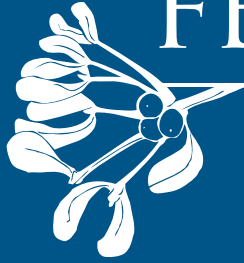


Teaching the Revised Common Lectionary

FEASTING on the WORD

CURRICULUM



Adult



Welcome to *Feasting on the Word Curriculum!*

You have accepted the call to teach God's people. Teaching is an important calling and ministry. *Feasting on the Word* resources will help you fulfill your calling. You can expect these resources to help you:

- ✧ Introduce biblical stories in new and creative ways.
- ✧ Gather your community with age-appropriate learning activities.
- ✧ Challenge your learners to put their faith into action and grow in their self-understanding as Christians.
- ✧ Prepare your learners for the worship and service of God.

About Adults

Adults see the world through the filter of life experience and life transitions. Adults enter Bible study and worship bringing with them this variety of views. *Feasting on the Word* materials will engage adults in a deeper exploration of biblical texts. Christian faith will be enhanced when the Scriptures read and proclaimed in worship are reinforced and expanded on what they have been considering in their educational time. Education and worship can be mutually supportive in helping God's word in Scripture come alive in the Sunday morning experience.

Session Flow

Each session of the *Feasting on the Word Curriculum* provides you with a plan for teaching the focus scripture in age-appropriate ways. Each session assumes a 45-minute period. For a 60-minute session, use more options from Responding.

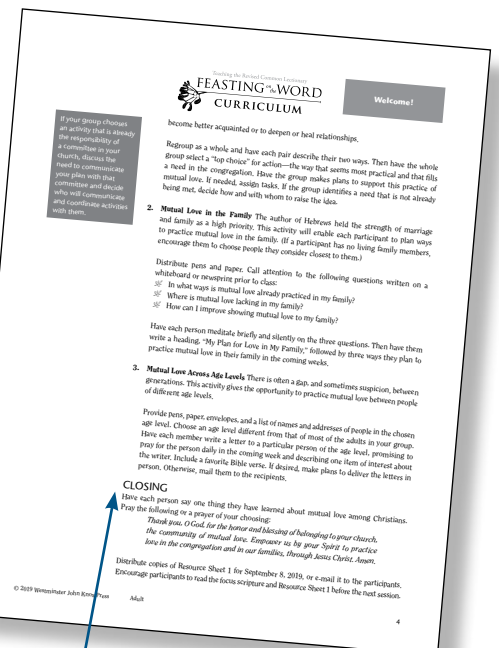
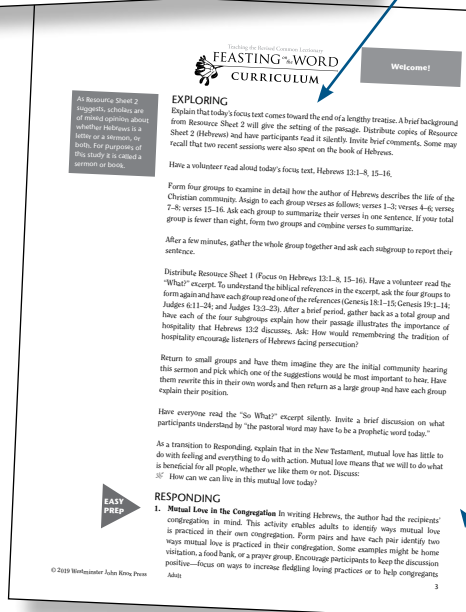
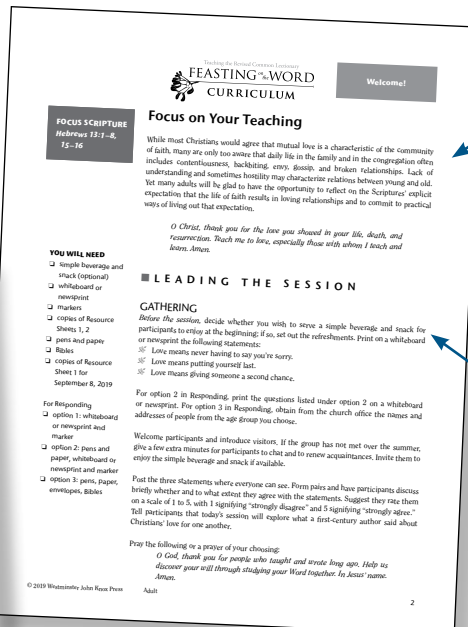
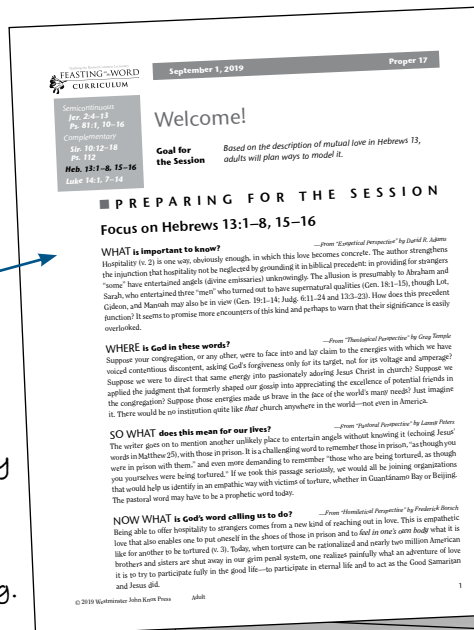
Preparing for the Session offers excerpts from the *Feasting on the Word* commentary series, giving a brief but rich background for your own learning.

Focus on Your Teaching makes connections between the focus scripture and the age group.

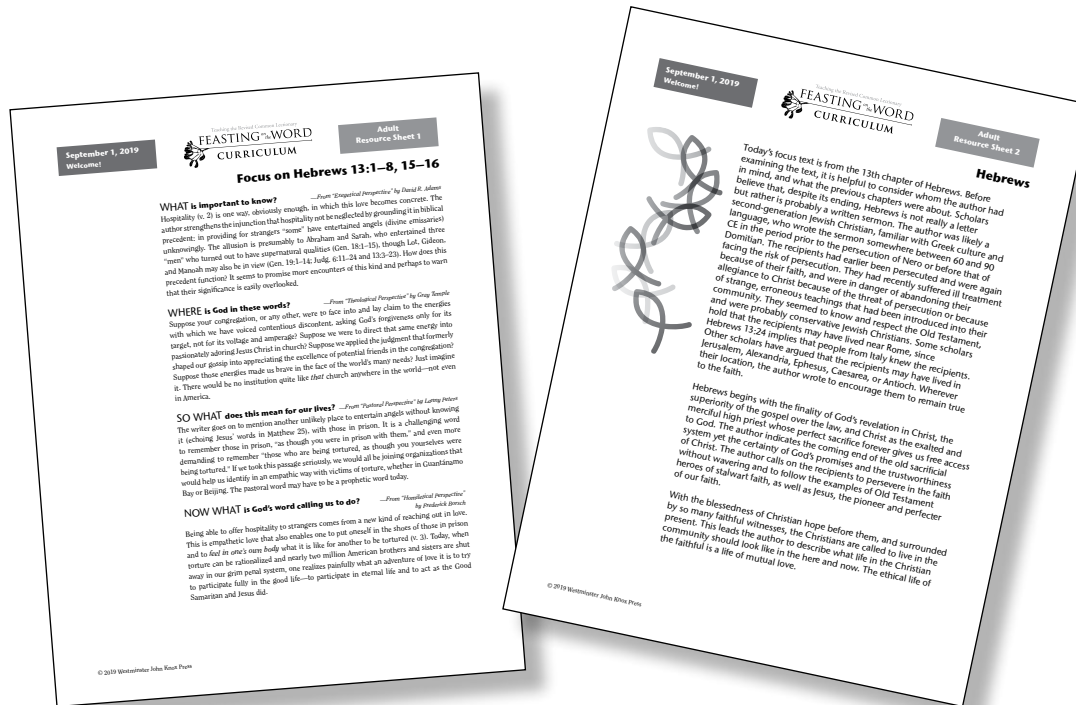
Leading the Session begins with Gathering, a brief worship time and an activity to make the bridge from participants' lives to the theme of the focus passage.

Exploring addresses two questions: "What is important to know about this passage?" and "Where is God in these words?"

Closing suggests a prayer and an opportunity for the participants to recall what they discovered and what they are called to do.



Responding poses the questions "So what does this mean for our lives?" and "Now what are we, individually and as the church, called to be or do?"



Two reproducible resource sheets

Preparing to Teach

- ✿ Read the focus scripture and the *Feasting on the Word* commentary excerpts.
- ✿ Read Focus on Your Teaching and pray for your group and your leadership.
- ✿ Look over the session plan. Select the activities you will use and gather necessary supplies.

Ways of Learning and Teaching

In any group, whether children, youth, or adults, many learning styles will be present. You too have preferred ways of learning something new. The session plans include a variety of learning methods so varieties of learner styles are included during each season. We tend to teach with the methods that are most familiar to or comfortable for us. From time to time, include activities that challenge you so you are including learners who prefer to learn in that way. If you find that you tend to lead the group in verbal activities, for example, try introducing musical, bodily, and other activities suggested by the session plan.

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Semicontinuous
Exod. 12:1–14
Ps. 149

Complementary
Ezek. 33:7–11
Ps. 119:33–40
Rom. 13:8–14
Matt. 18:15–20

Restorative Discipline

Goal for the Session

Adults will envision ways to practice reconciliation in the faith community through exploring Jesus' teachings on restorative discipline.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Matthew 18:15–20

WHAT is important to know?

—From “Exegetical Perspective” by Mitchell G. Reddish

Matthew 18:15–20 has parallels with 16:13–20. Both passages use the word “church” (*ekklesia*)—the only two places the term appears in the Gospels—and both passages speak of binding and loosing. Even though this passage is primarily concerned with matters of church discipline, its focus is on reconciliation, not punishment. The ultimate goal is to “regain the brother” (v. 15). Familial language is used. The final saying in verse 20 is a reminder to the community that the risen Christ is present in and with the church, even when the church must deal with disciplinary issues. This reminder serves as a word of assurance and as a precaution.

WHERE is God in these words?

—From “Theological Perspective” by Charles Hambrick-Stowe

Jesus speaks here not of honest differences of opinion but of a fellow Christian who “sins against you.” Such sin would include the offenses summarized in the Ten Commandments, but one might extrapolate it to mean any self-serving behavior that breaks the unity of fellowship in Christ. When church members injure one another, it is not merely an individual personal offense: it is a theological matter, harming the body of Christ. Each step outlined by Jesus is to be undertaken in the hope of healing and restoration. Jesus could mean this: if we in the church do not forgive and heal, who on earth is going to do it?

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

—From “Pastoral Perspective” by Jin S. Kim

The ministry of reconciliation must be at the heart of any Christian community's mission. The church has not been given the power to “bind” and to “loose” (v. 18) because it is always right, but because its primary language is one of confession, restoration, and reconciliation when offenses and divisions occur. This requires leadership that confesses in real time before the community, seeking collective accountability and correction as it returns the favor to the church body. There will be conflict, but it is precisely through conflict that we model for the world how to bind and loose one another appropriately.

NOW WHAT is God's word calling us to do?

—From “Homiletical Perspective” by Dale P. Andrews

Care and responsibility to forgive, to seek out reconciliation with the offender, are sustained in the authority given to the church. Power to bind and loose belongs not simply to the church leader or to the universal church (as demonstrated through Peter in Matt. 16:13–20), but also to the local church (18:18–20). This discipline teaches a theology of care by illumining the manner of care. The authority to interpret how to apply the rules of care, even the law, is given to the church. We seek to care for one another even when injured or offended, which requires discipline in binding and loosing ourselves to repent and to forgive, all sustained in Christ.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE
Matthew 18:15–20

Focus on Your Teaching

Most adults will be able to recall specific experiences of conflict in the church. Some may have seen reconciliation emerge out of such situations. Some may have witnessed the havoc wrought when the inability to reconcile leads to schism or ostracism. Today's text beckons the church to consider faithful ways to respond when estrangement looms. The text offers insights into what might lead to restoration in such times. Be aware that this session might strike a nerve in those for whom a serious congregational or denominational conflict is recent or ongoing.

*Be with me, O God, in my preparation and in my leading of this session.
And may I be open to your presence in both. Amen.*

YOU WILL NEED

- ☐ newsprint
- ☐ marker
- ☐ broken object
- ☐ Bibles
- ☐ Resource Sheet 1
- ☐ copies of Resource Sheet 2
- ☐ copies of Resource Sheet 1 for September 13, 2020

For Responding

- ☐ option 1: Resource Sheet 2
- ☐ option 2: newsprint, markers, church guidelines for conflict resolution or ethical misconduct (optional)
- ☐ option 3: Resource Sheet 2

■ LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, write the quote used in the Exploring sidebar on a sheet of newsprint, and set it aside.

Welcome participants as they arrive. Introduce any newcomers. If this is the group's first time together after summer break, get reacquainted. For example, ask everyone to describe their summer in five words or less.

Hold up the broken object (or its pieces) and ask for ideas about how to restore it. Ask: What would you have to be careful to do; what would you have to be careful not to do? For example: If the broken object were wood, you wouldn't want to use a welding torch!

Relate that today's session is part of a series of teachings by Jesus about reconciliation in the church when relationships get broken.

Lead the group in this prayer or one of your choosing:

Gather us, O God, as your people. Gather us in the knowledge that you dwell in our midst. Gather us that we may be led by your Spirit. Amen.

EXPLORING

Have a volunteer read Matthew 18:15–20 aloud to the group while others follow along in their Bibles. Invite general reactions to the text.

Read the "What?" excerpt on Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Matthew 18:15–20), beginning at the sentence "Even though this passage is primarily concerned . . ." Discuss what participants understand "reconciliation" to mean in the context of this passage.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Digging Deeper). Direct participants to silently read and reflect on Part 1, “Setting the Context for Matthew 18:15–20.”

Ask participants to listen to Matthew 18:15–20 as you read it aloud—only now, have them listen to the passage through the insights raised by the “Setting the Context” paragraph. After the reading, ask participants to offer any fresh impressions or questions about this passage.

Form three groups. Direct the first group to take the role of the one who has been sinned against in this passage; the second group to take the role of the one who has offended; and the third group to take the role of the “witnesses” and the church. In each group, discuss what Jesus’ teachings in these verses encourage you to do, and to what purpose.

Gather the three groups together, and have each group report on their discussion. Reflect on similarities and differences between the actions and purposes that the groups identified.

Read aloud verse 17b (“ . . . and if the offender refuses to listen . . .”). Ask participants what they understand to be the implications for community and relationship of “let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” Post the newsprint with the sidebar quote written on it for participants to read. Afterward, discuss how that perspective might influence what we take Jesus to be saying here.

“Churches usually hear this as license to excommunicate, exile, or otherwise shun the individual. However, since Jesus often interacted with Gentiles, tax collectors, prostitutes, and other unsavory outsiders, we should think more deeply about his meaning.”¹

Ask participants to consider the final sentence of the “What?” excerpt, which declares verse 20 to serve as both “a word of assurance and as a precaution.” Discuss the following issues:

- ✠ How might the promise of Christ’s presence bring assurance in this text: to the one who has been offended; to the one who has offended; to the whole community?
- ✠ How might the promise of Christ’s presence serve as a precaution in this text: to the one who has been offended; to the one who has offended; to the whole community?

In this conversation, link such assurances and precautions to Jesus’ overarching concern, in this passage and its wider context, for disciplines aimed at reconciliation.

Responding

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the length of your session:

- 1. Cutting Loose—or Hanging On?** Reconciliation is a discipline precisely because what it calls on us to do may not be easy to do. Read Part 2, “Cutting Loose—Or Hanging On?” on Resource Sheet 2. Invite participants to recall times when they or their churches faced decisions about “cutting loose or hanging on”—whether in regard to a particular individual or a group within the church. Discuss what reconciliation required in those circumstances—or where it foundered. Challenge participants to do at least one thing this week that maintains ties with someone it might be easier to just cut loose, inside or outside the church.

**EASY
PREP**

1. Excerpted from *Charles Hambrick-Stowe, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 48.

Your church may have a set of guidelines for conflict resolution or ethical misconduct. If so, it might be helpful to have these on hand, and to compare the process related there with option 2 in Responding.

2. **Taking Steps toward Reconciliation** The steps Jesus uses in addressing estrangement in hope of restoration provide a helpful outline for reviewing how we seek to do the same. Have the participants create a “checklist” for dealing with conflict and estrangement in your congregation based on Jesus’ teachings here. Write these on newsprint. Discuss at each point the value and the risk of each stage. Encourage participants to use this list in situations it might apply to in their lives outside of church.
3. **A Litany of Confession and Restoration** Prayer and worship form the nexus of faithful action, including reconciliation. Invite participants to offer prayers that confess places of estrangement in the church and needs for reconciliation. After each prayer, lead the group in a litany response found in Part 2 of Resource Sheet 2: “If we in the church do not forgive and heal, who on earth is going to do it?” Urge participants to make this response a regular part of their prayer life.

Closing

Gather in a circle around the broken object. Invite participants to remember the things they thought would be helpful or harmful for restoring this object. Invite them now to look at the broken object as a symbol of the church—and the discipline required for restoration. Ask them to name what this session has identified as leading toward reconciliation in the community of faith.

If you did not use option 3 in Responding, lead the group in the litany it describes. If you used option 3 in Responding, close with this prayer or one of your choosing:

Holy God, your grace restores us—and in doing so, calls us to be reconciled with one another. Be among us, as the One whose very presence reminds us of that calling and bears to us the grace to be reconciled. In Jesus Christ. Amen.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for September 13, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and resource sheet prior to the next session.

Focus on Matthew 18:15–20

WHAT is important to know?

—From “Exegetical Perspective” by Mitchell G. Reddish

Matthew 18:15–20 has parallels with 16:13–20. Both passages use the word “church” (*ekklesia*)—the only two places the term appears in the Gospels—and both passages speak of binding and loosing. Even though this passage is primarily concerned with matters of church discipline, its focus is on reconciliation, not punishment. The ultimate goal is to “regain the brother” (v. 15). Familial language is used. The final saying in verse 20 is a reminder to the community that the risen Christ is present in and with the church, even when the church must deal with disciplinary issues. This reminder serves as a word of assurance and as a precaution.

WHERE is God in these words?

—From “Theological Perspective” by Charles Hambrick-Stowe

Jesus speaks here not of honest differences of opinion but of a fellow Christian who “sins against you.” Such sin would include the offenses summarized in the Ten Commandments, but one might extrapolate it to mean any self-serving behavior that breaks the unity of fellowship in Christ. When church members injure one another, it is not merely an individual personal offense: it is a theological matter, harming the body of Christ. Each step outlined by Jesus is to be undertaken in the hope of healing and restoration. Jesus could mean this: if we in the church do not forgive and heal, who on earth is going to do it?

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

—From “Pastoral Perspective” by Jin S. Kim

The ministry of reconciliation must be at the heart of any Christian community’s mission. The church has not been given the power to “bind” and to “loose” (v. 18) because it is always right, but because its primary language is one of confession, restoration, and reconciliation when offenses and divisions occur. This requires leadership that confesses in real time before the community, seeking collective accountability and correction as it returns the favor to the church body. There will be conflict, but it is precisely through conflict that we model for the world how to bind and loose one another appropriately.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

—From “Homiletical Perspective” by

Dale P. Andrews

Care and responsibility to forgive, to seek out reconciliation with the offender, are sustained in the authority given to the church. Power to bind and loose belongs not simply to the church leader or to the universal church (as demonstrated through Peter in Matt. 16:13–20), but also to the local church (18:18–20). This discipline teaches a theology of care by illuminating the manner of care. The authority to interpret how to apply the rules of care, even the law, is given to the church. We seek to care for one another even when injured or offended, which requires discipline in binding and loosing ourselves to repent and to forgive, all sustained in Christ.

Digging Deeper



Part 1 Setting the Context for Matthew 18:15–20

This passage comes in the middle of a larger section in which Matthew has Jesus dealing with matters related to ecclesiology and life in the church. Prominent leaders (who might be considered “greatest in the kingdom of heaven”) are to have the humble status of a child and serve among the lowly (Matthew 18:1–5); disciples must eschew behavior that “put[s] a stumbling block” in the path of fellow believers (18:6–7), becoming radically scrupulous about personal morality (18:8–9); believers must care diligently for one another so that not one will be lost (18:10–14); and fellowship in Christ requires constant and boundless forbearance, forgiving one another “seventy times seven” if necessary (18:21–35). In this context Jesus addresses the question of what to do when “a brother” (i.e., “another member of the church”) “sins against you” (v. 15).

—Excerpted from Charles Hambrick-Stowe, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 44.

Part 2 Cutting Loose—Or Hanging On

The rest of the world writes people off when things reach a certain point. Jesus’ saying, “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (v. 18), is susceptible to multiple interpretations. In light of his teaching on life in the church as the locus of God’s mission in the world, and this verse’s echo of the Lord’s Prayer (God’s will being done “on earth as it is in heaven”), Jesus could mean this: If we in the church do not forgive and heal, who on earth is going to do it? . . . Jesus commands us never to give up on them, never to stop reaching out in love to them, always to yearn for grace to restore what has been broken.

—Excerpted from Charles Hambrick-Stowe, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 48.

Semicontinuous

Exod. 14:19–31

Ps. 114

Complementary

Gen. 50:15–21

Ps. 103:(1–7), 8–13

Rom. 14:1–12

Matt. 18:21–35

Forgiven and Forgiving

**Goal for
the Session**

*Adults will identify and endeavor to practice the forgiveness
Jesus summons in the parable of a king and his servants.*

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Matthew 18:21–35

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Lewis R. Donelson

The passage, to the surprise and chagrin of many Christians, concludes, “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart” (v. 35). Despite Christian nervousness about the implied limitation on God’s mercy, readers of Matthew have long noted that the provisional nature of God’s forgiveness that is articulated here is also articulated throughout the Gospel of Matthew. In Matthew at least, God’s forgiveness to some extent depends upon our forgiveness. Christians, who live under God’s grace and forgiveness, will be judged by this same God, mostly by whether they show the same grace and forgiveness to others.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Kathryn D. Blanchard

Peter makes explicit the perennial question that plagues all Christians in all times and places: When may we stop forgiving those who offend us repeatedly? Christians since the early church have consistently taken the meaning of Jesus’ answer—whether translated “seventy-seven” or “seventy times seven”—to be crystal clear: never. God is a God who forgives completely, and the body of Christ is called to do likewise. However, even God’s forgiveness has its limits. The theological tenet that God’s “default” stance toward the penitent is one of mercy must lead to the conviction that God’s people are those who likewise practice mercy—willingly, concretely, and as a communal way of life.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Charlotte Dudley Cleghorn

Marjorie Thompson writes: “To forgive is to make a conscious choice to release the person who has wounded us from the sentence of our judgment, however justified that judgment may be. It represents a choice to leave behind our resentment and desire for retribution, however fair such punishment may seem. . . . Forgiveness involves excusing persons from the *punitive consequences* they deserve because of their behavior. The behavior remains condemned, but the offender is released from its effects as far as the forgiver is concerned. Forgiveness means the power of the original wound’s power to hold us trapped is broken.”

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Charles L. Campbell

The issue here is not how many times an isolated individual should forgive some other random person who sins against him or her. Rather, the context is the community of faith. The concern here is the life of the church and the practices necessary to build up the community of faith. At the heart of those practices is forgiveness, not as an isolated act, but as an ongoing activity among members of the community. Within this context, there can be no limit on forgiveness, because it is a never-ending practice that is essential to the life of the church.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE
Matthew 18:21–35

Focus on Your Teaching

All adults face the challenge of forgiving others and accepting forgiveness. This challenge ranges in practice from simple matters to life-changing events. Will I forgive? Will I accept forgiveness offered? Must I forgive in order to be forgiven? Are there limits to what one should forgive? If so, what are they? Today's passage tells a provocative story about forgiveness that goes to the heart of these questions. Some may hear Jesus' teaching as untenable. Others may hear it as a godsend. Be aware that some in your group may be struggling with forgiveness and hold strong emotions about the topic.

Bless me, O God, with patience in my preparation and with Spirit in my leading. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- ☐ copies of Resource Sheet 2
- ☐ Bibles
- ☐ copies of Resource Sheet 1
- ☐ copies of Resource Sheet 1 for September 20, 2020

For Responding

- ☐ option 1: Resource Sheet 1
- ☐ option 2: pens, paper

■ LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Welcome participants as they arrive. Introduce any newcomers.

Form pairs and invite participants to call to mind the first time they remember being forgiven for something. Have them briefly tell that experience to their partner. Then ask them to remember the first time they forgave someone else. Invite them to tell this experience to their partner.

After the conversations in pairs, invite participants to silently reflect on a current issue or relationship in their lives where forgiving another, or accepting forgiveness, is posing a challenge. Invite a few volunteers to tell what makes forgiving or receiving forgiveness difficult.

Relate that today's session explores a parable Jesus offers in response to a question about the limits of forgiveness.

Lead the group in this prayer or one of your choosing:

Gracious God, we come with questions as well as faith. Meet us here with your grace that receives us as we are, even as it readies us for who you call us to be. Amen.

EXPLORING

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Parables). Ask for one or more volunteers to read it aloud—but at this point, do not read its final paragraph ("One further note . . ."). Encourage participants to ask questions raised by the material, and/or to underscore insights about parables they see as helpful. Affirm that this background on parables is provided not only for

today's passage, but also for the parables from Matthew that will be the focus of a number of future sessions. Encourage participants to keep this resource sheet for reference.

Have the group silently read Matthew 18:21–35 as if for the first time. Ask participants to briefly identify what they find most surprising; most comforting; most questionable.

Read Matthew 18:21–22 aloud to the group. Clarify that “member of the church” is translated from the Greek word for “brother.” Invite participants to consider how that difference in translation might affect the scope or interpretation of this passage. Inform the group that some rabbinic teachings of this era put the “limit” on forgiveness at three times, which makes Peter’s question far more generous than he is often credited for here.

Read the final paragraph of Resource Sheet 2. Talk about the function of exaggeration in this parable. Ask why simply limiting the teaching to literal details might cause confusion or misapplication.

Read Matthew 18:23–27 to the group. Encourage participants to identify what the passage reveals about: the king; the first servant; the nature of the debt; and the nature of forgiveness.

“Out of pity” is derived from the Greek word *spagchnizomai*, the root of which literally means the “bowels” or “guts.” In that era, that was where emotions were believed to be centered. This same word is also often translated as “compassion.”

Call attention to verse 27, where the king decides to forgive the first servant “out of pity.” Cite the information in the sidebar about the more literal meaning of this word, and its connection to compassion. Encourage participants to envision possible connections between the exercise of compassion and the exercise of forgiveness by the king for this servant.

Read Matthew 18:28–31 to the group. Explore how these verses are structured in a parallel way to verses 25–27. What is revealed in this portion of the parable about the first servant; about the community comprised of the fellow servants?

Read Matthew 18:32–34 to the group. Discuss what this section reveals about forgiveness, both in terms of motivation and in terms of “conditions.”

Read Matthew 18:35. Ask the group: Do you hear this as good or bad news, and why? Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Matthew 18:21–35). Have participants read the “What?” excerpt silently. Invite reactions to the way it speaks of the “provisional” (conditional) nature of God’s forgiveness.

Form two groups. Assign the following lectionary readings for today as follows: Psalm 103 to the first group and Genesis 50:15–21 to the second. Direct each group to discuss and prepare a brief report on what their passage reveals about the nature of forgiveness, and how (and by whom) forgiveness is modeled in it. Gather the groups together for the reports. At the end, discuss how those insights into forgiveness compare to and contrast with the teachings on forgiveness in Jesus’ parable. Ask participants how they believe forgiveness should be modeled after exploring all the lectionary readings.

**EASY
PREP**

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

- 1. What Forgiveness Means** The practice of forgiveness begins with understanding what forgiveness does and does not do. Direct participants to read the “So What?” excerpt silently. Invite general responses to the reading. Encourage participants to identify what they find hardest to accept in this excerpt—and how that relates to the challenge they experience in extending (or receiving) forgiveness. Have them silently reflect on the most helpful insight into forgiveness that this excerpt offers. Challenge participants to incorporate this insight into an opportunity to forgive another person this week.
- 2. Journaling** Forgiveness may entail significant personal reflection before its practice. Invite participants to write a journal entry that grows out of this session. It may be reflecting on ideas and questions raised today. It may focus on a particular situation in their lives where they are finding it difficult to forgive. Direct participants to return to this journal entry in another day or two, and to continue the thoughts stimulated—and/or to carry through on the forgiveness evoked.
- 3. Forgiveness Is Not Forgetting** The practice of forgiveness should not consign people to remain in abusive situations, nor empower abusers to continue such behavior. In the parable, the one who abuses forgiveness by forgetting its gift discovers its conditionality. Discuss how forgiveness relates to situations where abuse has occurred: between spouses, within families, in congregations. Invite participants to wrestle with how forgiveness coupled with remembrance of the offending action might make it possible for the parties to move forward rather than backward. Invite participants to pray this week for a situation where both forgiveness and remembrance are needed for the sake of wholeness.

If you use this option in Responding, be sensitive to adults who have suffered—or inflicted—abuse. This does not mean that you cannot use this option with them. For some, it may be just what is needed to move forward.

CLOSING

Gather the participants in a circle. Invite them to offer brief phrases that summarize what they will take from this session and Jesus’ parable. Affirm that these may take the form of questions as well as statements. Then give instructions for the following commissioning: Turn to the person on your right and say: “*Name*, God has forgiven you. Go now, and forgive.” Go first by turning to the person on your right and offering them this commission. When all have been so commissioned, close with this prayer or one of your choosing:

As a father and mother have compassion on their children, so God has compassion—and forgiveness—on us. As we have been so blessed, let us then bless those around us. Amen.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for September 20, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and resource sheet prior to the next session.

Focus on Matthew 18:21–35

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Lewis R. Donelson

The passage, to the surprise and chagrin of many Christians, concludes, “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart” (v. 35). Despite Christian nervousness about the implied limitation on God’s mercy, readers of Matthew have long noted that the provisional nature of God’s forgiveness that is articulated here is also articulated throughout the Gospel of Matthew. In Matthew at least, God’s forgiveness to some extent depends upon our forgiveness. Christians, who live under God’s grace and forgiveness, will be judged by this same God, mostly by whether they show the same grace and forgiveness to others.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Kathryn D. Blanchard

Peter makes explicit the perennial question that plagues all Christians in all times and places: When may we stop forgiving those who offend us repeatedly? Christians since the early church have consistently taken the meaning of Jesus’ answer—whether translated “seventy-seven” or “seventy times seven”—to be crystal clear: never. God is a God who forgives completely, and the body of Christ is called to do likewise. However, even God’s forgiveness has its limits. The theological tenet that God’s “default” stance toward the penitent is one of mercy must lead to the conviction that God’s people are those who likewise practice mercy—willingly, concretely, and as a communal way of life.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,”

Charlotte Dudley Cleghorn

Marjorie Thompson writes: “To forgive is to make a conscious choice to release the person who has wounded us from the sentence of our judgment, however justified that judgment may be. It represents a choice to leave behind our resentment and desire for retribution, however fair such punishment may seem. . . . Forgiveness involves excusing persons from the *punitive consequences* they deserve because of their behavior. The behavior remains condemned, but the offender is released from its effects as far as the forgiver is concerned. Forgiveness means the power of the original wound’s power to hold us trapped is broken.”

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,”

Charles L. Campbell

The issue here is not how many times an isolated individual should forgive some other random person who sins against him or her. Rather, the context is the community of faith. The concern here is the life of the church and the practices necessary to build up the community of faith. At the heart of those practices is forgiveness, not as an isolated act, but as an ongoing activity among members of the community. Within this context, there can be no limit on forgiveness, because it is a never-ending practice that is essential to the life of the church.

Parables

Seven of the remaining 12 sessions in this quarter (including today's) are from Matthew. Of those seven, five consist of parables (and a sixth teaching is clearly parable-like).

Although the church almost exclusively identifies parables with Jesus, the Old Testament has several examples of such teachings. The prophet Isaiah tells a parable about a vineyard that yielded wild grapes to convey the basis for God's impending judgment against Israel in the practices of injustice and violence (Isaiah 5:1–7). Similarly, the prophet Nathan tells King David the parable of the ewe lamb to make the king confront his culpability in the murder of Uriah (2 Samuel 12:1–10).

Some of Jesus' parables are told in situations of conflict (Luke 15:1–3). More generally, they provided listeners in his day with an object or experience or relationship in everyday life that Jesus uses to invoke or convey some spiritual truth.

Many parables, particularly those in Matthew, identify their intent as revealing some aspect of God's sovereign realm ("kingdom of heaven"). Some people may take that to mean that parables reveal what life will be like in the afterlife. Certainly God's reign points toward the future. Clearly, the qualities of that realm have not been fully realized on earth. We wait and hope with longing for such fulfillment. But the reign and realm of God exist now, in our midst. Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is among you" (Luke 17:21). Parables describe characteristics and qualities of God's reign that intend to transform how we live on this side of the grave.

One further note: Jesus often infuses parables with extreme hyperbole. In this week's parable, the debt of the first servant is said to be "ten thousand talents." "Ten thousand" was the highest numerical notation in that day. Likewise, a talent was the largest sum of money. Such a debt would have taken an ordinary day laborer more than 136,000 years to repay. The exaggerations in Jesus' parables are not to be understood literally, but spiritually. It is an impossible debt to incur, yet even it is forgiven. Jesus does not mean that forgiveness reaches its limit on the 78th offense (or 491st, as some manuscripts render that formula). He means that God's forgiveness has no limits.



Semicontinuous

Exod. 16:2–15

Ps. 105:1–6, 37–45

Complementary

Jonah 3:10–4:11

Ps. 145:1–8

Phil. 1:21–30

Matt. 20:1–16

Living Faithfully

Goal for the Session

Adults will articulate their challenges to live faithfully by exploring Paul's witness to faith affirmed in the midst of struggles.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Philippians 1:21–30

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” David L. Bartlett

For Paul, believers always live in the apocalyptic tension between this age and the age to come, between God's good and the pervasive evil that fights against that goodness. Therefore the faithful are always caught in a kind of dualism: God vs. evil, God's friends vs. God's enemies. For Paul, the very fact of persecution proves that the Philippians are God's friends, as he is. The very fact of persecution proves that their enemies are God's enemies. The Philippians' enemies (and Paul's) will soon face God's judgment—their own destruction.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” William Greenway

Paul rapidly moves to stress to readers and to himself that he is confident that he will remain in the flesh (*sarx*), because it “is more necessary *for you*” (v. 24). The “remain in the flesh” now articulates a conviction regarding what God will choose for the sake of others. All references to desire for selfish gain henceforth vanish. That is, it is not that Paul is not sure he will go on to fruitful ministry *despite* his continuing desire “to depart.” His reascendant “living for Christ” desire *is* for others.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Gilberto Collazo

How do we find hope and meaning in life? It all begins when we are able to look beyond ourselves and our circumstances. Paul in his prison cell looked beyond those dank walls to encourage and teach young communities of faith. We are called to look beyond our own circumstances and help others find meaning. Do we dare believe God's promises that we will experience life and life in abundance if we learn to live a life that trusts God even in the face of our greatest challenges? Nobody is exempt from those moments of feeling locked up, those moments of feeling that the walls are about to cave in around us. When those “prison moments” come, we are invited to model for others what it means to face them with hope.

NOW WHAT is God's word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Mike Graves

Paul is uncertain as to whether he will soon reside with Christ, as opposed to continuing on with the Philippians in the Mediterranean world (v. 21). That same dynamic applies to the readers whom he addresses as “the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi” (1:1). While they *reside* in Philippi, they *live* in Christ. This helps to explain Paul's dilemma about his own fate. He is not preoccupied with the next world to the neglect of this one; rather, he lets his firm belief in the next world fuel his living in this one. His hope for the Philippians is that they will do the same.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE
Philippians 1:21–30

Focus on Your Teaching

Most adults understand by experience that life and struggles go hand in hand. Many adults will acknowledge struggles in their faith journey. These may be triggered by any one of a variety of causes: for example, the extended suffering or untimely death of a loved one, a personal experience of gross unfairness, or blatant social injustices. Today's session addresses people who face such challenging times. Younger adults may be more open to express struggles related to faith. On the other hand, some older adults who have “weathered storms” may bring steadying perspective.

*Guide me, O God, in my life's journey—and now in this time of preparation.
May both bring welcomed expectation. Amen.*

YOU WILL NEED

- ☐ index cards
- ☐ pens
- ☐ copies of Resource Sheet 2
- ☐ Bibles
- ☐ study Bibles
- ☐ copies of Resource Sheet 1
- ☐ newsprint
- ☐ marker
- ☐ copies of Resource Sheet 1 for September 27, 2020

For Responding

- ☐ option 1: Resource Sheet 2
- ☐ option 2: collage materials (magazines, markers, paste, poster board)
- ☐ option 3: Resource Sheet 1

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Welcome participants as they arrive. Introduce any newcomers.

Distribute index cards and pens. Direct participants to write on one side of the index card something that is a struggle for them at this moment.

Give participants the option to find someone with whom to recount their struggle. Honor the choice of some who may not feel comfortable confiding this with another. Caution participants against giving “advice” to their partner about how to solve their struggle. Urge them to simply listen to their partner's struggle and to offer support.

Say that in today's passage from Philippians, Paul writes to a beloved community about his own struggles so that they might be encouraged to live faithfully in the struggles and challenges they face.

Offer this prayer or one of your own choosing:

We gather as your people, O God; we come as we are. Open us to your leading, that we may leave as you call us to be. Amen.

EXPLORING

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 and direct participants to read the section titled “The Setting” on it. Lead a group discussion on how those disclosures of Philippians as both a “friendship” letter and an “imprisonment” letter might shape what Paul has to say—and how we might hear those words, given those contexts.

Ask for a volunteer to read Philippians 1:21–30 aloud. Encourage the group to listen, first, through the “lenses” provided by the information on the resource sheet. After the reading, invite participants to tell what they heard as undertones of Paul’s friendship with this community and also of his imprisonment.

Direct participants to work individually or in small groups to search in study Bibles for issues that Paul addresses in Philippians. Ask for brief reports on findings.

Have participants return to the index card used in Gathering. Direct them to work individually, writing on the other side of the card one or more of the struggles they hear Paul articulating in today’s focus scripture. As they do so, encourage them to consider how that struggle connects to the faith and trust Paul affirms in this passage. Gather the participants together. Discuss the struggles identified and the connections to impacts upon Paul’s faith.

Invite participants to imagine they are part of the Philippian congregation, listening to Paul’s letter for the first time. Ask for group discussion:

- ✧ What would you make of one who had been your former pastor saying these things?
- ✧ What would you take away from this portion of Paul’s letter?

Some hear in Paul’s desire to depart and be with Christ a spiritual “selfishness.” You might ask participants: Where do you hear Paul drawing the line between a fearlessness in the face of death and a recklessness that might prematurely abandon life?

Reread verses 21–24. Invite participants to offer their reactions to these words of Paul. Consider raising the question identified in the sidebar to delve more deeply into potential misunderstandings of Paul’s thoughts here by the Philippian community.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Philippians 1:21–30) and read the “What?” excerpt. Have participants identify any places in today’s text where dualism appears, and discuss the role it serves in Paul’s teaching. In particular, look at verse 28 and the contrast of the “opponents” with the community Paul addresses. Challenge participants to weigh the pros of dualistic thinking with its dangers for the Philippian community (e.g., “God’s friends vs. God’s enemies”).

Post a sheet of newsprint and write on it the following question: What did it mean to live faithfully in a world like Paul’s? Ask participants to review the Philippians text and to find words or phrases that would provide Paul’s answers to that question for himself and for the Philippians. Have participants call out those words and phrases, while you write them down. Afterward, go through each word/phrase and ask: How does this trust or vocation arise out of the struggles of Paul and/or the Philippians?

Post another sheet of newsprint, and write a similar question: What does it mean to live faithfully in a world like ours? Affirm that this is the question the text leaves for us to answer, even as we take it up in the activity(ies) in Responding for today.

**EASY
PREP**

Be prepared for honesty if you use this in a setting where there have been recent church fights or divisions within congregations or a denomination. Do not minimize expression of residual feelings, whether you agree with their position or not.

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

- 1. Living with Hope** Living faithfully in the midst of struggles summons us to live with hope. Read and discuss the section of Resource Sheet 2 titled “The Purpose.” Encourage participants to reflect on how to live faithfully with hope in times of struggle. Either discuss the topic as a whole group or form small groups for a brief discussion. Encourage participants to read the final paragraph of Resource Sheet 2 every morning or evening this week as a spiritual discipline for coping with a struggle they face.
- 2. Worthy of the Gospel Heeding** Paul’s summons to live a life “worthy of the gospel” begins with envisioning what faithful living might look like in our day. Read aloud verse 27a: “Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel.” Make collage materials available and direct participants to create a collage to serve as a visual presentation of that verse. Encourage them to carry the image of this collage with them as they seek to live faithfully this week. Option: Have participants with cell-phone cameras take a picture of the collage to use as a reminder.
- 3. Struggles For and With Community** Part of the struggle to live faithfully involves the challenges of living in a faith community with its inevitable conflicts. Recall the earlier conversation on verse 28 and the “What?” excerpt, particularly the dangers of dualistic thinking (“God’s friends vs. God’s enemies”) for the Philippian community. Talk about the pitfalls that dualistic thinking presents to the modern church, when conflicts become reduced to “us versus them.” Identify alternatives to such approaches, that still allow us to “stand firm” in the faith. Challenge participants to commit to working for one such alternative in their participation in the congregation’s life.

CLOSING

Ask participants to silently review the struggles they wrote on both sides of the index cards. Have them also reflect on the struggles identified in the option(s) you used in Responding. Direct their attention again to the newsprint with the question “What does it mean to live faithfully in a world like ours?” Ask participants to name something they will take from this session that helps them answer that question, particularly when it comes to a struggle they may be facing. Give everyone an opportunity to respond, but respect the silence of those who do not feel comfortable doing so.

Offer the following prayer or one of your own choosing:

Holy God, gracious God, hold us together: in times of harmony, in times of struggle, gather us as community, send us in mission, as your people in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for September 27, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and resource sheet prior to the next session.

Focus on Philippians 1:21–30

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” David L. Bartlett

For Paul, believers always live in the apocalyptic tension between this age and the age to come, between God’s good and the pervasive evil that fights against that goodness. Therefore the faithful are always caught in a kind of dualism: God vs. evil, God’s friends vs. God’s enemies. For Paul, the very fact of persecution proves that the Philippians are God’s friends, as he is. The very fact of persecution proves that their enemies are God’s enemies. The Philippians’ enemies (and Paul’s) will soon face God’s judgment—their own destruction.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” William Greenway

Paul rapidly moves to stress to readers and to himself that he is confident that he will remain in the flesh (*sarx*), because it “is more necessary *for you*” (v. 24). The “remain in the flesh” now articulates a conviction regarding what God will choose for the sake of others. All references to desire for selfish gain henceforth vanish. That is, it is not that Paul is not sure he will go on to fruitful ministry *despite* his continuing desire “to depart.” His resurgent “living for Christ” desire *is* for others.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

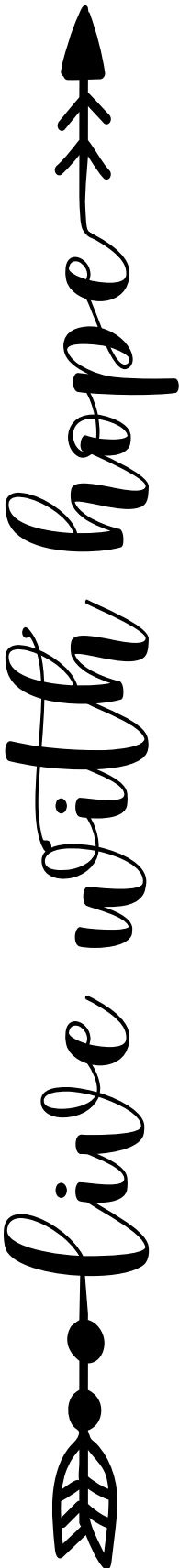
— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Gilberto Collazo

How do we find hope and meaning in life? It all begins when we are able to look beyond ourselves and our circumstances. Paul in his prison cell looked beyond those dank walls to encourage and teach young communities of faith. We are called to look beyond our own circumstances and help others find meaning. Do we dare believe God’s promises that we will experience life and life in abundance if we learn to live a life that trusts God even in the face of our greatest challenges? Nobody is exempt from those moments of feeling locked up, those moments of feeling that the walls are about to cave in around us. When those “prison moments” come, we are invited to model for others what it means to face them with hope.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,”
Mike Graves

Paul is uncertain as to whether he will soon reside with Christ, as opposed to continuing on with the Philippians in the Mediterranean world (v. 21). That same dynamic applies to the readers whom he addresses as “the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi” (1:1). While they *reside* in Philippi, they *live* in Christ. This helps to explain Paul’s dilemma about his own fate. He is not preoccupied with the next world to the neglect of this one; rather, he lets his firm belief in the next world fuel his living in this one. His hope for the Philippians is that they will do the same.



Philippians: Setting and Purpose

The Setting

Philippians is the most unabashedly affectionate of Paul's letters. There is nothing here like the frustration of Galatians or the chiding of the Corinthian letters. Indeed scholars who study the writings of Hellenistic authors of Paul's time suggest that the letter is a typical letter of friendship, written to strengthen the bonds of affection between author and recipient.

The poignancy of the friendship letter is only increased by the fact that, when Paul writes it, he is himself in prison, uncertain whether he will ever be released to visit his friends in Philippi again.

—Excerpted from David L. Bartless, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 87

The Purpose

Paul writes this letter from prison, facing capital charges. Issues of life and death are no joke in this setting; yet he instructs people to rejoice in the midst of their circumstances, no matter how difficult they may be. Many opinions exist about the purpose of this letter, but I would like to suggest that Paul is challenging people to find joy and hope in the difficult moments of life. Bette Midler in her song "The Rose" seems to offer a word of rebuke for those who are so afraid of dying that they never learn to live. Life happens, yet we have become so complacent and take things so for granted that when the hard times come, these bad incidents become like prisons that snuff out our life.

We are called to live with hope. Viktor Frankl, the famous psychoanalyst and Holocaust survivor, in his book *Man's Search for Meaning* presents his thesis on how people find meaning in life and the importance of this fruitful search for a life of hope and joy. In explaining the phenomena of the concentration camps, where hundreds of prisoners acquiesced to dozens of soldiers, Frankl speaks of the loss of hope, which robs people of their will to live and to face life's difficulties. People start dying when they lose hope. That was why the words *Arbeit Macht Frei* ("Work Creates Freedom"), which adorned the entrance of the first German concentration camp at Dachau, could have more appropriately been replaced by the words from Dante's *Divine Comedy*: "Abandon hope, all who enter this place." Frankl speaks of the freedom we possess that helps us determine our attitudes and spiritual well-being. The person who has nothing to live for will lose hope and die quickly. That is what Paul is trying to counteract in this passage. It is God's will that we experience life and not death.

—Excerpted from Gilberto Collazo, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 86 and 88

Semicontinuous

Exod. 17:1–7

Ps. 78:1–4, 12–16

Complementary

Ezek. 18:1–4, 25–32

Ps. 25:1–9

Phil. 2:1–13

Matt. 21:23–32

Christlike Humility

**Goal for
the Session**

Adults will explore ways to practice the radical humility of Christ to which Paul summons us through an ancient hymn.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Philippians 2:1–13

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” David L. Bartlett

What is clear is that the hymn has two verses, and the movement of the second exactly reverses the movement of the first. In the first strophe, Christ Jesus starts out being in the form of God, humbles himself to descend to earth, and then is further humbled by death, cast down below the earth to Sheol. In the second strophe, Christ is raised from Sheol and raised to highest heaven while winning the allegiance of every sphere through which he has passed—those in heaven and on earth and underneath the earth. The name that is above every name is surely *kyrios*—“Lord.”

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” William Greenway

When found in human likeness (*homoīōmati*, v. 7), Jesus Christ remains true to divine nature—to the death. Contrast Adam, who *grasped after* autonomy and power, assuming a form diametrically opposed to the divine form (the disobedience of Eden). Jesus Christ, by contrast, presents in human likeness the true nature of God, manifests truly the *imago Dei* in the flesh. “Even death on a cross” (v. 8). What is the passion of Passion Week, the passion of Jesus Christ? It is the passion of Immanuel, of love, of *kenōsis* [self-emptying], a passion for justice and joy, an absolute sensitivity to the vulnerability, need, and suffering of others.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Gilberto Collazo

Christian living is a process. God’s timeline for each one of us is unique, and only God knows what the final product is going to look like. We do not expect an instantaneous transformation of our life’s attitudes and actions, but rather an ongoing process of change that results from the ever-growing awareness of our need to be at a different place if we are to be true Christ followers. The process begins with our conscious decision to become reflections of Christ in our actions and reactions to life.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Mike Graves

Following Paul’s lead, we then move to his exhortations. Although repeated and rephrased in a variety of ways, ultimately the call is to empty oneself for the greater good of the church body, to practice humility. It is nearly impossible in our day to recognize how radical this word was in the first-century Mediterranean world. Lists of vices and virtues were standard fare, not just in the church but in the larger culture, often nearly identical in nature. It was a given that love was superior to hate, harmony better than fighting. However, humility was seen as a weakness in the ancient world, whereas Paul listed it as a virtue. Of course Christians today recognize humility as a virtue to be emulated, but it is much easier to *recognize* it than to *practice* it.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

Philippians 2:1–13

Focus on Your Teaching

Who are the adults in your group that you would consider to be humble? What leads you to make that assessment? Would they say it of themselves—and would they make that assessment about you? Today's focus passage approaches the theme of humility with the prose of teaching coupled with the poetry of hymnody. You and the adults in your group may have widely varied opinions as to whether humility is a blessing or an impediment in today's world. Such differences will likely vary more on the basis of personality styles than generational spans.

Open my mind to your wisdom, open my heart to your compassion, open my spirit to your presence. In Jesus Christ. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- ☐ soothing instrumental music recording and player
- ☐ Bibles
- ☐ copies of Resource Sheet 2
- ☐ copies of Resource Sheet 1
- ☐ copies of Resource Sheet 1 for October 4, 2020

For Responding

- ☐ option 2: Resource Sheet 1
- ☐ option 3: copies of hymnal or songbook, newsprint, markers

■ LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, prepare to play a soothing instrumental recording so that it is ready to be played during the reading of the focus scripture in Exploring.

Welcome participants as they arrive. Introduce any newcomers.

Form pairs and explain this activity. For the first minute, one partner will finish the sentence “Humility is . . .” with a different affirmation every time. After each response, the other partner is to say, “Thank you. And what is humility?” After one minute, reverse roles.

Gather the group together and invite brief feedback about the activity. Afterward, ask each person what was the most important affirmation their partner made about humility. Then ask each set of partners: What was the most difficult affirmation made in your pair about humility? What makes it difficult?

Affirm that in today's focus scripture, Paul writes about the humility of Christ.

Offer this prayer or one of your own choosing:

Be at work among us, O God, as we gather in your name. Be in our words and be in our thoughts, be in our questions and be in our fellowship. In Jesus Christ. Amen.

EXPLORING

Invite participants to close their eyes and imagine they are sitting in a symphony hall. Introduce the “performance” they will hear as a blending of music with today's focus scripture. There will be an overture, consisting of the first five verses; a second and main movement, verses 6–11; and a finale, verses 12 and 13.

Begin the music quietly, to set the mood. The music should play continuously throughout the reading. Read verses 1–5 aloud to the group and then pause for approximately ten seconds. Then read verses 6–11 and pause again. Finally, read verses 12 and 13. When you are finished reading, continue to play the music a short while longer. Slowly turn the volume down until the music cannot be heard, rather than abruptly turning it off. Have participants open their eyes and take a deep breath.

Invite participants to reflect on this reading joined to music. Was the music helpful or distracting from the words? Discuss what the participants found most memorable, or puzzling, in the text.

The word Paul uses to begin verse 1 (*ei* instead of *ean*) assumes the reality of the conditions he describes. Thus, the verse would be better translated: “*Since* there is encouragement, *since* there is consolation”

Ask participants to silently read verses 1–5. Invite comments or questions about Paul’s words and message in that passage. Mention the information identified in the sidebar about the word translated in the text as “if.” Discuss how the suggested change in translation alters what we hear Paul saying, particularly when it comes to the commissions Paul charges the Philippians with in verses 2–5.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (A Song of Christ’s Humility). Note that most scholars believe Philippians 2:6–11 to have been an already existing hymn of the church in Paul’s day. Lead the group in a unison reading of verses 6–11 printed on Resource Sheet 2. Use the line breaks as pauses in speaking, as such breaks are used in chanting. If you and/or a member of the group is comfortable doing so, you might even lead it as a chant. Invite participants to reflect on the ways this hymn celebrates the humility of Jesus.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Philippians 2:1–13). Read and discuss the “What?” excerpt to delve deeper into the hymn’s pairing of humility and exaltation.

Have a volunteer read aloud verses 12 and 13 to the group. Invite the participants to imagine themselves now sitting in the congregation at Philippi. They have just heard the hymn that Paul uses in verses 6–11 sung—and now it is followed by these two verses. Ask: What connects the preceding hymn, and its focus on Christ’s humility, to Paul’s commissioning the Philippians to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling”?

Read the “So What?” excerpt, focusing on its concluding sentence that affirms that Christian living “begins with our conscious decision to become reflections of Christ.” Challenge participants to consider the possibilities of what it might mean for people and communities of Christ today to become “reflections of Christ” based on the first stanza of the hymn in verses 6–8.

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

- 1. Plan a Group Service Project** The humility of Christ bids us to the service of Christ. Discuss and plan a service project your group will carry out (for example, serving meals at a homeless shelter). Do so not with the idea that doing this will “humbling” for

EASY
PREP

A word of caution: too many times in the church, the call to “empty” or “deny” oneself has been unequally applied. Women, minorities, and the poor have been browbeaten, while those in positions of privilege or power have been exempted.

the participants, but rather with the realization that those being served are beloved of God, and it is a gift to us to be able to respond in Christ’s name. Assign participants responsibilities in the coming week to arrange and carry out the project.

2. **Humility: From Recognition to Practice** The practice of Christlike humility depends on recognizing what humility involves. Read the “Now What?” excerpt from Resource Sheet 1. Discuss how the ideas about humility generated in Gathering relate to the excerpt’s definition of humility as the call to “empty oneself for the greater good.” Where do participants see such humility in the world; in their congregation? For the coming week assign a journal activity that daily reflects on a situation in the participants’ lives with this question: What would it mean to practice Christlike humility there?
3. **The Faith We Sing** Paul’s use of an ancient hymn reminds us that our songs shape not only our faith in Christ but also our understanding of what a Christlike life is. Distribute a copy of your church’s hymnal(s) or songbook to each participant. Working in small groups, have each group choose one or two songs about the person or work of Christ. List on newsprint the most important affirmations made about Christ in each hymn. For each affirmation, ask: What does this mean for our calling to reflect Christ in our lives? Have participants choose one hymn they will return to each day this week for meditating on Christ’s humility and call upon their lives today.

CLOSING

Gather the participants in a circle. Invite them to offer thoughts or questions generated by this session.

If you used option 3 in Responding, invite participants to name the hymn they will use for meditation this week.

If you used option 1 in Responding, confirm any further planning that needs to be made, and by whom, in order to carry out the service project.

Offer the following prayer or one of your choosing. You may wish to do the latter if it will be a “commissioning” for the option 1 project in Responding.

Holy God, we see in Jesus the very incarnation of humility. May we live with Christ’s humility, trusting that you are at work in us and through us for the sake of salvation. Amen.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for October 4, or e-mail it to participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and resource sheet prior to the next session. Encourage participants to also review, if they still have it, Resource Sheet 2 (Parables) from September 13.

Focus on Philippians 2:1–13

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” David L. Bartlett

What is clear is that the hymn has two verses, and the movement of the second exactly reverses the movement of the first. In the first strophe, Christ Jesus starts out being in the form of God, humbles himself to descend to earth, and then is further humbled by death, cast down below the earth to Sheol. In the second strophe, Christ is raised from Sheol and raised to highest heaven while winning the allegiance of every sphere through which he has passed—those in heaven and on earth and underneath the earth. The name that is above every name is surely *kyrios*—“Lord.”

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” William Greenway

When found in human likeness (*homoīōmati*, v. 7), Jesus Christ remains true to divine nature—to the death. Contrast Adam, who *grasped after* autonomy and power, assuming a form diametrically opposed to the divine form (the disobedience of Eden). Jesus Christ, by contrast, presents in human likeness the true nature of God, manifests truly the *imago Dei* in the flesh. “Even death on a cross” (v. 8). What is the passion of Passion Week, the passion of Jesus Christ? It is the passion of Immanuel, of love, of *kenōsis* [self-emptying], a passion for justice and joy, an absolute sensitivity to the vulnerability, need, and suffering of others.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Gilberto Collazo

Christian living is a process. God’s timeline for each one of us is unique, and only God knows what the final product is going to look like. We do not expect an instantaneous transformation of our life’s attitudes and actions, but rather an ongoing process of change that results from the ever-growing awareness of our need to be at a different place if we are to be true Christ followers. The process begins with our conscious decision to become reflections of Christ in our actions and reactions to life.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,”
Mike Graves

Following Paul’s lead, we then move to his exhortations. Although repeated and rephrased in a variety of ways, ultimately the call is to empty oneself for the greater good of the church body, to practice humility. It is nearly impossible in our day to recognize how radical this word was in the first-century Mediterranean world. Lists of vices and virtues were standard fare, not just in the church but in the larger culture, often nearly identical in nature. It was a given that love was superior to hate, harmony better than fighting. However, humility was seen as a weakness in the ancient world, whereas Paul listed it as a virtue. Of course Christians today recognize humility as a virtue to be emulated, but it is much easier to *recognize* it than to *practice* it.

A Song of Christ's Humility

Philippians 2:6–11

6 Who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
7 but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
8 he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

9 Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name that is above every name,
10 so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
11 and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.



Semicontinuous
Exod. 20:1–4, 7–9,
12–20
Ps. 19

Complementary
Isa. 5:1–7
Ps. 80:7–15
Phil. 3:4b–14
Matt. 21:33–46

Perils of Rejection

Goal for the Session

Based on Jesus' parable of the vineyard owner, adults will wrestle with the dynamics of rejecting God by rejecting others.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Matthew 21:33–46

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Susan Grove Eastman

What shall we make of this judgment on Israel's religious leaders? We note that here Jesus does not reject the whole people of Israel; his conflict with the chief priests is preceded and triggered by his healings of the blind and the lame, who come to him within the temple precincts (21:14). The suffering, impoverished, and illiterate common people rightly acclaim him; the educated leaders do not. Thus the accusations against Israel in Isaiah 5:8–30 echo in the background of Jesus' teaching here: the outcast and the poor suffer, while the wealthy continually enrich only themselves.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Andrew Purves

Calvin has a second point: whatever the contrivances of those who actively reject or betray Jesus, seeking to destroy him, the cornerstone remains secure, holding up the building. The attack on Jesus Christ is ultimately fruitless. Jesus, says Calvin, suffers no loss or diminution when he is rejected or betrayed. In spite of betrayal, he retains the place given to him from the Father. Whatever the honor given to and apparent success of those who attack Christ, the authority and purpose of God will prevail. “This was the Lord's doing” (v. 42).

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Richard E. Spalding

Our weathering of the challenges to our ethics and convictions posed by responsible stewardship—of the “vineyard” of this earth, of the values we live by, of the soundness of our relationships—begins with the realization that God will maintain at least sufficient distance to enable us to determine our own fruitfulness or to make our own mistakes. Though, of course, God is not an absentee landlord, mature faith means practicing sound values and sound devotion on our own, even when God seems distant.

NOW WHAT is God's word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Marvin A. McMickle

Another way in which we reject God occurs when we reject some of God's people for reasons of our own. Human beings are capable of doing terrible things to other people whom they are somehow able to define as less worthy, less human, less valuable than themselves. If we can manage to turn another human being into the “other,” there is no limit to what we will do or will allow to be done to them. We can be as brutal to one another as were the men who beat, stoned, and killed people in Matthew 21:35–37. When we reject some of God's people, we are rejecting the God who made them.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE
Matthew 21:33–46

Focus on Your Teaching

Many participants in your group have likely experienced rejection by others. At other times they may have been the ones doing the rejecting. Rejection bears the risk of doing violence to relationship, and in the process, to oneself. Rejection can be insidious when it rears its head in faith communities. Today's focus scripture relates a challenging teaching of Jesus about the potentially devastating consequences of rejection. Some participants might find the stark declaration of judgment in Jesus' teaching to be unduly harsh, or contrary to their view of God.

Open my ears, and spirit, to listen, that my leading of this session may be grounded in what you have to say. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- ☐ copies of Resource Sheet 2
- ☐ Bibles
- ☐ concordances (optional)
- ☐ copies of Resource Sheet 1
- ☐ copies of Resource Sheet 1 for October 11, 2020

For Responding

- ☐ option 1: Resource Sheet 1
- ☐ option 2: paper, pens

■ LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Welcome participants as they arrive. Introduce any newcomers.

Lead the following guided meditation:

Close your eyes and take several deep breaths. (Pause) Recall an experience where you rejected someone. (Pause) Think of what it was like when you encountered this individual after that rejection. (Pause) Consider two questions:

- ✠ What was different about the way you spoke or acted toward them as a result?
- ✠ Is there anything you regret about the experience?

Take several deep breaths, then open your eyes.

Observe a time of silence. Invite any participants comfortable doing so to speak a word or phrase that sums up any regret they have about the experience.

Affirm that today's session delves into a parable of Jesus concerning the consequences of rejection.

Offer this prayer or one of your own choosing:

God, we thank you for your presence with us in Spirit, and for your presence with us in each other. Open us now to you. Amen.

EXPLORING

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Context and Connection) and read Part 1, "Setting the Context." Invite participants to identify what they hear as the most important details of background given there. Encourage the group to keep this background in mind as you enter into the parable Jesus told.

Have participants number off by fours. Instruct the “ones” to listen to the parable through the eyes of the landowner. The “twos” shall listen to the parable through the eyes of the tenants. The “threes” shall listen to the parable through the eyes of the slaves/servants. The “fours” shall listen to the parable through the eyes of the son. Ask everyone to keep these issues in mind as they listen:

- ✠ Your character’s respect and/or disrespect toward the other characters in the parable;
- ✠ Why your character or characters do what they do as a result of those views.

Read Matthew 21:33–39 aloud to the group. Invite individuals in each group to offer their insights into these two issues about their characters. Afterward, invite the “characters” to talk with one another about those views and their consequences.

The parable itself ends at verse 39. Have one or more participants read aloud verses 40–46 to the group. Invite comments or questions sparked by these verses. Ask:

- ✠ *What dilemma did the religious leaders face?*
- ✠ *How did that dilemma play into the placement of this incident in Matthew’s Gospel, shortly after Jesus’ final entry into Jerusalem?*

Choose one or more of the following issues to delve into more deeply:

- ✠ Participants’ reactions to the strong imagery of God’s judgment in verses 41 and 44;
- ✠ Participants’ understanding of the “stone that the builders rejected” reference (use concordances to look up original reference in Psalm 118);
- ✠ The reasons, according to other Gospel accounts, that these leaders sought Jesus’ arrest, and why parables might have been so threatening in this instance.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Matthew 21:33–46). Read and discuss the “What?” excerpt. Focus on the point made about Jesus’ not rejecting the whole people of Israel. Identify where that assertion may be stated or at least implied in today’s passage. Also, read aloud the next to last sentence in the excerpt: “The suffering . . . acclaim him; the educated leaders do not.” Discuss the fairness and potential misinterpretations of the negative clause in the second half of that sentence.

In Isaiah 5:1–7, the prophet declares God’s impending rejection of Israel. The reasons for that rejection (v. 7) are summarized in a play on Hebrew words, where justice (*mishpat*) has been exchanged for bloodshed (*mishpakh*).

Note that Jesus’ parable intensifies the meaning of an even older Jewish parable that concerns rejection. Have participants silently read Isaiah 5:1–7. Relate the information provided in the sidebar to provide further background for Isaiah’s parable. Discuss how participants understand Jesus’ parable to reinterpret Isaiah’s.

Read the second half of Resource Sheet 2, “Connecting Then with Now.” Invite participants to consider what they would give as testimony for the excerpt’s assertion that today’s parable “is remarkably helpful for guiding reflection on the life of the church today.”

EASY
PREP

Consider ahead of time how you might handle conflict within the group triggered by passionate differences over an issue in which rejection is an acknowledged dynamic—for example, where sex offenders are allowed to live in a community.

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

- 1. Who Might We Be Rejecting?** Rejecting others potentially jeopardizes our relationship with God, especially when we justify such rejection in the name of God. Read the “Now What?” excerpt from Resource Sheet 1. Challenge participants to identify examples in your community where such rejection takes form, whether of individuals or groups. Discuss how faith or relationship with God by the one(s) doing the rejecting is jeopardized by such actions. Urge participants to take one action this week on behalf of someone who is the victim of such rejection.
- 2. A Modern Version of Today’s Parable** Rewriting the parable in a contemporary setting may help participants identify more deeply with how Jesus’ words may speak to us today. Distribute paper and pens to participants. Have participants, working individually or in small groups, rewrite this parable in a modern setting. Encourage freedom not to have to deal with every detail of the original parable, but rather to tell a story that illustrates its chief dynamics. Encourage participants to share the parable this coming week with a friend or acquaintance, without telling them its original source.
- 3. Avoiding the Trap of Anti-Semitism** Rejecting Judaism has been an all-too-common result of misunderstanding this and others of Jesus’ stories. Discuss—and confess, as needed—instances of how the Christian community has nurtured rather than opposed anti-Semitism by misinterpreting Scripture—in particular, Scripture involving conflicts between Jesus and some (not all) Jewish authorities (for example, in some teachings of Martin Luther or in rationales for the Holocaust). Encourage participants in the coming weeks to read with a discerning eye such conflict stories in the Gospels, so that they are not heard as blanket condemnations of the Jewish people or the Jewish faith.

CLOSING

Gather the participants in a circle. Invite them to briefly identify insights they carry from this session and/or questions that linger.

If you used option 2 in Responding, invite volunteers to read their modern version of the parable. If you used option 1 in Responding, invite individuals to silently pray for courage in carrying through on the action on behalf of a victim of rejection.

Invite participants to join hands. Offer the following closing prayer or one of your own choosing:

Holy God, may we find in your gracious acceptance of us the means to be gracious. When it seems easier to reject, may we assess the cost that rejection may levy on others and on us. And when we feel rejected ourselves, may we find the empowering assurance that you claim us as your own. In Jesus Christ. Amen.

Focus on Matthew 21:33–46

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Susan Grove Eastman

What shall we make of this judgment on Israel’s religious leaders? We note that here Jesus does not reject the whole people of Israel; his conflict with the chief priests is preceded and triggered by his healings of the blind and the lame, who come to him within the temple precincts (21:14). The suffering, impoverished, and illiterate common people rightly acclaim him; the educated leaders do not. Thus the accusations against Israel in Isaiah 5:8–30 echo in the background of Jesus’ teaching here: the outcast and the poor suffer, while the wealthy continually enrich only themselves.

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SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

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Richard E. Spalding

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NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,”

Marvin A. McMickle

Another way in which we reject God occurs when we reject some of God’s people for reasons of our own. Human beings are capable of doing terrible things to other people whom they are somehow able to define as less worthy, less human, less valuable than themselves. If we can manage to turn another human being into the “other,” there is no limit to what we will do or will allow to be done to them. We can be as brutal to one another as were the men who beat, stoned, and killed people in Matthew 21:35–37. When we reject some of God’s people, we are rejecting the God who made them.

Context and Connection

Part 1 Setting the Context

Matthew's version of the parable of the Wicked Tenants is the second in a series of three parables that Jesus tells in the temple. The setting and context of the parable are crucial to its interpretation. Jesus has entered Jerusalem riding on a colt and been acclaimed as the messianic Son of David, and "the whole city was in turmoil" (Matthew 21:6–10). This acclamation of Jesus as the Son of David continues when he goes to the temple and overturns the tables of the money changers, prompting the chief priests and scribes to ask angrily, "Do you hear what these are saying?" (21:16). Jesus leaves the city for the night. When he returns the next morning, he curses a fruitless fig tree, symbolizing the coming destruction of Jerusalem and disempowerment of the temple leadership (21:18–19; cf. Matthew 3:10). After this he enters the temple and, not surprisingly, encounters a challenge to his authority from the chief priests and elders (21:23–27). The three parables that follow respond to this challenge, and each speaks directly to these Jewish leaders, not to the people as a whole. Thus, when in the first parable Jesus says, "The tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you" (21:31), he judges the religious leaders, not the Jews as a people (21:45).

—Excerpted from Susan Grove Eastham, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 141

Part 2 Connecting Then with Now

The parable of the Wicked Tenants is remarkably helpful for guiding reflection on the life of the church today. While it must be interpreted in its historical context as part of the teaching of Jesus against the religious leaders of his day, and of the reach of the gospel beyond the confines of Israel, the parable must not remain locked within the limitations of past history. As gospel it has contemporary significance. John Calvin, in his commentary on this parable, noted as much for his day. Calvin identified two theological points of continuing relevance: (1) we should expect people, and especially religious leaders, to try to hinder the reign of Christ; (2) whatever contrivances are mounted against the church, God will be victorious.

—Excerpted from Edward Purves, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 140



Semicontinuous

Exod. 32:1–14

Ps. 106:1–6, 19–23

Complementary

Isa. 25:1–9

Ps. 23

Phil. 4:1–9

Matt. 22:1–14

Joyous Persistence

Goal for the Session

Adults will celebrate the enduring joy experienced in covenant faithfulness as reflected in Paul's exhortation to the Philippians.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Philippians 4:1–9

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Annette Weissenrieder

Synergōn [coworker] and *synēlthēsan* [struggle along with] have one thing in common: they express an active participation of the coworkers in the mission. Cooperation in the mission signifies an active fight, no quiet or passive participation. The choice of agonistic language deepens this background further: participants in a competition never fight only for themselves or for their family, but are always nominated as envoys of a city. Their service is to be interpreted as a service for the city. Paul's encouragement is clear: nobody fights alone; we always fight together.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” David B. Burrell

What difference does becoming a follower of Jesus make to one's daily life? A follower familiar with the Gospels would, of course, readily cite Matthew 25, the charter of the Christian life, yet Paul is even more specific: “help these women, [Euodia and Syntyche], for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life” (v. 3). So followers of Jesus are enjoined to assist one another “in the gospel,” that is, to encourage each other to follow in the footsteps of Jesus as outlined in Matthew 25.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Jill Y. Crainshaw

Seasons of identity exploration and maturing hold the potential to remind communities of the profound extraordinariness of what seems merely ordinary. Keep on with your everyday works of gentleness and prayerful living, Paul counsels the Philippians (v. 4). Bake a loaf of bread for the woman down the street whose husband just died, Paul might say. Take a bag of groceries to the food closet. Visit a church member in the nursing home. Seemingly ordinary acts bear extraordinary gifts of God's love. Ordinary Time teaches communities about the persistent, everyday powerful, promises of God's grace in Christ.

NOW WHAT is God's word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Nathan Eddy

It comes naturally to Paul that prayer should be intimately associated with joy in the Lord. Prayer here is relationship with God, not a technique. By perceiving and rejoicing in a living, unexpected presence in the world even in difficult situations, one lets go of being one's own savior. Instead of worrying about “anything,” the Philippians are to bring “everything” to God (v. 6). The “anythings” and “everythings” of life can be sources of endless worry—or the stuff of prayer. Either way they are important. Like joy, prayer is not an escape but a practice of regarding the same painful situation from another angle, one still open to multiple resolutions that God permits us to consider.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

Philippians 4:1–9

Focus on Your Teaching

Some adults in your group may have mixed feelings as to whether joy and community blend easily. Conflicts inevitably happen in communities. Unexamined routines may drift into dull monotony. How might your congregation help its members value and experience joy in the ordinary courses of life together? Today's focus scripture addresses just such a situation and challenge. Its counsels engage individuals and communities in journeys through ordinary times as well as extraordinary ones. Adults in your group facing a difficult crisis at this moment may find the text Pollyannaish—or an empowering commission.

I thank you, O God, for the opportunity to lead this session. Be with me in its preparation as well as its unfolding. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- ☐ newsprint
- ☐ markers
- ☐ Bibles
- ☐ copies of Resource Sheet 1
- ☐ poster board
- ☐ index cards
- ☐ glue sticks
- ☐ copies of Resource Sheet 1 for October 18, 2020

For Responding

- ☐ option 1: copies of Resource Sheet 2
- ☐ option 2: Resource Sheet 1
- ☐ option 3: Resource Sheet 1

■ LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, write the following quote on a sheet of newsprint: “Joy is a discipline of perception, not an emotion dependent on circumstances.” Display it in the room so that adults can easily see it as they enter. Set up the poster board, index cards, and glue sticks for use in Exploring.

Welcome participants. Introduce any new members of the group or visitors.

Direct participants' attention to the quote on the newsprint. Form groups of three or four. Have each group briefly discuss reactions to that quote and relate any personal experience that bears those words out.

Gather the group. Invite each small group to describe some insight into joy as a discipline that arose out of their conversation.

Note that today's focus scripture elicits a call to joy by Paul that is anchored in community life.

Offer this prayer or one of your own choosing:

We rejoice, O God, that you have gathered us here today. Open us now to your holy presence among us, a presence you reveal through your Word and in each other. In Jesus Christ. Amen.

EXPLORING

Have participants silently read Philippians 4:1–9. Invite initial comments or questions evoked by the passage.

Now read the passage as a litany using the following process. Ask for eight volunteers to read one verse each of Philippians 4:1–3 and 5–9. Explain that verse 4 will be read as a unison response by the group after each of the other eight verses. (If you have fewer than eight in your group, have one or more adults take on two of the verses.)

Invite reactions to the text and its meaning evoked by this second reading. Draw connections to ways in which those reactions compare to and contrast with the responses generated by the first reading.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Philippians 4:1–9) and read the “What?” excerpt. Encourage participants to use its insights in revisiting what they hear Paul saying in verses 1–3. Clarify for the group that the term “agonistic” in the excerpt originates from the Greek word used to describe the effort expended in athletic competition—a very different connotation from what we associate with the English usage of “agony.”

We think of joy as a private overflow of good feeling in response to happy circumstances. The command “Rejoice” (v. 4) is in the plural, as are the rest of his commands here. Joy is incomplete unless it is shared.

Form two debate teams. The issue for debate is verse 4: Namely, is it possible or even faithful to think we can always rejoice? Have the two groups form their arguments, and engage in debate. After both sides have had adequate opportunity to present their case, bring the information in the sidebar to their attention. Ask each group: How might this assertion about the communal basis of rejoicing affect your side’s argument? Allow each group one opportunity to address this issue as part of their closing argument. Conclude the debate. Debrief by having the participants identify which arguments were more persuasive. Talk about the impact of the sidebar information not only on the debate, but also more broadly on how participants interpret “rejoice” and the other imperatives by Paul in this passage. Discuss how this emphasis on community might alter how we perceive what Paul summons here in terms of faithful living.

Affirm that two of today’s other lections, which would have been familiar to Paul, celebrate the joy we draw in community with God. Invite participants to read Isaiah 25:1–9 and Psalm 23. Direct the participants to the index cards, markers, and glue sticks. Have them write words or phrases on the index cards (one word or phrase per card) that reflect the joy or reasons for it celebrated in these texts. Have participants affix the cards to the poster board you have set up, using the glue sticks. While they are working, write across the top of the poster board: “Rejoice in the Lord always.” When all index cards are posted, have participants reflect on these testimonies to joy. Encourage participants to call out how these words and phrases connect to today’s focus scripture.

Ask for silent reflection on this question: Given this poster and this session’s activities, how might we celebrate the joy that comes in faithful relationship with God and one another?

**EASY
PREP**

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

- 1. Make a Joyful Inventory** Based on Paul's list of virtues in Philippians 4:8, participants will identify practices for each that celebrate and embody the joy evoked in faithful living. Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Make a Joyful Inventory). Go over the introduction and instructions in the first two paragraphs. Have each participant work individually or with another participant to fill out their inventory sheet. If there is time, gather the group and have one volunteer read or summarize their entry for each listing. Encourage participants to continue to use and perhaps update this inventory through the coming week.
- 2. Everyday Practices of Joy** Faithful living occurs not simply in extraordinary moments of crisis or opportunity, but also in the daily routines and possibilities of life. Read and discuss the "So What?" excerpt on Resource Sheet 1. Identify other ways to "keep on" with everyday works in addition to those listed in the excerpt, and discuss what joy may be found and extended in such actions. Challenge each participant to take on one of those actions in the coming week.
- 3. Connecting Joy and Prayer** Prayer, both individual and communal, anchors the joys and practices of faith in community with God. Read and discuss the "Now What?" excerpt on Resource Sheet 1. Focus the conversation on the excerpt's final sentence. Call on participants to return to that sentence as a guide for their daily prayers throughout the week, particularly those that lift up crises in the lives of others or in their own life.

The final sentence of the excerpt, highlighted in this option's discussion, speaks of regarding the "same painful situation" from another angle. You might ask participants to also discuss that sentence by substituting "joyful" for "painful."

CLOSING

Invite participants to call to mind a God-given joy for which they are grateful. Ask for silent reflection: How does that joy help you persist through difficult times in life?

Give directions for the following litany prayer. Participants comfortable doing so will offer a brief sentence about that gift of joy and how it sustains them in life. After each such offering, lead the group in the following litany response that reflects Paul's assurance to the Philippians at the end of today's focus scripture: "May the God of peace be with you—rejoice!" Assure participants who are not comfortable speaking that they do not have to. Encourage them, though, to keep their joy and its gift for living in mind as they join in the litany response with others.

Pray the litany as the closing prayer for this session.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for October 18, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and resource sheet prior to the next session.

Focus on Philippians 4:1–9

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Annette Weissenrieder

Synergōn [coworker] and *synēlthēsan* [struggle along with] have one thing in common: they express an active participation of the coworkers in the mission. Cooperation in the mission signifies an active fight, no quiet or passive participation. The choice of agonistic language deepens this background further: participants in a competition never fight only for themselves or for their family, but are always nominated as envoys of a city. Their service is to be interpreted as a service for the city. Paul’s encouragement is clear: nobody fights alone; we always fight together.

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Seasons of identity exploration and maturing hold the potential to remind communities of the profound extraordinariness of what seems merely ordinary. Keep on with your everyday works of gentleness and prayerful living, Paul counsels the Philippians (v. 4). Bake a loaf of bread for the woman down the street whose husband just died, Paul might say. Take a bag of groceries to the food closet. Visit a church member in the nursing home. Seemingly ordinary acts bear extraordinary gifts of God’s love. Ordinary Time teaches communities about the persistent, everyday powerful, promises of God’s grace in Christ.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,”
Nathan Eddy

It comes naturally to Paul that prayer should be intimately associated with joy in the Lord. Prayer here is relationship with God, not a technique. By perceiving and rejoicing in a living, unexpected presence in the world even in difficult situations, one lets go of being one’s own savior. Instead of worrying about “anything,” the Philippians are to bring “everything” to God (v. 6). The “anythings” and “everything” of life can be sources of endless worry—or the stuff of prayer. Either way they are important. Like joy, prayer is not an escape but a practice of regarding the same painful situation from another angle, one still open to multiple resolutions that God permits us to consider.

Make a Joyful Inventory

Paul commissions individuals and communities in Philippians 4:8 with a list of qualities or virtues to think of—and then immediately follows the list with “keep on doing the things” Paul has set before them. Thus, living joyfully and faithfully involves not only what we think, but also how those thoughts permeate our actions.

Use the list Paul provides in verse 8 as a starting point for your “joyful inventory.” Space is provided after each quality Paul identifies, in order for you to reflect on that quality in terms of: (1) the joy it can bring to life; and (2) a specific way you will practice that quality in your everyday living.

“Whatever is true”—What joy can truth bring, and where might you live out the call to be truthful?

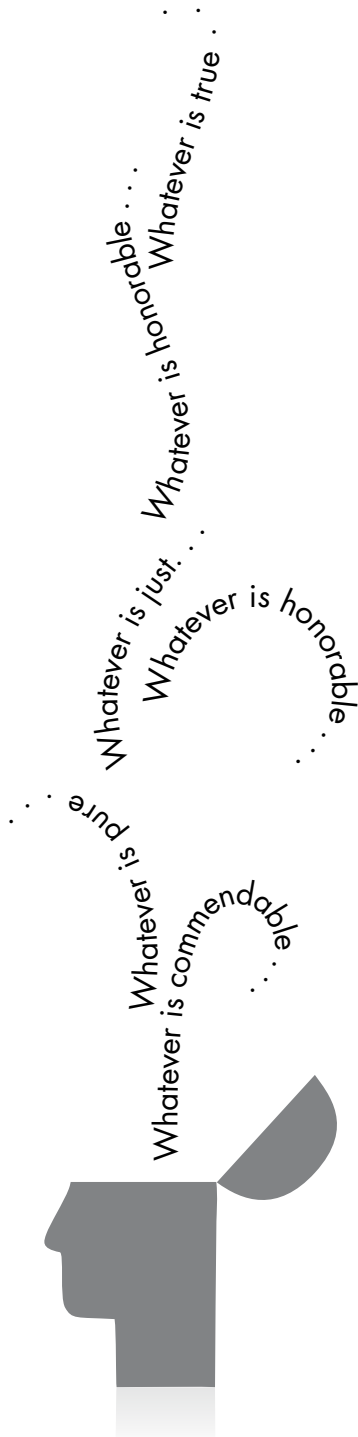
“Whatever is honorable”—The Greek word translated as “honorable” carries the connotation of someone of character. What joy can dependability of character bring, and what does the challenge to be a person of character call you to practice?

“Whatever is just”—What joy is there in justice (equitability in relationship), and what does justice beckon you to do?

“Whatever is pure”—The Greek word translated as “pure” derives from the root of “holy” (that which is set apart for God). What joy might there be in “purity” that reflects such “Godward” purpose, and what practice(s) might purity take in your life in terms of being set apart for God—or set apart from that which separates you from God or faithful community?

“Whatever is pleasing”—The Greek word translated as “pleasing” has *philos* (“love”) as part of its root. What joy comes from that which is pleasing or lovely in life, and how might you practice its virtue?

“Whatever is commendable”—The Greek word translated as “commendable” carries the sense of “well spoken of.” What joy may be found in that which is commendable, and how might you embody this quality of character?



Semicontinuous

Exod. 33:12–23

Ps. 99

Complementary

Isa. 45:1–7

Ps. 96:1–9, (10–13)

1 Thess. 1:1–10

Matt. 22:15–22

Tugs of War

Goal for the Session

Adults will identify contemporary loyalties and powers that compete with faith's allegiances through exploring an encounter designed to entrap Jesus.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Matthew 22:15–22

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Susan Grove Eastman

Then comes the trick question: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” (v. 17). The Roman tax referenced here was levied annually on harvests and personal property, and determined by registration in the census. It was administered by Jewish authorities, but it put heavy economic burdens on the impoverished residents of first-century Palestine. So if Jesus answers, “Yes,” to the question, he risks alienating the oppressed Jews of Palestine; if he answers, “No,” he can be accused of fostering sedition. Brilliantly, Jesus refuses to do either, and in his answer he shows what is truly “lawful”—that is, what fulfills the law of God.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Andrew Purves

If Christianity remains the cult of the private, the community, or the institution, it sanctions civil religion and ratifies the religious sanctification of society as it is. While eschatology forces Christianity to refuse to identify the present structures of society with the kingdom of God, demythologizing civil religion, the cross of Christ forces Christians to become involved in concrete struggle for public freedom. In the light of the resurrection of Jesus and the coming kingdom of God, we set death and present social, political, and economic reality in a redemptive perspective; death and the deadly systems that kill and dehumanize people are criticized and mobilized against.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Richard E. Spalding

When we look at each other, or in the mirror, we tend to see the inscriptions that our business with the world has left on us: you are what you look like, what you have, what you wear. Nevertheless, underneath all those inscriptions is a much deeper mark: the watery sign of a cross made once upon a time on the forehead, the image of all those children in the arms of their mothers. All those faces are a part of your face, when you begin to see the image that God sees, the God who, in Jesus, stands behind us with full faith and credit.

NOW WHAT is God's word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Marvin A. McMickle

Many issues speak to the places where this passage challenges the church today. There are devout Christians on both sides of all these issues. The question for the church is not whether we should or should not pay taxes. The greater question is, what do we expect from and demand from the government that is supported by our tax dollars? Not only that, but what does conscience demand of Christians when the actions of their government and the teachings of their faith appear to be in conflict? This has never been an easy issue, but Christians have never been excused from engaging it.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE
Matthew 22:15–22

Focus on Your Teaching

Most if not all of your participants will understand the feeling of being in caught a “tug of war” between competing priorities or allegiances. On one level, household budgeters regularly make choices between what will be funded and what will not. On another level, some adults struggle deeply when the country they love engages in actions that contradict one’s values. Today’s session reflects on the dynamics at work in “tugs of war” that involve competing allegiances. Older adults may be more uncomfortable expressing critical views of established authorities than young adults.

God, guide my intellect and imagination and spirit as I engage in these preparations. In Jesus Christ. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- ☐ copies of Resource Sheet 2
- ☐ Bibles
- ☐ copies of Resource Sheet 1
- ☐ copies of Resource Sheet 1 for October 25, 2020

For Responding

- ☐ option 1: newsprint, markers
- ☐ option 2: Resource Sheet 1
- ☐ option 3: Resource Sheet 1

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Welcome the participants. Introduce any newcomers to the group.

Lead the following continuum exercise. Designate one end of the room as “completely agree,” the other end as “completely disagree,” and the area between as varying degrees of agreement or disagreement. Have participants position themselves according their views on statements you will read. Read the following statements one at a time. Pause to allow participants to move accordingly, before reading the next statement. After the exercise, gather the group. Invite reactions to the exercise.

- ✠ It is more important to get to bed early rather than to sleep in.
- ✠ It is more important to support what is right about your country than to critique what is wrong.
- ✠ It is more important to spend time with family than to spend time at church.

Note that today’s focus scripture is about a forced choice between allegiances imposed upon Jesus, and his response to it.

Pray this prayer or one of your choosing:

God of all creation, hear our prayer for your direction as we feast upon your word. Amen.

EXPLORING

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Who Are Those Guys?) for adults to read silently. Discuss how this material about these groups in first century Judaism affects participants’ previous understandings regarding these groups. Encourage participants to keep this background in mind as they study the account in Matthew about an encounter between Jesus and a group of Pharisees and Herodians.

Ask for a volunteer to read Matthew 22:15–22 aloud to the group. Observe a moment of silent reflection following the reading. Invite general comments or questions raised by the narrative. Ask participants to hold on to those for the moment as, together, you delve more deeply into the text.

Have participants look more closely at verses 15 and 16. Discuss the importance of verse 15 for understanding and interpreting the next verse as well as the remainder of the narrative. Ask why it might be significant for Pharisees and Herodians to join together in this effort. What might each stand to gain—and what might each stand to lose—by doing so?

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Matthew 22:15–22) and read the “What?” excerpt. Recall the background information on the four factions in Judaism. Form four small groups. Assign one group each to take on the role of Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, and Zealots. Have each group discuss what values or allegiances are at stake for their factions in this “trick” question, and how each group might answer it for themselves. Gather the whole group, and have each small group report what their answer would have been to this question.

The language of the text makes it clear that both entities have a rightful claim to Christians’ allegiance.

Review Jesus’ response to his “examiners” in verses 18–21. Invite participants to offer their thoughts on the significance of the following details (or others they might identify) for interpreting this encounter:

- ✠ Jesus’ recognition of this as a test borne out of malice;
- ✠ Jesus’ request to show the coin used for the tax;
- ✠ Jesus’ question regarding the coin of “whose *head* is this” (“head” is translated from the Greek word *eikon*, which is also the word used for “image”—as in “image of God”);
- ✠ The ambiguous nature of “rendering” to both the emperor and God (relate the information in the sidebar).

Have participants return to the previous four groups. Read verse 22 aloud. Ask all groups to discuss these questions:

- ✠ What will your group be talking about as you walk away from Jesus?
- ✠ What allegiances and/or loyalties of yours did Jesus confirm or undermine?
- ✠ If you could go back and ask Jesus one more question, what would it be—and why?

Ask each small group to present a brief summary of its discussion of these questions to the whole group. After all four summaries, focus on the allegiances and loyalties of these groups that Jesus undermined or confirmed by his final response of giving what is due to both emperor and God.

To transition to Responding, affirm that conflicts in loyalties and allegiances involving matters of faith are not limited to first-century Judaism. Challenge participants to see this episode as a metaphor for what following Jesus might mean today when competing loyalties and powers vie for our allegiance.

**EASY
PREP**

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

- 1. Competing Loyalties** Identifying loyalties and powers vying for our attention helps us discern our ultimate allegiances. For example, if you listened to talk radio this week, what allegiances did you hear being appealed to? Post a sheet of newsprint. Have participants write on its left side any loyalties or powers that vie for their allegiance. Next, have participants write on its right side what they consider allegiances of faith. Discuss what competing loyalties participants see at work between items on the two sides. Urge participants to identify one example of competing loyalties they struggle with during the coming week. Prayerfully consider what it might mean to give God what is God's in this matter.
- 2. The Things That Are God's** The irony of Jesus' reply and the testimony of baptism provide a powerful affirmation of God's sovereign mark upon all creation. Invite participants to close their eyes and imagine themselves at their own baptism, or witnessing that of a beloved child. Observe a time of silence, then read aloud the "So What?" excerpt from Resource Sheet 1. At its end, invite participants to open their eyes—and in the coming week, to see in themselves and in every person they meet, the image of God affirmed in the "watery sign of a cross" made in baptism. Urge them to act accordingly.
- 3. God and Caesar** The question of political obligations framed by these Pharisees and Herodians remains a lively issue for the faith community. Read the "Now What?" excerpt on Resource Sheet 1. Engage participants in a discussion based on its question of what conscience demands of Christians when government actions and faith teachings conflict. Encourage participants to bring this question to bear on their actions in the coming week in one such question of conscience in the life of your community or nation today.

If your group deals well with conflict, focus the discussion on a matter that currently divides the community. If not, consider discussing the issue from a historical perspective: for example, the choices facing the German church in the 1930s.

CLOSING

Invite participants to listen again as you read verse 21b: "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." Ask for silent reflection: What do you hear Jesus addressing in your life with this verse? And what would you need to do or change to do so?

Encourage participants to carry that last thought with them through this week. Commission them with this prayer or one of your own choosing:

*Sovereign God of all creation, whose image is borne by all your children,
may we live with allegiance to you that is as joyful as it is firm, that is as
loving as we are loved. Amen.*

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for October 25, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and resource sheet prior to the next session.

Focus on Matthew 22:15–22

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Susan Grove Eastman

Then comes the trick question: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” (v. 17). The Roman tax referenced here was levied annually on harvests and personal property, and determined by registration in the census. It was administered by Jewish authorities, but it put heavy economic burdens on the impoverished residents of first-century Palestine. So if Jesus answers, “Yes,” to the question, he risks alienating the oppressed Jews of Palestine; if he answers, “No,” he can be accused of fostering sedition. Brilliantly, Jesus refuses to do either, and in his answer he shows what is truly “lawful”—that is, what fulfills the law of God.

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NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,”
Marvin A. McMickle

Many issues speak to the places where this passage challenges the church today. There are devout Christians on both sides of all these issues. The question for the church is not whether we should or should not pay taxes. The greater question is, what do we expect from and demand from the government that is supported by our tax dollars? Not only that, but what does conscience demand of Christians when the actions of their government and the teachings of their faith appear to be in conflict? This has never been an easy issue, but Christians have never been excused from engaging it.

Who Are Those Guys?

In the movie *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, Butch and the Kid ask that question no fewer than four times about the band of pursuers who chase them throughout the movie.

In order to better understand today's passage, "Who are those guys?" is a good question to consider. Who are these groups that hound Jesus in this text—and who are two other groups that loom in the background?



Pharisees

Pharisees were a lay group (not priests) who believed that righteousness came through strict adherence to the Law, both written (Torah) and oral traditions. Their primary sphere of influence was in the synagogues, where teaching rather than ritual was central. It is ironic that Jesus has so many conflicts with the Pharisees, as they were the group most closely resembling his spirit of teaching (see, for example, Matthew 5:17–18).



Herodians

Herod the Great had been the last relatively independent king of the Jews. Though the Herodians are mentioned only twice in the Gospels, it is believed this group constituted a faction in Judaism that supported the reestablishment of a Herodian dynasty. One son of Herod, Antipas, ruled in Galilee (most famous for his execution of John the Baptizer). A nephew of Herod, Agrippa, would later come into power. Both Antipas and Agrippa relied on Roman favor to hold their positions. Thus, the Herodians would not have wanted to disturb this relationship.



Sadducees

Sadducees represented the priestly and scribal leaders who were in charge of the Jerusalem temple. While they, like the Pharisees, believed righteousness came through adherence to the Law, Sadducees accepted no other authority other than the Torah. Looming alongside the temple was the Roman fortress called the Antonia. To keep the Romans from further interfering with the temple (one tradition holds that Pontius Pilate even held the high priest's vestments in the Antonia, releasing them only for the Passover), Sadducees would have wanted to smooth relations with Rome to keep their own power and what independence they possessed intact.



Zealots

It is believed the Zealots originated in a group that rebelled against a Roman census in 6 CE in Galilee. Like the Pharisees, they believed righteousness came through observance of the Law. But the Zealots also had a fierce belief in liberty, and they believed that the Law could never be fully observed in the land until its Roman occupiers were cast out. The movement suffered a fatal blow when their revolt against Rome in 66 CE resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem. A recent book, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* by Reza Aslan, provocatively associates Jesus with the Zealot movement.

Semicontinuous

Deut. 34:1–12

Ps. 90:1–6, 13–17

Complementary

Lev. 19:1–2, 15–18

Ps. 1

1 Thess. 2:1–8

Matt. 22:34–46

It All Hangs on Love

**Goal for
the Session**

*Adults will bear witness to the two loves that Jesus identifies
as the linchpins for living faithfully.*

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Matthew 22:34–46

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Patrick Gray

No surviving Jewish texts from antiquity read Psalm 110 as a messianic prophecy. Matthew and others in the early church allowed their experience of Jesus to shape their reading of the Scriptures. They did not allow their reading of the Scriptures to define or limit Jesus in his role as the Christ. Jewish expectations in the first century about the identity and character of the Messiah were far from uniform. Christian hopes centered on Jesus were not shared by all Jews, but nevertheless comprised a vital component of this diverse milieu.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Tim Beach-Verhey

God’s purposes are larger than any single people. The Messiah’s mission transcends the salvation of any particular group. Those who follow the Messiah must subordinate all particular interests, identities, and purposes to the Savior’s universal mission. Jesus refuses to identify love of God with rigid religious requirements or to identify faithfulness to himself with loyalty to a particular community of people. As he approaches the cross, Jesus makes clear what it means to love God and be a follower of the Messiah: “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matt. 25:40).

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Earl F. Palmer

I think it is important for us as interpreters of this Monday event to see these encounters as a deepening journey. The lawyer may or may not be sincere in his question, but what has happened is that what he asks is near to the center of what really matters in life. My own experience as a Christian disciple and pastor is that if we wait it out with those in our lives who have questions on their minds, and then take each question in turn and do our best to say some one or two things in response, then sooner or later even the questions themselves get better, deeper, and more significant.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Allen Hilton

In his answer to the Pharisees’ question, Jesus gives two separate commands: the “greatest,” to love God; and the “second,” to love neighbor. Although he says the second is “like” the first, Jesus does not collapse the two, as if love of God *equals* love of neighbor. We probably should not collapse them either. “What is it to love God whole-lifedly?” One Ignatian author has hoped to be “seized so completely by the love of God that all the desires of my heart and all the actions, affections, thoughts and decisions which flow from them are directed to God.” How would one obey a command to “be seized”?

FOCUS SCRIPTURE
Matthew 22:34–46

Focus on Your Teaching

Many adults in your group may feel overwhelmed by multiple tasks and commitments that crowd schedules and muddle priorities. These adults, and you, would likely be grateful if there would be a way to clearly delineate the most important one or two things to be done above all others. What might serve as such a prioritizing principle for the many demands made upon us? Today's passage addresses just such a question, and the session unpacks how the answer given might bring focus to our lives and faith.

God of light and truth, help me to discern in my preparations for this session that which is most important for me to do. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- ☐ newsprint
- ☐ marker
- ☐ colored dots with adhesive backs
- ☐ copies of Resource Sheet 1 (optional)
- ☐ Bibles
- ☐ copies of Resource Sheet 2
- ☐ copies of Resource Sheet 1 for November 1, 2020

For Responding

- ☐ option 2: hymnals or songbooks, construction paper, markers, scissors, tape
- ☐ option 3: paper, pens

Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Matthew 22:34–46) is not used in this session plan; however, feel free to make copies to give to participants to read on their own for additional reflection.

■ LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Welcome the participants. Introduce any newcomers to the group.

Have participants imagine that a scientific breakthrough has made human habitation possible in a region previously uninhabited. A new nation will be formed there by peoples from around the world—and you have been tasked with writing its constitution. Brainstorm ideas critical to include in the constitution, and write these on the newsprint as participants call them out. When the list (or three minutes) comes to an end, give each participant two of the colored dots. Direct participants to place one dot each on the two items they consider to be the most important ideas.

When dots have been placed, briefly discuss reasons that those receiving the most dots did so.

Note that in today's focus scripture Jesus is asked which commandment is the most important—and he also answers with two dots!

Offer this prayer or one of your own choosing:

God, guide us as we move from exploring your Word, and into the living of it. Amen.

EXPLORING

Remind participants that this is now the fifth focus scripture in the last few weeks that comes from Matthew's Gospel. Invite participants to summarize what they have discussed so far about Matthew's Gospel, as well as the contexts in which Matthew sets Jesus' teaching. Recall last week's discussion of the four main groups in Judaism at the time of Jesus. Ask participants to recall the insights brought out in the conversation about the Pharisees and

Sadducees. Note that these groups, one directly and one indirectly, once again are at the center of this narrative.

Have the participants read Matthew 22:34–46 silently. Afterward, discuss the following questions:

- ✠ What roles do questions serve in this exchange between Pharisees and Jesus?
- ✠ What do you make of the outcome related in verse 46 in terms of no one asking Jesus any more questions? (In other words, is that good, bad, or neither, and why do you think so?)

Form pairs. Have partners review the dialogue in verses 31–40 and discuss the following:

- ✠ What part of the conversation (and what character) do you most identify with, and why?
- ✠ At the end of this conversation, what would you have wanted to ask the Pharisee?
- ✠ At the end of this conversation, what would you have wanted to ask Jesus?

Gather the group and distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Jesus the Good Rabbi); have participants read it. Discuss each of the three paragraphs, one at a time.

- ✠ With the first paragraph, focus conversation on participants' views about the significance of Jesus' Jewish roots for our understanding of his ministry.
- ✠ With the second paragraph, make sure to read Deuteronomy 6:4–5. Talk about why this verse might have come to play such a dominant role in Jewish identity. Ask participants what other teachings of Jesus it calls to mind.
- ✠ With the third paragraph, read at least Leviticus 19:18—better yet, read Leviticus 19:1–2, 15–18, one of the other lectionary readings for today—and discuss why Jesus might single this command out as “like” the first. Ask participants what they understand Jesus to say by “and a second is like it.”

Reread Matthew 22:40. Note that of the seven occurrences of “hang” (*kremannymi*) in the New Testament, four refer to Jesus' crucifixion. Discuss why, for Jesus, love would hold such a prominent place in his teaching.

Encourage participants to silently reflect on the following issues as you transition to Responding:

- ✠ In what ways might our understanding of Jesus' cross relate to love of God and love of neighbor?
- ✠ How have the hallmarks of love of God and love of neighbor borne witness to the life of this congregation?
- ✠ How do you bear witness to these hallmarks by the way you seek to practice faith?

**EASY
PREP**

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

- 1. Keeping Love's Commands** Communities of faith as well as individuals are called to practice the kinds of love that Jesus identifies as the greatest commandments. Identify ways in which your church practices love of God and love of neighbor. Discuss how your congregation does (or might better) encourage its members to join with others in such practice of love. Have each participant identify one such community practice of love that they will devote special attention to in the coming week.
- 2. Singing Love's Creed** One way the church bears witness to faith is through its hymns. Distribute hymnals or songbooks, and direct participants to the construction paper, scissors, markers, and tape. Have participants write phrases or lines from hymns or other songs that reflect the call to love God and/or neighbor on strips of construction paper. Post these on a wall in your room. Discuss afterward how they individually and together witness to our calling to love God and neighbor. Encourage participants to use one of these excerpts as a daily companion in prayer and in their practice of love's command in their lives.
- 3. Love: A Prayer and Action List** Practicing love of God and love of neighbor is a daily calling. Distribute paper and pens. Ask participants to write across the top of the paper: *Love: A Prayer and Action List*. Have them write down situations or opportunities in their lives that call for the practice of love. Encourage participants to use these notes in the coming week as a checklist or reminder for the daily practice of love of God and neighbor. Add items for prayer and practice to the notes through the week as needed.

Some participants may find it helpful to divide the paper into two columns, one for love of God and one for love of neighbor. The intention is not to "split" the two loves Jesus commands, but rather to work toward a balance of them.

CLOSING

Gather the group in a circle and join hands. Invite participants to name something that impressed them about today's session on love of God and love of neighbor.

When all have spoken, lead the group in the following commission chant. Explain that you will speak first, and then the group will repeat what you say.

We shall love. (repeat)
We shall love God. (repeat)
We shall love. (repeat)
We shall love neighbor. (repeat)
We shall love. (repeat)
We shall love God and neighbor. (repeat)
We shall love. (repeat)
For we are loved. (repeat)

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for November 1, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and resource sheet prior to the next session.

Focus on Matthew 22:34–46

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Patrick Gray

No surviving Jewish texts from antiquity read Psalm 110 as a messianic prophecy. Matthew and others in the early church allowed their experience of Jesus to shape their reading of the Scriptures. They did not allow their reading of the Scriptures to define or limit Jesus in his role as the Christ. Jewish expectations in the first century about the identity and character of the Messiah were far from uniform. Christian hopes centered on Jesus were not shared by all Jews, but nevertheless comprised a vital component of this diverse milieu.

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— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Earl F. Palmer

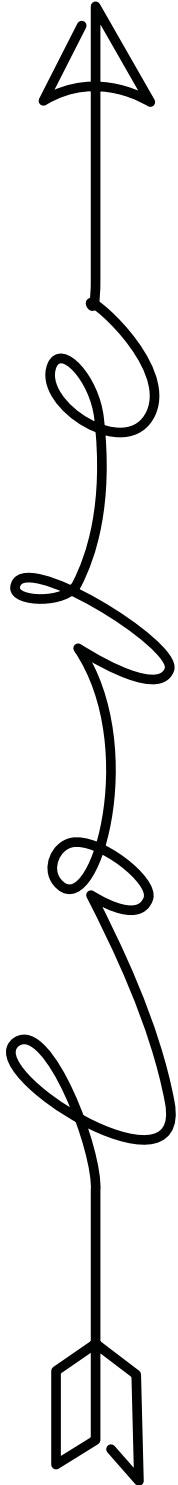
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Jesus the Good Rabbi



The church has often made the mistake of separating Jesus from his very real Jewish roots. Old Testament “law” is frequently contrasted with New Testament “grace”—as if the Old Testament knows nothing of grace and the New Testament conveys nothing of law. The exceptions to that misapplied standard are not only legion, they are dispelled in the very ministry of Jesus. Consider his answer to the inquisitive (or it is inquisitorial?) Pharisee in today’s passage. Good rabbi that Jesus is, he quotes the Torah for revealing his take on the greatest commandment(s).

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.

Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6:4–5, sometimes called the Shema (from the Hebrew word meaning “to hear” or “to listen”).

The Shema was (and is) integral to Jewish piety, to be prayed twice daily and used in community prayer services. Likely not coincidentally for Jesus’ use here, these verses are immediately followed in Deuteronomy 6:6 with the injunction “Keep these words that I am commanding you.” Jesus’ appeal to this as the primary commandment would have placed him in good stead with the Pharisees and in the whole of Jewish tradition.

You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Jesus pairs the Shema with yet another quote from the Torah, this from Leviticus 19:18b. In Leviticus, the confession of God as holy (see 19:2) becomes the basis for a complex series of codes aimed at evoking Israel’s holiness as a people. And here in chapter 19, the basis for holy living takes the form of this command to love neighbor.

Semicontinuous

Josh. 3:7–17

Ps. 107:1–7, 33–37

Complementary

Mic. 3:5–12

Ps. 43

1 Thess. 2:9–13

Matt. 23:1–12

A Way out of No Way

Goal for the Session

As Joshua led the Israelites across a seeming impasse, adults will consider where God may be creating new ways forward in their lives.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Joshua 3:7–17

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Carol J. Dempsey

After the death of Moses, his young assistant, Joshua, becomes the leader of the Israelite people, and through his efforts, the Israelites enter Canaan, the promised land. The crossing of the Jordan River is a pivotal event, as important as the Israelites’ crossing of the Red Sea (Exod. 14), which symbolized the Israelites’ leaving a settled experience of oppression in Egypt, to become wanderers sustained by God and living under divine promise. The crossing over the Jordan River takes the people out of the wilderness, completes their initial formation as God’s people, and symbolizes a move toward unity, stability, permanence, and well-being.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Eleazar S. Fernandez

Central to our lectionary reading is the tradition of a God who makes “a way out of no way.” When all possible ways are closed, the God who has been with the people makes a way out of no way. In God there is hope for deliverance. To use a religious idiom of the black church in North America: “God ain’t finished with us yet!” History is not closed; God is not yet finished with history. The Red Seas and Jordan Rivers of history are not barriers to God’s purpose. In God and with God, the people will overcome.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Shawnthea Monroe

As they fled from the Egyptian army, the people might have missed the theological significance of crossing the Red Sea, but no one could mistake the crossing of the Jordan for anything other than a demonstration of God’s mighty power. The second event calls to mind the first event, clarifying their understanding of who they are, and who God is. It is this understanding that enables and equips the Israelites to conquer and occupy the land. The same reverence and awe the Israelites felt crossing the Jordan should be present in our worship today. After all, we worship the same living God.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Michael E. Williams

The priests then carry the ark into the middle of the river (on dry riverbed, the narrator adds) and hold it there until all the people have passed across the last geographical barrier into the land of promise. There is no leap of faith here. Rather, trusting God’s promise, the priests step into the water, and example allows the people to trust that the waters will remain heaped up until they too can make it across safely. Note that the waters do not stop flowing until the priests are willing to enter the water. While God takes the initiative, sometimes we have to take a step of faith before we can receive the goodness of God’s dream for us.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

Joshua 3:7–17

Focus on Your Teaching

Most if not all of the adults in your group have likely experienced situations where there seemed to be no way forward. Illness, economic setbacks, or disruptions in valued relationships can create such roadblocks. Sometimes, however, unexpected paths are discovered that provide a new way forward in such times. Today's session explores such a breakthrough experience and its foundation. Older adults, who likely have come through several such "closed door" experiences followed by new ways forward, may be more open to such possibilities than younger adults who may have never faced seemingly insurmountable situations.

God, may I trust your Spirit to guide me. In Jesus Christ. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- ☐ bowl
- ☐ pitcher of water
- ☐ copies of Resource Sheet 2
- ☐ Bibles
- ☐ copies of Resource Sheet 1
- ☐ copies of Resource Sheet 1 for November 8, 2020

For Responding

- ☐ option 1: Resource Sheet 1
- ☐ option 2: Resource Sheet 1
- ☐ option 3: Resource Sheet 2

■ LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, place the bowl and pitcher of water at the front or center of the area where the group will sit.

Welcome the participants. Introduce any newcomers.

Form pairs and have each person briefly tell about an experience where she or he felt trapped, only to discover an unexpected way forward. How did the way forward come about? Give an example, such as a job loss or a broken relationship. Clarify that if the experience involving closed doors is too personal or painful for a participant, they need not disclose the particulars of the situation. In such a case, encourage them to simply relate how it felt to be in that situation and then to find a way out of it.

Gather the group. Invite brief comments from the partners about those unexpected ways forward and the sources that led to those solutions.

Note that today's session will explore faith's witness to such unexpected possibilities through a story in the book of Joshua.

Offer this prayer or one of your own choosing:

God of all that is known and unknown to us, open our eyes and spirits in this session to the ways you would have us journey and to the lives you would have us lead. Amen.

EXPLORING

Have participants silently read Joshua 3:7–17.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Setting the Scene) and read the first section, “Joshua and Matthew.” Recall for the group the passages and themes in Matthew that they have encountered in recent sessions. Have participants identify any connections they hear between this background material and the focus scripture just read.

Read the second part of Resource Sheet 2, “Joshua and Waters.” Encourage participants to briefly relate what they know of the biblical leader Joshua and this book beyond bringing down the walls of Jericho. Urge participants to keep the imagery of waters in mind as they read through today’s text.

Ask for three volunteers to read today’s focus scripture. Assign verses 7 and 8 to one reader, verses 9–13 to a second, and verses 14–17 to a third. Explain that, as with Resource Sheet 2, the sections of Scripture will be read and discussed separately.

Have the first volunteer read aloud verses 7 and 8. Have participants discuss the following issues, and others they may raise:

- ✧ Putting yourselves in the sandals of Joshua, what would you have been thinking as you heard these words?
- ✧ Looking at the situation from the perspective of the people of Israel, what would you have been thinking?

The displacement of Canaan’s prior inhabitants noted here is a troubling aspect in Joshua. While some recent scholarship questions the “conquest” narrative, contemporary parallels with forced removal of Native Americans and Aboriginal peoples are undeniable—and may generate controversy here.

Have the next volunteer read aloud verses 9–13. Consider and discuss the reactions of the following to Joshua’s words:

- ✧ The ones who will bear the ark and step into the water first;
- ✧ The Canaanites, Hittites, and other current residents of the land identified here.

Have the next volunteer read aloud verses 14–17. Invite participants to reflect on and discuss the significance of:

- ✧ Details in these verses that raise questions or seem confusing;
- ✧ Details in these verses rich in symbolism.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Joshua 3:7–17) and read the “What?” excerpt. Identify and discuss details in today’s passage that underscore (or still leave open-ended) the three affirmations made in the concluding sentence of the excerpt about what the crossing of the Lord does:

- ✧ Takes Israel out of the wilderness;
- ✧ Completes their initial formation as God’s people;
- ✧ Symbolizes a move toward unity, stability, permanence, and well-being.

Relate that scholars hold that the psalm paired in the lectionary with the passage from Joshua today is a poetic remembrance of the event narrated by Joshua. Invite participants to close their eyes, take a deep breath, and imagine they stand with the Israelites who have crossed the Jordan. Read Psalm 107:1–7. Allow for a time of silent reflection before bidding the participants to open their eyes. Invite thoughts that came during this meditation, and words or phrases from the psalm that stood out for them.

Read the “So What?” excerpt of Resource Sheet 1 and have participants silently consider:

- ✠ What actions of God in your life and/or in that of your community generate a sense of reverence and awe as you worship God in private devotion and communal services?
- ✠ How does this awareness of God’s activity lead you to be open to new ways God may be opening before you?

EASY
PREP

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

1. **A Way out of No Way** Joshua’s witness to God’s parting of the Jordan serves as an invitation to celebrate the ways God opens before us today. Review the “Where?” excerpt on Resource Sheet 1. Ask participants to reflect silently on one present situation where God may be seeking to make a “way out of no way” in their lives. Challenge participants to commit to embracing God’s leading in this matter in the coming week.
2. **Taking the First Step** The God who created Israel’s passage across the Jordan did so by challenging its leaders to step into the water before it had been parted. Read the “Now What?” excerpt on Resource Sheet 1. Form groups of three or four. Discuss the insight summarized in the excerpt’s final sentence. Invite participants to identify experiences in their own lives that would confirm the importance of taking that first step of faith. Challenge participants in the coming week to identify such a first step they need to take as an act of trust, and to find a partner who will help them take it.
3. **Watery Faith and Service** The water imagery in Joshua’s passage taps into the roots of faith and beckons fresh possibilities of life-giving deliverance. Review “Joshua and Waters” on Resource Sheet 2. Encourage participants to identify other biblical and liturgical linkings of water with new life. Identify a project your group can support that provides fresh water to those without it, or that cleans water that has otherwise been polluted. For example, Church World Service offers a number of options at cwsglobal.org/our-work/global-development/water. Encourage participants, individually and/or working together, to take action this week in support of that project.

Each time participants name a biblical and liturgical linking of water and new life, pour a small amount of water from the pitcher into the bowl.

CLOSING

Gather the group. Have participants listen as you lift the pitcher as high as you can safely pour water into the bowl. As you pour, invite participants to recall the story from Joshua about God’s making a way across the Jordan, and then to think about the ways God makes possible in our lives. When you are finished pouring, invite participants to name one of those ways God has made—or is making—possible in their lives.

Depending on which option was used in Responding, encourage participants to follow through on the reflection and/or action called for in the coming week.

Close with this prayer or one of your own choosing:

*Grant us the hope, O God, that you will make a way forward for us—and
grant us the trust, O God, to take the first step. Amen.*

Focus on Joshua 3:7–17

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Carol J. Dempsey

After the death of Moses, his young assistant, Joshua, becomes the leader of the Israelite people, and through his efforts, the Israelites enter Canaan, the promised land. The crossing of the Jordan River is a pivotal event, as important as the Israelites’ crossing of the Red Sea (Exod. 14), which symbolized the Israelites’ leaving a settled experience of oppression in Egypt, to become wanderers sustained by God and living under divine promise. The crossing over the Jordan River takes the people out of the wilderness, completes their initial formation as God’s people, and symbolizes a move toward unity, stability, permanence, and well-being.

WHERE is God in these words?

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SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,”

Shawnthea Monroe

As they fled from the Egyptian army, the people might have missed the theological significance of crossing the Red Sea, but no one could mistake the crossing of the Jordan for anything other than a demonstration of God’s mighty power. The second event calls to mind the first event, clarifying their understanding of who they are, and who God is. It is this understanding that enables and equips the Israelites to conquer and occupy the land. The same reverence and awe the Israelites felt crossing the Jordan should be present in our worship today. After all, we worship the same living God.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,”

Michael E. Williams

The priests then carry the ark into the middle of the river (on dry riverbed, the narrator adds) and hold it there until all the people have passed across the last geographical barrier into the land of promise. There is no leap of faith here. Rather, trusting God’s promise, the priests step into the water, and example allows the people to trust that the waters will remain heaped up until they too can make it across safely. Note that the waters do not stop flowing until the priests are willing to enter the water. While God takes the initiative, sometimes we have to take a step of faith before we can receive the goodness of God’s dream for us.

Setting the Scene

Joshua and Matthew

A reading from the book of Joshua might seem to interrupt recent focus texts from the Gospel of Matthew. Ironically, though, Joshua and Matthew share intriguing roots. The book of Joshua narrates the story of the leader who had taken over the role after Moses died. Scholars have long noted that Matthew several times presents Jesus as a “new” Moses: who finds deliverance as an infant from a tyrannical ruler (Exodus 1:22–2:10, Matthew 2:13–20); who goes up a mountain to receive teachings to guide the community (Exodus 19:20–20:17, Matthew 5–7). Additionally, scholars such as Walter Brueggemann have argued that the imagery and promissory role of land in the Old Testament closely parallels the imagery and promissory role of “kingdom” in the New Testament. Joshua narrates Israel’s entry into the land. Likewise, Matthew’s Gospel more than any other Gospel emphasizes Jesus’ teachings regarding God’s kingdom or sovereign realm.

Joshua and Waters



Ask the fourth-grade Sunday school class, “Who fought the battle of Jericho?” and they will answer without hesitation: “Joshua!” They might tell you how Joshua marched his army around the city for six days and how on the seventh day the people blew trumpets and gave a mighty cry, and “the walls came a-tumblin’ down.” If you ask those same children, “How did Joshua cross the Jordan?” you will get no response at all. That is the

challenge with this passage from Joshua: the miraculous crossing of the Jordan is totally eclipsed by the fall of Jericho in chapter 6.

Both events demonstrate the power of the living God, but for my money, mastering the waters of the Jordan is far more awe-inspiring than destroying the fortifications of Jericho. In the Hebrew Scriptures, water represents chaos (Genesis 1:2) and God’s judgment on humankind (Genesis 6). Water has the power to bless as well as to curse. . . . This is not the first time the Israelites have crossed a body of water. When Moses led the people through the Red Sea, they began the crossing as slaves and emerged as free people. When Joshua leads the Israelites through the Jordan, they cross as nomadic tribes and emerge as a settled nation. More than that, these two water crossings act as bookends, bracketing God’s promise to free the people and bring them into a land “flowing with milk and honey.” God’s promise is fulfilled in their passing through dangerous waters, proving that God, who alone has power over the chaos of the water, has done this great thing.

—Excerpted from Shawnthea Monroe, *Feasting on the Word, Year A Complete Semicontinuous, Proper 26* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 1–2

Semicontinuous
Josh. 24:1–3a, 14–25
Ps. 78:1–7

Complementary
Wis. 6:12–16 or
Amos 5:18–24
Wis. 6:17–20 or
Ps. 70

1 Thess. 4:13–18
Matt. 25:1–13

Living in Hope

Goal for the Session

Adults will articulate dynamics of living in hope through exploring Jesus' parable of the Wise and Foolish Maidens.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Matthew 25:1–13

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Thomas D. Stegman, SJ

Matthew's parable of the Wise and Foolish Maidens thus sets forth the assurance that Jesus, the Son of Man, will return in glory to usher in the full coming of God's reign. It also exhorts Christians to the appropriate stance they should take in the present. Two extremes are to be avoided. On the one hand, we ought not to be lulled into thinking that there is no sense of urgency in preparing for the Lord's coming. On the other hand, the prospect of the end should not produce panic and anxiety. Christians can have the peace of mind that results from being faithful to putting Jesus' teaching, as set forth throughout the Gospel, into action.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Mark Douglas

This text, at least, remains theologically silent about the attitudes we should inhabit or the viewpoints we should inculcate while we await the coming of the kingdom of God. So how are we prepared to wait? Though answers vary from tradition to tradition within the faith, the text at least hints at some of the following: Gather with others who also wait—and stick with them. Avoid communities that are caught up in prognosticating about God's timing. While it is wise to fill our lamps with good things, we should remember that those things are for use this side of eternity. There is already more than enough light at the banquet.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” John M. Buchanan

Christian hope is as big as the whole sweep of human history, but also as small as each individual. Ultimate issues have been resolved for the human race, but also for each of us individually. In every congregation are faithful people genuinely frightened about where human history seems to be headed. Freedom, justice, and compassion seem fragile in the face of the forces of oppression, injustice, violence, and torture. Living in hope does not mean immunity to the harsh realities of history. On the contrary, it means living confidently and expectantly, trusting that the Lord of history continues to come into life with compassion and redemption and hope.

NOW WHAT is God's word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Lindsay P. Armstrong

As with so many things in life, the essence is in the timing. There is a timeliness of faith and love. There are people who wait for timely attention, who need us to live our faith without procrastination. In Matthew, the wise are those who know and tend this. With good works and acts of faith in God, they prepare for an unknown but secure future. The foolish assume a bright future but do little to prepare for it.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE
Matthew 25:1–13

YOU WILL NEED

- ☐ board or newsprint
- ☐ marker
- ☐ Bibles
- ☐ copies of Resource Sheet 1
- ☐ paper
- ☐ pens
- ☐ copies of Resource Sheet 1 for November 15, 2020

For Responding

- ☐ option 1: copies of Resource Sheet 2, pens
- ☐ option 2: Resource Sheet 1
- ☐ option 3: newspapers, news magazines, scissors, index cards, pens or markers, poster board(s), glue sticks

Matthew 24:1–25:46 is a series of Jesus’ teachings on the end times. This section reaches a climax with the parable of the Judgment of the Nations, preceded by three parables (this is the second) that address the delay of God’s promised realm.

Focus on Your Teaching

Many Christians wonder how they should live while waiting for the full establishment of God’s realm on earth. One extreme seems to proceed on the assumption that any effort on our part is irrelevant because God will work it all out. Christians at another extreme may so busy working for God’s realm as to lose sight that this realm is God’s and not ours. What is a healthy balance between these two? Today’s session offers an opportunity to examine how to live lives of active, hopeful anticipation as creation moves toward the fullness of God’s realm.

Guide me, O God, in using this time of preparation wisely for the sake of this coming session. Amen.

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, write the three questions from the second paragraph of Exploring on the board or a piece of newsprint.

Welcome the participants. Introduce any newcomers.

Present the participants with the following scenarios. After each scenario, have them identify what would be wise ways to proceed, what would be foolish—and why.

- ✧ You are laboring to complete a project under a pressing deadline at work. A cherished friend invites you to a daytime ballgame that would require taking a day off and risk missing the deadline.
- ✧ You are on a road trip to a large city. You see a sign that says: “Last gas station in 75 miles.” The gas at that station is 25 cents per gallon higher than it will be in the city. Your gas gauge indicates you can probably go another 85 miles.

Say that today’s focus scripture is a parable of Jesus that deals with wise and foolish decisions.

Offer this prayer or one of your own choosing:

*Help us, O God, to discern the ways you call us to live as your people.
Amen.*

EXPLORING

Offer the sidebar information to set the context for today’s parable. Note that the “end times” theme remains firmly in the background of the next two sessions as well, as they explore two other parables of Jesus from this section of Matthew.

Form three groups and designate them as the bridegroom, the five wise bridesmaids, and the five foolish bridesmaids. Instruct each group to listen through the ears of their character as you read Matthew 25:1–13 aloud to the whole group. Afterward, call attention to the three questions posted on the board or newsprint and have the groups spend five minutes answering them.

- ✂ What was your character’s reaction(s) to the parable?
- ✂ How might your character(s) rewrite the parable?
- ✂ What would you like to ask Jesus?

Gather the groups together. Have each group summarize their conversations. Discuss similarities and differences in terms of reactions, rewrites, and questions to be asked of Jesus. Encourage participants to identify what hope these characters might find in this parable—and if they find no hope, why not.

Recall the opening background information that identified this parable as part of a much longer “end times” teaching by Jesus. Following up on the discussion concerning what hope the parable’s characters might find in this parable, ask participants: What hope might Matthew’s audience find in this parable? Note that scholars often identify that audience as Jewish-Christian communities existing in the time after the destruction of Jerusalem and the dispersal of the church across the eastern Mediterranean world.

Return to the three small groups designated as bridegroom, wise bridesmaids, and foolish bridesmaids. Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Matthew 25:1–3), along with paper and pens, and have the groups read the “What?” and “Where?” excerpts. Based on the information in the excerpts, give them two assignments. First, have groups make a list of what their characters should do in the parable’s setting. Second, have each group come up with a bumper sticker relevant to their character and what this session calls them to do.

Gather the entire group. Have each small group read in unison their bumper sticker slogan, and then report on the lists they have made for their character’s actions. Move to a discussion of what participants think the first hearers of this parable might have understood to be its main lessons. One question that might lead off that discussion would be: What was Matthew hoping his readers and listeners would take from this?

Have a volunteer read the “So What?” excerpt on Resource Sheet 1. Affirm that today’s parable urges individuals and communities of faith not only to consider what it means to live in hope, but also to then live lives congruent with such hope as followers of Jesus and the coming sovereign realm he announced and will usher in. For making the transition from Exploring to Responding, ask participants to consider the following question:

- ✂ How does our community reflect the type of hope suggested in today’s parable of the Wise and Foolish Maidens?

**EASY
PREP**

Be open to potentially diverse and strong opinions on the topic of “end times” among your participants. For example, the phenomenal profits of the Left Behind series suggest a far wider popularity than some might appreciate or admit to playing a part in.

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

- 1. Living in Hope** Living in hope means translating beliefs about the future into wise and opportune actions now. Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Living in Hope: Where the Rubber Meets the Road). Read aloud the opening two paragraphs, then review the instructions in the third paragraph. Have participants work individually on the worksheet. Encourage participants to use the worksheet (and add to it as needed) in the coming week as a guide for their own living in hope.
- 2. The Church and the End Times: Wisdom and Folly** The church has a checkered history of wise and foolish ways to live toward the promise of God’s coming realm. Review the “Where?” excerpt on Resource Sheet 1. Have participants recall episodes from history or their own experience of foolish responses to end time beliefs. Challenge participants to be alert in the coming week to appeals or teachings related to end time theologies. Ask: How might their appeal lead to wisdom or folly in living as a disciple of Jesus with hope?
- 3. Discerning Signs and Acts of Hope** Living in hope takes place in the experiences and crises faced each day. Set out newspapers, news magazines, scissors, index cards, pens or markers, poster board(s), and glue sticks. Direct participants to work individually or in small groups, cutting out headlines or photos that affirm or challenge our call to live in hope. With each headline or photo, have participants write on one or more index cards what living in hope calls for in this situation. Have participants post the clippings and index cards to create a composite vision of what it means to live in hope in our world today. Encourage the group in the coming week to look at news stories with the same lens of the affirmations or challenges posed to their living in hope.

CLOSING

Gather the participants in a circle. Invite them to offer reflections on or reactions to today’s session, whether questions, affirmations, or other comments.

Explain that the session will now close with a litany commissioning. Ask participants to think of one situation that calls for people and communities of faith to live in hope, or of one action they feel called to do in order to live in hope this coming week. Say that after each person offers their word of hope, the group will respond: *Let us live in the hope of God’s realm*. Practice this once or twice so participants are comfortable speaking it. Speak your word of hope first, lead the group in the response, then go around the circle until all have had an opportunity to speak, followed by the litany response.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for November 15, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and resource sheet prior to the next session.

Focus on Matthew 25:1–13

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Thomas D. Stegman, SJ

Matthew’s parable of the Wise and Foolish Maidens thus sets forth the assurance that Jesus, the Son of Man, will return in glory to usher in the full coming of God’s reign. It also exhorts Christians to the appropriate stance they should take in the present. Two extremes are to be avoided. On the one hand, we ought not to be lulled into thinking that there is no sense of urgency in preparing for the Lord’s coming. On the other hand, the prospect of the end should not produce panic and anxiety. Christians can have the peace of mind that results from being faithful to putting Jesus’ teaching, as set forth throughout the Gospel, into action.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Mark Douglas

This text, at least, remains theologically silent about the attitudes we should inhabit or the viewpoints we should inculcate while we await the coming of the kingdom of God. So how are we prepared to wait? Though answers vary from tradition to tradition within the faith, the text at least hints at some of the following: Gather with others who also wait—and stick with them. Avoid communities that are caught up in prognosticating about God’s timing. While it is wise to fill our lamps with good things, we should remember that those things are for use this side of eternity. There is already more than enough light at the banquet.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” John M. Buchanan

Christian hope is as big as the whole sweep of human history, but also as small as each individual. Ultimate issues have been resolved for the human race, but also for each of us individually. In every congregation are faithful people genuinely frightened about where human history seems to be headed. Freedom, justice, and compassion seem fragile in the face of the forces of oppression, injustice, violence, and torture. Living in hope does not mean immunity to the harsh realities of history. On the contrary, it means living confidently and expectantly, trusting that the Lord of history continues to come into life with compassion and redemption and hope.

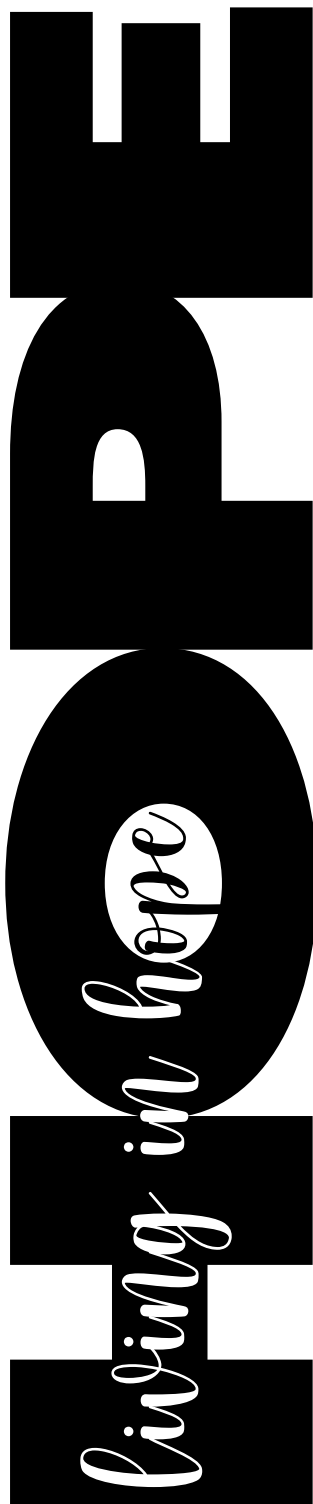
NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,”

Lindsay P. Armstrong

As with so many things in life, the essence is in the timing. There is a timeliness of faith and love. There are people who wait for timely attention, who need us to live our faith without procrastination. In Matthew, the wise are those who know and tend this. With good works and acts of faith in God, they prepare for an unknown but secure future. The foolish assume a bright future but do little to prepare for it.

Living in Hope: Where the Rubber Meets the Road



Years ago, a tire company used the slogan “Where the rubber meets the road” to extol the practical virtues of its product. Consumers didn’t need to know the chemical composition of the material, the function of the tread designs. All they (we) needed to know was that the tire would function properly in whatever conditions it encountered.

Hope functions in a similar way. Hope does not require knowing the day and time of Jesus’ return. Hope does not stand or fall on whether one is a pre- or post-tribulation millennialist (or doesn’t have a clue about what that means). Hope simply yet profoundly means “living confidently and expectantly, trusting that the Lord of history continues to come into life with compassion and redemption and hope.”

And, one might add, hope means a willingness to embody such qualities in our own lives by the grace of God.

In the worksheet below, identify situations that long for the embodiment of hope in the arenas in which you live—and what you can and will do to live in hope in the coming days.

LIVING IN HOPE: Toward your family and circle of friends

LIVING IN HOPE: Within your congregation

LIVING IN HOPE: In the midst of the wider community around your church

LIVING IN HOPE: As a citizen of this nation and a member of the world community

Semicontinuous

Judg. 4:1–7

Ps. 123

Complementary

Zeph. 1:7, 12–18

Ps. 90:1–8, (9–11), 12

1 Thess. 5:1–11

Matt. 25:14–30

Venture Discipleship

Goal for the Session

Adults will affirm the risks and joys inherent in following Jesus through the lens of Matthew's parable of the talents.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Matthew 25:14–30

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Thomas D. Stegman, SJ

The parable sets forth positive and negative examples of conduct while awaiting the return of the Lord. Not to be overlooked is the characterization of the master: as one who bestows gifts abundantly, carefully calibrates gifts on the basis of ability, gives his slaves freedom to respond with loving responsibility, and rejoices in their fidelity. While the parable initially intimates that the talents bestowed are external to the recipients (i.e., only to be managed by them), the detail in verse 29—“to all those who *have*, more will be given, and they will *have* an abundance” (italics added)—suggests that the talents do, in fact, enrich the recipients. The parable's ending warns of the tragedy of acting timidly in response to God's generosity.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Mark Douglas

We may get a more accurate reading of the master and the slave on the basis of their actions. Far from simply being harsh, the master acts generously, trusting even the third slave with the wealth of more than fifteen years' wages. Far from reaping what he did not sow, he returns to their oversight the wealth that the first two slaves earned and, even more importantly, invites them into his joy, therein transforming his relationship with them from master/slave to something approaching equality (vv. 21, 23). This eschatological passage is about a willingness to resist fear and, like the first two slaves, to behave in risky and trusting ways, for in so doing we enter into joy upon the master's return.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” John M. Buchanan

Here Jesus invites us to be his disciples, to live our lives as fully as possible by investing them, by risking, by expanding the horizons of our responsibilities. To be his man or woman, he says, is not so much believing ideas about him as it is following him. It is to experience renewed responsibility for the use and investment of these precious lives of ours. It is to be bold and brave, to reach high and care deeply. So the parable is the invitation to the adventure of faith: the high-risk venture of being a disciple of Jesus Christ.

NOW WHAT is God's word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Lindsay P. Armstrong

Faithful living is not static; yet, like this third slave, we are good at knowing without doing. We are adept at holding on to a talent entrusted, knowing what we should do with it, but not doing so. We know what faithful living looks like, but we hesitate to live it. We bury too much goodness, time, love, treasure, and talent in the ground. Compassionately addressing inactivity, fears, and/or misconceptions about God could be a freeing treasure to offer an insecure society.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE
Matthew 25:14–30

Focus on Your Teaching

Would you say most of your participants' lives reflect adventure or caution? Consider how they would react to the phrase "Nothing ventured, nothing gained." Some might hear it simply as a financial maxim related to the importance of receiving a good return on financial investments. But how might "venturing" resonate with their views on, and practices of, faith? Today's focus scripture relates a story that some participants may find challenging if not offensive. For older adults, this story may have been "tamed" by its frequent use in stewardship appeals. One key aspect of leading this session will be freeing the parable from that constraint.

Equip me, O God, for the preparing and leading of this session, according to your purposes. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- ☐ newsprint
- ☐ marker
- ☐ Bibles
- ☐ copies of Resource Sheet 1
- ☐ copies of Resource Sheet 1 for November 22, 2020

For Responding

- ☐ option 1: copies of Resource Sheet 2
- ☐ option 2: paper, pens
- ☐ option 3: Resource Sheet 1

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, post a sheet of newsprint with "Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained" written across it.

Welcome the participants. Introduce any newcomers as needed.

Direct participants to the newsprint headline. Ask them to recall the following:

- ✂ A time in your life when you took a risk to achieve some greater good;
- ✂ A time in your life when you balked at taking such a risk and regretted it.

Form pairs. Discuss these questions in light of those reflections:

- ✂ What empowered you to take the risk you did?
- ✂ What held you back from the risk you avoided?

Gather the group. Invite partners to offer brief comments on what empowered and what held them back from risk.

Affirm that today's session will explore how "nothing ventured, nothing gained" looms in the background of a parable Jesus tells about God's promised realm and our response to it. Then offer this prayer or one of your own choosing:

Holy God, guide me as I lead this session and help me follow Jesus every day of my life. Amen.

EXPLORING

Introduce today's Scripture by noting that this is the next to last parable Jesus tells about the *eschaton* ("end times") in his teachings on this subject in Matthew 24–25 in response to a question his disciples raised (Matthew 24:3).

A conventional theological reading of Matthew 25:14–30 treats it as a pericope on stewardship. Matthew is telling stories about the end of time—a point likely to be subverted or perverted when we focus too closely on stewardship.

Use the information in the sidebar to urge participants to separate the hearing of this parable from its overuse in stewardship campaigns. Remind participants that the word “talent” in this parable is not about its common English understanding of “something we can do well”—but rather, a large sum of money that is equivalent to what would have taken a common day laborer in Jesus’ era approximately 15 *years* to earn. Invite the participants to compute the equivalent of 15 times their annual income to rightly hear the import—and risk—in this parable.

Ask for five volunteers to read Matthew 25:14–30. Assign them the following five roles: narrator (Jesus); the first, second, and third servants; and the master. Have the remaining participants choose one of these characters in order to hear the parable read from the perspective of this character. Carry out the reading.

After the reading, invite those participants who listened from the perspective of one of its characters to offer reactions to the story, especially any questions that it raised. Invite readers to offer their reactions as well. Deal with questions or negative reactions without minimizing what some may find difficult in this parable or its message.

Explore in the whole group or small groups the following issues and others identified in the previous paragraph’s discussion:

- ✂ the importance of the phrase “to each according to his ability” in verse 15;
- ✂ the possible impact on the servants’ actions due to the enormous sum of money each was given;
- ✂ the meaning of “the joy of your master.”

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Matthew 25:14–30) and read both the “What?” and “Where?” excerpts. Explore the assertions made there about the master as “far from simply being harsh” and “generous.” Ask: *What actions of the master might affirm or contradict those assessments?*

One possible option: debate whether the first two servants fear the master, as does the third (vv. 24b–25a).

Read the “Now What?” excerpt on Resource Sheet 1. Discuss how the actions of all three servants in the parable undergird the excerpt’s argument that “faithful living is not static.” Invite participants to reflect on what risks and joys are evoked in their mind by the call issued in the excerpt’s final sentence. Ask: How might the church both encourage such risks and celebrate such joys?

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

- 1. Discipleship as Adventure** Following Jesus beckons us to venture out of safe enclaves for the sake of the gospel. Distribute copies and read Resource Sheet 2 (The Venture of Discipleship). Focus the ensuing conversation on participants’ reactions to the first

EASY
PREP

This exercise might threaten participants who deny being driven by fear, or who are currently overwhelmed by some fear. How might you encourage participants on either side of that spectrum to use this as a means of growth?

two sentences of the third paragraph (“The greatest risk of all . . .”). Identify where participants have seen such risks played out in the world and in their personal faith journeys. Encourage participants to use those two sentences to begin their daily prayers in the coming week, asking God: “What would you have me do today?”

2. **Naming the Fears that Hold Us Back** Like the servant in the parable, we sometimes allow fear to prevent us from the risk of following Jesus. Distribute paper and pens. Have participants write the opening words of verse 25 (“I was afraid, and I . . .”) on the paper. Invite participants to think about and write down fears that hold them back from following Jesus more closely. Urge them to be specific. For each fear noted, invite them to imagine what Jesus would say to them about that fear. Have them write that beneath the fear. Urge participants to choose one of these entries to begin each day this week, identifying and committing to one action that day that would resist giving in to that fear.
3. **Joyward Risk** Jesus’ parable links the risks of discipleship to the experience and promise of joyful relationship. Read the “So What?” excerpt on Resource Sheet 1. Invite participants to discern where joy might be found in the callings that unfold in that excerpt. Ask participants what joys they have experienced in their journey of discipleship. Encourage the group in the coming week to celebrate each day some particular joy that following Jesus has generated.

CLOSING

Gather the participants in a circle. Direct them again to the newsprint banner: “Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained.” Invite them to call out words or phrases gained from today’s discussions or activities that bring fresh meaning to the ways those words on the banner resonate with discipleship.

Invite participants to silently call to mind one particular risk of discipleship that weighs on them. Explain the following commissioning exercise: One by one, each participant will step into the middle of the circle with that situation or dilemma in mind. (Assure participants they will not be called to say what it is.) As each person steps into the circle, the group will repeat this blessing:

(Name), *in the face of fear, do not live afraid. Follow Jesus.*

Practice the response several times, then begin the commissioning. Use it until everyone has moved inside the circle and received the commissioning.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for November 22, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and resource sheet prior to the next session.

Focus on Matthew 25:14–30

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Thomas D. Stegman, SJ

The parable sets forth positive and negative examples of conduct while awaiting the return of the Lord. Not to be overlooked is the characterization of the master: as one who bestows gifts abundantly, carefully calibrates gifts on the basis of ability, gives his slaves freedom to respond with loving responsibility, and rejoices in their fidelity. While the parable initially intimates that the talents bestowed are external to the recipients (i.e., only to be managed by them), the detail in verse 29—“to all those who *have*, more will be given, and they will *have* an abundance” (italics added)—suggests that the talents do, in fact, enrich the recipients. The parable’s ending warns of the tragedy of acting timidly in response to God’s generosity.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Mark Douglas

We may get a more accurate reading of the master and the slave on the basis of their actions. Far from simply being harsh, the master acts generously, trusting even the third slave with the wealth of more than fifteen years’ wages. Far from reaping what he did not sow, he returns to their oversight the wealth that the first two slaves earned and, even more importantly, invites them into his joy, therein transforming his relationship with them from master/slave to something approaching equality (vv. 21, 23). This eschatological passage is about a willingness to resist fear and, like the first two slaves, to behave in risky and trusting ways, for in so doing we enter into joy upon the master’s return.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” John M. Buchanan

Here Jesus invites us to be his disciples, to live our lives as fully as possible by investing them, by risking, by expanding the horizons of our responsibilities. To be his man or woman, he says, is not so much believing ideas about him as it is following him. It is to experience renewed responsibility for the use and investment of these precious lives of ours. It is to be bold and brave, to reach high and care deeply. So the parable is the invitation to the adventure of faith: the high-risk venture of being a disciple of Jesus Christ.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,”

Lindsay P. Armstrong

Faithful living is not static; yet, like this third slave, we are good at knowing without doing. We are adept at holding on to a talent entrusted, knowing what we should do with it, but not doing so. We know what faithful living looks like, but we hesitate to live it. We bury too much goodness, time, love, treasure, and talent in the ground. Compassionately addressing inactivity, fears, and/or misconceptions about God could be a freeing treasure to offer an insecure society.

The Venture of Discipleship

In today's parable, the property-owner commends those servants who risk venturing what has been entrusted to them. What might that mean for those who would follow Jesus today?



The third slave takes a very different approach with his money, his one talent. He digs a hole in the ground and puts all the money in the hole for safekeeping. In a time of stock-market decline, this man looks very wise. This is not a bad man. This is a prudent, careful, cautious investor. He is not about to take chances with the money. It is all there, every penny of it, when his master returns. He is proud of himself. "Here it is. All of it, safe and sound." For his efforts he is treated as harshly as anyone in the whole Bible.

The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is not to risk anything, not to care deeply and profoundly enough about anything to invest deeply, to give your heart away and in the process risk everything. The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is to play it safe, to live cautiously and prudently. Orthodox, conventional theology identifies sin as pride and egotism. However, there is an entire other lens through which to view the human condition. It is called sloth, one of the ancient church's seven deadly sins. Sloth means not caring, not loving, not rejoicing, not living up to the full potential of our humanity, playing it safe, investing nothing, being cautious and prudent, digging a hole and burying the money in the ground.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that the sin of respectable people is running from responsibility. Bonhoeffer, who was a pacifist, took his own responsibility so seriously he joined the Resistance and helped plan an assassination attempt on Hitler's life. His sense of responsibility cost him his life. How important is this personally, in terms of how we live our lives? Jesus' warning is that the outcome of playing it safe—not caring, not loving passionately, not investing yourself, not risking anything—is something akin to death, like being banished to the outer darkness.

—Excerpted from John M. Buchanan, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 310 and 312

Semicontinuous
Ezek. 34:11–16,
20–24
Ps. 100

Complementary
Ezek. 34:11–16,
20–24
Ps. 95:1–7a
Eph. 1:15–23
Matt. 25:31–46

Facing Jesus

Goal for the Session

Prompted by Jesus' parable of the sheep and goats, adults will discern how Jesus may be treated with compassion today.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Matthew 25:31–46

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Thomas D. Stegman, SJ

Matthew's description of the last judgment ends with the notice that “the righteous” will be called to inherit eternal life (v. 46). These are the merciful who are blessed (Matt. 5:7), the people whose hunger and thirst for righteousness (Matt. 5:6) leads them to respond with compassion to the hunger and thirst of others. Jesus teaches that God's reign—the full revelation of which we await—is characterized in the present, not by powerful works and miracles, but by deeds of love, mercy, and compassion, especially toward those most in need. Jesus' kingly ministry is to be reflected in his followers' exercise of shepherding care.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Mark Douglas

This text needs other texts in Matthew and throughout Scripture that, while not necessarily untying its knots, at least place them in larger contexts. Other texts and further theological exploration might remind us that Christians are always both recipients of the gospel and witnesses to it. Each of us is both unbeliever and believer, both commanded to care and in need of care, both judged by the Son of Man and identified with him in our weakness, both under judgment for our failures to pursue justice and saved by grace, both a goat and a sheep.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” John M. Buchanan

What I can do and am called to do is to remember what Jesus said: “When you did it to one of the least of these, my family, you did it to me”—not, please notice, just the certifiably hungry and truly deserving. The only criterion he set was “least of these,” which means those who are weak and vulnerable, the little ones, particularly the small ones, the children. So what you and I can do and are called to do is not to ignore and overlook, but to look into a human face and to see there the face of Jesus Christ, because that is what he said.

NOW WHAT is God's word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Lindsay P. Armstrong

This Scripture testifies that salvation is something we discover, often when we least expect it. In Matthew 25:37–39, the righteous are surprised to realize they had cared for the King of creation; evidently, they simply shared who they were and what they had freely, without calculation or expectation. In verse 44, the unrighteous are shocked that they missed opportunities to show love to the King; had they known God was in their midst, they would have done the right thing. Yet, the King is looking for a natural overflowing of love, not calculated efforts designed to project a certain image. This is the kind of love Jesus has come to demonstrate and share.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE
Matthew 25:31–46

Focus on Your Teaching

Have you or the members of your group ever had this experience? You hear of or speak to someone who seems to be a stranger. But then it becomes clear: they are a friend of a friend, lived in the same community, or shared a church background with you. That recognition changes how you engage with that person. Today's passage challenges Christians with a surprising twist on how we respond to strangers who actually are not strangers at all. Be aware as you lead that some may interpret this parable's portrayal of salvation to be a troubling contradiction of salvation through grace alone.

God, open my eyes and heart to your purposes in my preparations for and leading of this session. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- ☐ Bibles
- ☐ copies of Resource Sheet 1
- ☐ copies of Resource Sheet 1 for November 29, 2020

For Responding

- ☐ option 1: copies of Resource Sheet 2, pens
- ☐ option 2: Resource Sheet 1, art supplies for painting and/or sketching, paper
- ☐ option 3: newsprint, marker

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Welcome the participants. Introduce any guests or visitors.

Ask for four volunteers to take part in two skits. Give these instructions to the first two volunteers:

✂ You are two strangers who meet on the street. One of you seeks directions to the nearest food bank, and then asks the other to drive them there.

Take the second two volunteers aside. Give them the same instructions with this exception: you are friends who have not seen each other for years.

Ask the remaining members of the group to observe two skits, but do not tell them what they are about. Move directly from one skit to the next.

Afterward, invite those who watched to comment on the interactions between the two pairs. Ask: What created any differences in the flow and outcome of the skits?

Indicate that today's session will explore a parable that links our responding to others with our responding to Jesus.

Offer this prayer or one of your own choosing:

Open us in this session, O God, to your presence already among us. Amen.

Some church traditions observe today as Reign of Christ Sunday or Christ the King Sunday. Encourage participants to be attentive to today's focus scripture and session for insights into that theme and its observance.

EXPLORING

Introduce today's reading by indicating it is the final section of Jesus' teachings on the end times in Matthew. Invite participants to reflect on the importance and purpose of "closing words" in times of teaching or debate. Encourage participants to be mindful of such importance and purpose as they attend to the final emphasis Jesus asserts in his instructions to disciples (25:13) on the end times and their impact on present conduct.

Draw an imaginary line down the middle of the group and have one side play the part of the righteous sheep and the other the unrighteous goats. Instruct them to read in unison when it is their turn. Read the narration yourself or have a volunteer read it. Invite reactions to the reading or questions that it raised. Encourage participants to keep those reactions and questions before them as you go back through the passage during the session.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Matthew 25:31–46) and direct participants' attention to the "Now What?" excerpt.

- ✠ Read the first two sentences of the "Now What?" excerpt on Resource Sheet 1. Invite participants to brainstorm ideas as to why Jesus might not make an issue of righteous people's lack of recognition of him?
- ✠ Read the third sentence of the "Now What?" excerpt, along with verse 41. Ask the participants about their feelings regarding the fairness of this judgment ("unrighteous" in the excerpt, "accursed" in the text).

Recall that this focus scripture is the final section of Jesus' teaching about the end times. Ask participants: If this were Jesus' sole teaching about God's coming reign and the end times, which verse(s) from this parable would most clearly summarize Jesus' teaching?

Read the "Where?" excerpt on Resource Sheet 1. Invite participants' reactions to the excerpt's point that Christians are more "both/and" rather than "either/or" in terms of the gospel's grace and judgment and the parable's "goats and sheep." Discuss how participants see that point as congruent or discordant with the thrust of Jesus' parable.

Affirm that one of today's Old Testament readings is an "end times" teaching that also draws on shepherd imagery. Read the lection, Ezekiel 34:11–16, 20–24. Identify the actions of the shepherd in this passage. Compare these to the actions of both the righteous and the king in Jesus' parable. Ask: What priorities in life do both suggest in anticipation of God's reign?

Have a volunteer read the "What?" excerpt on Resource Sheet 1. Look up the two Beatitude references, and discuss the importance of linking those teachings from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount with Jesus' concluding instruction for his disciples on the end times in today's Scripture. Read aloud the excerpt's final two sentences ("Jesus teaches . . ."). Invite participants to reflect on the following:

- ✠ Where do you see the church, and where do you see yourself, called to exercise the "shepherding care" of verses 35 and 36?

**EASY
PREP**

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

- 1. Meeting Christ in Human Need** We encounter Christ in human need that beckons our compassionate response. Distribute Resource Sheet 2 (Meeting Christ in Human Need). Review the instructions in the opening paragraph. Have participants work individually or in small groups, writing ideas in the spaces provided. Gather the group. Go through each category, inviting participants to briefly share their ideas. Urge participants to use (and add to) this during the week as a guide for their own compassionate response to human need.
- 2. Facing Jesus in ‘the Least of These’** Putting a face on Jesus’ words of “the least of these” leads to empathy and compassion for those otherwise ignored. Read the “So What?” excerpt on Resource Sheet 1. Lay out the art supplies, and invite participants to create an image that reflects the insight of the excerpt’s final sentence. Encourage participants to take these home and to place them where they will be seen every day as a reminder of where and in whom Christ may be seen and responded to with compassion in the upcoming season of Advent.
- 3. Do a Church Missional Inventory** The call to respond with compassion in the face of human need is not only for individuals but for communities as well. Write on newsprint the six needs that evoke the compassionate response of the righteous in verses 35 and 36. Identify ways in which your congregation responds to such needs. Identify one area of need that your congregation may be overlooking. Determine strategies for how the church might better engage that need in the approaching season of Advent. Encourage participants in the coming week to do at least one thing to help the congregation respond in new ways to such need.

If you plan to use this option, speak ahead of time with the pastor and/or mission chairperson in your congregation. They may have ideas on how to carry through on suggestions generated.

CLOSING

Gather the group together in a circle. Invite participants to summarize in a phrase or a few words what they will carry away from this session.

If you used option 2 in Responding, invite individuals to share with the group the image they created, and how it speaks to them of how and in whom Christ may be seen and responded to with compassion.

Use the following benediction or one of your own choosing:

*God has given eyes and spirits that we may see with compassion,
Christ has ministered among the outcast that we may move beyond our circles,
Spirit has come that we may be empowered to respond to human need.
So let us see, so let us minister, so let us respond. Amen.*

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for November 29, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and resource sheet prior to the next session.

Focus on Matthew 25:31–46

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Thomas D. Stegman, SJ

Matthew’s description of the last judgment ends with the notice that “the righteous” will be called to inherit eternal life (v. 46). These are the merciful who are blessed (Matt. 5:7), the people whose hunger and thirst for righteousness (Matt. 5:6) leads them to respond with compassion to the hunger and thirst of others. Jesus teaches that God’s reign—the full revelation of which we await—is characterized in the present, not by powerful works and miracles, but by deeds of love, mercy, and compassion, especially toward those most in need. Jesus’ kingly ministry is to be reflected in his followers’ exercise of shepherding care.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Mark Douglas

This text needs other texts in Matthew and throughout Scripture that, while not necessarily untying its knots, at least place them in larger contexts. Other texts and further theological exploration might remind us that Christians are always both recipients of the gospel and witnesses to it. Each of us is both unbeliever and believer, both commanded to care and in need of care, both judged by the Son of Man and identified with him in our weakness, both under judgment for our failures to pursue justice and saved by grace, both a goat and a sheep.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” John M. Buchanan

What I can do and am called to do is to remember what Jesus said: “When you did it to one of the least of these, my family, you did it to me”—not, please notice, just the certifiably hungry and truly deserving. The only criterion he set was “least of these,” which means those who are weak and vulnerable, the little ones, particularly the small ones, the children. So what you and I can do and are called to do is not to ignore and overlook, but to look into a human face and to see there the face of Jesus Christ, because that is what he said.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,”
Lindsay P. Armstrong

This Scripture testifies that salvation is something we discover, often when we least expect it. In Matthew 25:37–39, the righteous are surprised to realize they had cared for the King of creation; evidently, they simply shared who they were and what they had freely, without calculation or expectation. In verse 44, the unrighteous are shocked that they missed opportunities to show love to the King; had they known God was in their midst, they would have done the right thing. Yet, the King is looking for a natural overflowing of love, not calculated efforts designed to project a certain image. This is the kind of love Jesus has come to demonstrate and share.

Meeting Christ in Human Need

The parable sets the language of Christ's surprising presence in past tense: "I was hungry, . . . I was . . ." For us to take the parable to heart, however, the shift must be made to present tense. Christ *is* among us, in the person of those who hunger, who thirst . . . So the missional question is: How will we respond to the ones in whom we encounter Christ today? In the spaces below, reflect on how you will respond to the Christ you encounter in human need.

I Am Hungry . . . How Will You Give Me Food?

I Am Thirsty . . . How Will You Quench My Thirst?

I Am a Stranger . . . How Will You Welcome Me?

I Am Naked . . . How Will You Clothe Me?

I Am Sick . . . How Will You Care for Me?

I Am in Prison . . . How Will You Visit Me?



Isa. 64:1–9

Ps. 80:1–7, 17–19

1 Cor. 1:3–9

Mark 13:24–37

Opening to Holy Hope

Goal for the Session

Stirred by Isaiah’s intercessory pleas, adults will affirm the grounding of Advent’s hopes in God’s holy and sometimes hidden purposes.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Isaiah 64:1–9

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” William P. Brown

These final verses establish the ties that bind God to God’s people. God is “our Father,” equated earlier with “our Redeemer from of old” (63:16). To claim God as paternal is to assert God’s familial claim upon Israel and Israel’s claim upon God, a kinship that necessitates continued recognition and care for Israel. The community is also God’s handiwork, pottery, no less, shaped by loving hands (cf. Jer. 18). God would not let a people slide into destruction any more than a father would sacrifice his son or a potter would destroy her prized bowl. The bottom line is that “we are all your people,” whether God likes it or not, for the covenantal bond is indissoluble. God, thus, is bound to act.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Scott Bader-Saye

Isaiah calls on Israel to be malleable in the hands of God, and he reminds God to fulfill the task of forming Israel into a people of blessing. In the season of Advent, Christians imaginatively enter a time of waiting for the Christ child, who comes as God hidden in human form, who comes not to inaugurate an apocalyptic cleansing but to reveal the power of the powerless in his self-giving on the cross. In so doing, he reveals the will of the Father who is eternally, patiently molding and shaping the clay of creation into the New Jerusalem.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Patricia E. De Jong

At Advent, God’s people summon the courage and the spiritual strength to remember that the holy breaks into the daily. In tiny ways, we can open our broken hearts to the healing grace of God, who opens the way to peace. May that peace come upon us as a healing balm, as a mighty winter river, gushing and rushing through the valleys of our prideful fear and our own self-righteous indignation. As a friend has said, this is not a season for passive waiting and watching. It is a season of wailing and weeping, of opening up our lives and our souls with active anticipation and renewed hope.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Donald Booz

Yet recognizing God’s presence may be a daily task, especially given the world in which we live. Like Isaiah, we need to remember when God has been visible in our midst. Waiting with hope that God will be visible once again is the call of Isaiah to God. Watching with eyes to see is the call of Isaiah to the people of faith. To hear the voice of Isaiah is to proclaim that Advent is more than a time to hear promises about God. Advent becomes a season of attentiveness to the presence of God already among us.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 64:1–9

Focus on Your Teaching

What reasons for hope and despair might the participants in your group bring with them into this session: about these weeks leading to Christmas; about your congregation and wider community; about your nation and world? Today's session will explore a challenging text on hope's possibilities and hurdles.

God of all hope, weave your purposes through my preparations for this session and the entire Advent season. Amen.

■ LEADING THE SESSION

YOU WILL NEED

- ☐ Advent wreath with candles
- ☐ matches or lighter
- ☐ index cards
- ☐ pens
- ☐ Bibles
- ☐ copies of Resource Sheet 1 for December 6, 2020

For Responding

- ☐ option 1: copies of Resource Sheet 2
- ☐ option 2: banner-making materials (felt blocks, glue gun, scissors, 3 x 3 backing cloth)
- ☐ option 3: copies of Resource Sheet 1

GATHERING

Before the session, arrange the Advent wreath in front or at the center of your meeting space, depending on the seating arrangements. Decide whether you will choose the Advent banner-making activity (option 2 in Responding), which will be a four-week project.

Welcome the participants. Introduce any guests or visitors.

Give each participant an index card and a pen. Ask individuals to consider what hopes they bring with them today. Clarify that the hopes may be for the world and/or for their personal life. Have them write the two or three most important hopes on one side of the index card.

Next, use the other side of the index card to write both reasons for holding those hopes and reasons for wondering whether they will ever come to pass.

Affirm that today is the first Sunday in Advent, and that the first candle you will light on the Advent wreath represents hope. As you light the first candle, invite participants to be mindful of the hopes they have identified. Afterward, say that today's session will explore a text from Isaiah on hope.

Offer this prayer or one of your own choosing:

*Holy God, open us to your presence in word, in community, and in hope.
Amen.*



Many scholars date Isaiah 56–66 to the years after the return to Israel after exile in Babylon. The yearning in Isaiah 64 thus arose not from the hope for the exile’s ending, but rather out of difficulties experienced after the return.

EXPLORING

Introduce today’s focus scripture by reading and discussing the sidebar information in preparation for engaging today’s text.




Lead the participants in the following meditation. Have them find a comfortable position, close their eyes, and take three deep breaths. Use the following script to guide the meditation, rewording as you see fit.

Imagine you are one of those who returned from exile in Babylon to Israel. You had been buoyed by prophetic promises of restoration to make the long journey. As you first entered the land, you saw fields and orchards that had been destroyed or suffered from lack of tending. You saw houses fallen into disrepair. And you saw Jerusalem, its walls broken down and the temple destroyed. Three years have passed. You have made headway in restoring the home in which you live. But the walls of the city remain down, leaving you vulnerable to raids by enemies. It will still be several years before the olive trees you tend will once again bear fruit. And with all the work to be done, the temple remains in ruins. You gather with others in a synagogue this day because a new scroll bearing the name of Isaiah will supposedly be read. What feelings do you carry with you into the synagogue that day: about the lack of progress and hard work of restoration; about the presence of God? You listen as the rabbi unrolls the scroll and reads these words (read Isaiah 64:1–9). When the rabbi finishes, he rolls up the scroll and closes by asking these two questions:

-  What will you pray this evening because of these words?
-  What will you do tomorrow because of these words?

Allow time for participants to reflect on the questions. Then invite participants to take three deep breaths and open their eyes. Form small groups for participants to discuss their responses to the rabbi’s questions.

Have four volunteers read portions of today’s passage aloud to the group. Assign the volunteers the following verses from Isaiah 64:1–9: 1–2, 3–4, 5–7, and 8–9. Read each set of verses. After the reading of each set, discuss the following questions based on that set of verses alone:

-  What hope does this section lift up?
-  What does this section reveal about those to whom Isaiah wrote it?
-  What does this section reveal about God?

Bring the discussion of the previous three questions into the context of today’s being the first Sunday in Advent. Encourage participants to identify what they hear Isaiah saying about God’s purposes, both “holy” and “hidden,” in this passage. Ask: How might Isaiah’s words shape our observance of Advent and what it could mean to live in its hopes?

**EASY
PREP**

The banner-making option is offered each session in Advent. Choose this option only if you will do so in the other sessions. The intent is to create a single composite banner or series of four to reflect the whole season.

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

1. **Advent's Hope: Let's Be Clear** Separating the hopes of Isaiah and Advent from shallow optimism is a critical task for people and communities of faith. Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Signposts on the Way to Advent's Hopes) and have participants silently read it. Invite participants to identify what they found most challenging about these readings, and most helpful, in terms of the hopes associated with Advent. Challenge individuals to use this resource sheet in the coming week to reassess one of the hopes (and reasons for holding it and wondering about it) identified on their index cards.
2. **Crafting Hope** As Isaiah used visual imagery to craft his message, the group may express Advent hope by crafting a visual symbol. Discuss ideas for a visual symbol of the hope evoked by Isaiah and explored in this session. Reach a consensus on one. Direct participants to the banner-making materials, and have them work together to create an Advent banner of hope. Decide whether the group will eventually create a single banner for Advent or four separate banners. Encourage participants to remember the visual symbol in their prayers and personal Advent preparations this week.
3. **A Season of Attentiveness** Observing Advent and affirming its hopes involve attentiveness to the needs for and signs of God's presence already among us. Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Isaiah 64:1–9) and read the "Now What?" excerpt. Brainstorm ideas on practices that might help participants be more attentive and responsive to God's presence in this season of Advent. Encourage participants to consider service-oriented as well as reflective practices. Urge each person to commit to one reflective practice and one congregational Advent mission project through the season of Advent as part of their attending to God's presence among us.

CLOSING

Gather the participants around or in front of the Advent wreath and remind them that the first candle was lit to symbolize "hope." Ask them to reflect on ways this session has witnessed to hope, as well as challenged us to dig deeper into hope's meaning or hiddenness. Invite participants to call out a word or phrase that speaks to that hope or challenge.

Introduce the following litany prayer, noting that Isaiah's passage is largely a prayer. Ask participants to identify a hope they would pray for, whether on their index card or something evoked through this session. After each person states their hope, lead the group in a litany response that uses the final sentence in the first paragraph of Resource Sheet 2 ("We pray for the hope of Advent: that God will break into the ordinary, bringing the promise of peace, hope, and restored life.").

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for December 6, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and resource sheet prior to the next session.

Focus on Isaiah 64:1–9

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” William P. Brown

These final verses establish the ties that bind God to God’s people. God is “our Father,” equated earlier with “our Redeemer from of old” (63:16). To claim God as paternal is to assert God’s familial claim upon Israel and Israel’s claim upon God, a kinship that necessitates continued recognition and care for Israel. The community is also God’s handiwork, pottery, no less, shaped by loving hands (cf. Jer. 18). God would not let a people slide into destruction any more than a father would sacrifice his son or a potter would destroy her prized bowl. The bottom line is that “we are all your people,” whether God likes it or not, for the covenantal bond is indissoluble. God, thus, is bound to act.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Scott Bader-Saye

Isaiah calls on Israel to be malleable in the hands of God, and he reminds God to fulfill the task of forming Israel into a people of blessing. In the season of Advent, Christians imaginatively enter a time of waiting for the Christ child, who comes as God hidden in human form, who comes not to inaugurate an apocalyptic cleansing but to reveal the power of the powerless in his self-giving on the cross. In so doing, he reveals the will of the Father who is eternally, patiently molding and shaping the clay of creation into the New Jerusalem.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,”
Patricia E. De Jong

At Advent, God’s people summon the courage and the spiritual strength to remember that the holy breaks into the daily. In tiny ways, we can open our broken hearts to the healing grace of God, who opens the way to peace. May that peace come upon us as a healing balm, as a mighty winter river, gushing and rushing through the valleys of our prideful fear and our own self-righteous indignation. As a friend has said, this is not a season for passive waiting and watching. It is a season of wailing and weeping, of opening up our lives and our souls with active anticipation and renewed hope.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,”
Donald Booz

Yet recognizing God’s presence may be a daily task, especially given the world in which we live. Like Isaiah, we need to remember when God has been visible in our midst. Waiting with hope that God will be visible once again is the call of Isaiah to God. Watching with eyes to see is the call of Isaiah to the people of faith. To hear the voice of Isaiah is to proclaim that Advent is more than a time to hear promises about God. Advent becomes a season of attentiveness to the presence of God already among us.

Signposts on the Way to Advent's Hopes



It (Isaiah 64:1–9) is a strange way to begin this time of Advent. Beginning Advent with weeping and a lament? That is unusual! And powerful. This is where we need to begin. The coming of Advent jolts the church out of Ordinary Time with the invasive news that it's time to think about fresh possibilities for deliverance and human wholeness. . . . Hope is what is left when your worst fears have been realized and you are no longer optimistic about the future. Hope is what comes with a broken heart willing to be mended. . . . We pray for the hope of Advent: that God will break into the ordinary, bringing the promise of peace, hope, and restored life.

—Patricia deJong, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4*
(Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 4

God's refusal to replicate a Red Sea-type deliverance does not mean that God has abandoned Israel or the church. Our hope does not rely on God's acting today in the same ways God acted in the ancient stories, but it does rely on God's being the same God yesterday, today, and tomorrow—a God who hears our cries, a God who does not abandon us, a God who will finally redeem all that is lost in a new heaven and new earth (Isaiah 65:17). The tradition of biblical lament does not invoke the past as nostalgia, nor does it dismiss the present in despair; rather, it draws on the collective memories of God's people as a source of hope for the future.

—Scott Bader-Saye, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4*
(Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 6

Too much that passes for hope among us is little more than wishful thinking disconnected from action taken in response. Too much that passes for hope is self-centered daydreaming about what would be nice for me and mine to the exclusion of any concrete consideration for you and yours. Too much that passes for hope wants to let go and let God, even in those matters where our gracious God waits and waits on us to act. To term such hope wishy-washy is a gentle understatement. Such a parody of hope leaves us spiritually homeless, stripped of the calling and direction so vital in Biblical faith. . . . Hope involves finding where and to whom we and all creation belong and then having the trust and courage to start living in that direction.

—John Indermark, *Hope: Our Longing for Home*, (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2007), 11–12