

## **SPIRITUAL TRUTHS DOGS CAN HELP TEACH (PART ONE)**

Did you realize that our dogs can be used to teach some of God's basic spiritual truths? Whether you and your dog work with kids or adults, you can plan activities with your dog to help communicate some of Scripture's most fundamental lessons to those you visit. This article will give you some ideas to get started, with more ideas coming in Part Two!

### **Clicker Training: Recognizing God's Voice**

The clicker can be a valuable tool in teaching your dog a new behavior. (Clickers can be purchased for a nominal amount at any pet store.) The clicker makes a unique sound that is heard nowhere else, and by using it to produce its distinct clicking sound, clicker training allows dog owners to mark the exact moment their dog performs the desired behavior, providing clear communication and consistency. The sound of the clicker is then always followed by a reward for the dog, so that the dog comes to associate the clicker sound with a reward. The sound of the clicker means good things to the dog when they obey, and they eagerly await that sound! Likewise, we should anticipate and eagerly await God's voice speaking to us through His Spirit, because good things await those who hear and obey His voice. God's voice is also distinctive, if we are listening and are in close relationship with Him.

There are many videos available on how to do clicker training. Here's one of them:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3NydiXQQYiY>

In your demonstration of this concept, you can demonstrate how you use the clicker by having your dog perform a simple command he already knows (like "Sit"), for ease of presenting. You can even have your participants try it by having them click and then immediately drop a treat on the floor for the dog (without issuing any command). This activity works best if there are no other dogs around. Clicker use is only one training method among many. You may also simply use your voice (which is also distinctive to your dog) to mark the desired behavior, then follow up with a reward.

### **Nose work: Searching for God's Blessings**

It is easy to do nose work activities with your dog. It can be as simple as hiding a treat under one of three upside-down plastic cups and telling the dog to "Find It". The dog should be able to sniff out the treat fairly easily. A variation of this would be to place several small open boxes upside down in different places in the room, some with treats hidden underneath. (You can have the participants place the boxes, giving some of them a treat to put under the box.) The dog then has to check all the boxes to find the treats, which are under only some of them. Keep the dog on leash, tell him to "Find It", and let him sniff and lead you around to the various boxes. If you are working with kids or mobile adults, you can double-leash the dog and let the participant hold one leash (while you hold the other for control) and both of you follow the dog around the room. The lesson in this is that we sometimes have to search for God's blessings. If we look hard enough, we can find hidden blessings even in the storms and deserts of life.

### **Obstacle Course: Following God's Direction and Dealing with Life's Detours**

This activity involves using a variety of props, such as four toy construction cones (or chairs), a hula hoop, 3-4 plastic cups, a tennis ball or small soft toy, and a pool noodle cut into six 7-inch lengths. The obstacle course consists of the dog stepping (or jumping) through the hula hoop (two participants can hold the hoop vertically on the floor), weaving around the cones or chairs (on leash, with the handler), finding the treat under one of the upside-down cups, catching the ball or small soft toy, and "bowling" (the pieces of pool noodle are placed standing vertically on the floor in an upside-down triangle shape like bowling pins, with a treat placed on the floor among the "bowling pins" – the dog knocks over the noodle bowling pins with its nose, in order to get to the treat). Always keep your dog on leash throughout this activity. If you want to turn it into a game, you (or a participant) can time how long it takes your dog to complete the course, then see if your dog can beat his previous time. (Or you could turn it into a contest between multiple dogs on your visit.) You can use your imagination according to the abilities of your dog and create other "obstacles" as well – It's a lot of fun for you, your dog, and your participants! (And of course, make sure your dog gets rewarded royally at the end!)

It's a good idea to practice these skills at home first. I use the command "Go Through" for the hula hoop (lure the dog through it with a treat), "Right" and "Left" while leading the dog on leash weaving around the cones, "Find It" for sniffing out the treat under the cup, "Catch" for tossing the ball to the dog, and "Find It" again for the bowling game.

The spiritual lesson to be learned from the obstacle course is that we need to follow God's direction in our lives, even if there are obstacles or detours along the way.

### **Other Truths That Our Dogs Can Illustrate**

These are some truths that don't require any activity. You can just talk about them with those whom you visit:

- Unconditional love from dogs illustrates the unconditional love of Christ.
- Caring for animals incorporates the simple concepts of kindness and respect (Proverbs 12:10). By respecting and protecting those who are smaller and more vulnerable than us, we learn to value and respect each other.
- If God places so much value in each of His creatures, how much more value does He place in us, His children created in His image? (Luke 12:6)

Stay tuned – More to come in Part Two!