him to speak, though, he just asked me, "Do you know what 10 times 10 is?" I was a little disappointed with the question, but I decided to go along with it. When I asked him "What", he replied: "A lot!"

I returned to my theme by asking the children about the need to have a book that contained every possible addition or multiplication problem in it. How many pages would it have? The answer to this was the same: "A lot!" I pressed the idea that God meant for us to understand the fundamental principles so that we could figure things out. From this we would learn how to love one another and treat people right.

I made it plain that the freedom to calculate instead of look up the answer did not mean that we could make $2 + 3$ equal 6. There are still boundaries to respect, though love is not an exact mathematical quantity. As I tried to finish up my little talk so that we could work with the art project, another hand went up frantically. "Do you have a comment on the lesson", I asked. This boy, one usually very serious about such things, asked, "Do you know what 20 times 20 is?" Turns out that this was also "a lot".

The impact of my lesson was much different than I had hoped or planned. I decided to let go and move on to the art segment of the class and let my wife work with the kids for a while. The week before she had helped them create the basic "stones" out of cardboard so that the Ten Commandments could be written on them. This week she had printed the text with an open typeface so that they could fill the letters in with a colored pencil. As time got short, we tried to encourage them to move on and not worry about filling the letters perfectly (perhaps giving the appearance of age). And then the best line of the day came from one boy who said, "Maybe God doesn't always stay within the lines."

I was stunned, and the more I thought about it, the more I was amazed! Maybe someone was actually thinking about the message. And he had a sense of God's Grace that taught me something in return.