

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

Loving the Least of These

Goal for the Session *Adults will identify the “least of these” around them and consider ways to minister with them.*

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Matthew 25:31–46

WHAT is important to know?

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

The last judgment scene is the final and climactic passage in Jesus’ discourse on the end times (Matthew 24:1–25:46). Matthew draws on imagery from Daniel 7:13–14—where the Ancient of Days bestows dominion and glory on “one like a son of man”—to set the stage for the full manifestation of God’s reign. Jesus is portrayed in his glorious return as a shepherd, an image Matthew employs throughout his Gospel. The picture of the Son of Man then morphs into the image of Jesus as king. Indeed, Jesus’ kingly/messianic identity is a major theme for Matthew.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Mark Douglas

The one who sits “on the throne of his glory” (v. 31) and has the power to separate the sheep from the goats is also the one who lends his identity to “the least of these.” Given not only the fluidity with which the Son of Man reveals his identity, but also his complex willingness to identify himself with those who live dependent on others, perhaps treating our own identities as more fluid and complex than we often do may remind us not to assume too much about ourselves, our places in this text, our relations to our neighbors, or our places in eternity.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” John M. Buchanan

“What you do for me and to the least of these—sick, hungry, homeless, oppressed, imprisoned—you do to me.” In these familiar words of Jesus are three important ideas. The first is about God: God is here, in the messiness and ambiguity of human life. The second is about the practice of religion: There is only one criterion, and that is whether or not you saw Jesus Christ in the face of the needy and whether or not you gave yourself away in love in his name. The third is personal: God wants to teach us the fundamental truth that to love is to live.

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

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Lindsay P. Armstrong

The emphasis on freely sharing with all who are hungry, thirsty, naked, and /or sick is a key diagnostic tool to help assess our righteousness. If we cannot share freely and fully or if we do not make ourselves available to do so, this indicates that our relationship with God and the world is not as healthy and whole as Jesus’ triumph on the cross makes possible. Loving those for whom Jesus gave his life, particularly those who are undervalued, is a primary expression of our love of God and our experience of God’s love for us.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

Matthew 25:31–46

Focus on Your Teaching

The parable of the Sheep and the Goats is a fitting one to discuss during a season of thanksgiving and as we close the liturgical year. A Christian life of thanks for what we have been given results in a life of serving those around us, especially the “least of these.”

As you think about your group, don’t assume that none of them are among the least of the ones identified in the parable. In this economic downturn, some individuals may be experiencing difficult times. That being said, few Americans are unable to minister in some way to others. Everyone can be found in this parable.

O God, my judge, open my eyes to find you in all my neighbors, especially the weak and the lonely. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- Bibles
- paper and pens
- chart from November 19, 2017
- board or newsprint
- markers
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 2
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for December 3, 2017

For Responding

- option 1: paper, pens
- option 2: poster board, glue, scissors; old magazines
- option 3: guest speaker(s)

Palestinian shepherds often had mixed flocks and had to separate sheep from goats each night. Sheep enjoyed the open air but goats had to be protected from the cold. Sheep had more commercial value than goats.

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, write the three sentences in Exploring on newsprint. Post the chart titled “Matthew’s Stories about Waiting” used in the November 19, 2017, session. If you are using option 2 in Responding, bring an assortment of magazine or Internet pictures to illustrate the categories named in Matthew 25:35–36.

Greet participants as they arrive. If you have guests, have participants introduce themselves. Direct their attention to the chart “Matthew’s Stories about Waiting” as a way to remind everyone about these four parables.

To help the group enter into the context for this session, ask:

- ✠ What groups of people in our community seem to be at a disadvantage or to have little power and influence over decisions that are made?

As they name groups, write them on newsprint.

Pray this prayer or one of your choosing:

God of all peoples, we come before you eager to learn how to follow you. Send your Spirit to us so that we might be open to your Word. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

EXPLORING

Explain that the focus scripture will be a group presentation. Select a narrator, who should sit with half the group on his or her left and half on the right. Jesus should stand in front and facing everyone. The rest of the group sits on either side of the narrator. The sides do not have to be the same number. The group on Jesus’ right will be sheep and the group on

his left, goats. The sheep and the goats should read in unison when it's their turn. Have everyone turn to Matthew 25:31–46 and read the text.

Direct the participants' attention to the chart of parables from last week. Complete together the information for today's text, the parable of the Sheep and the Goats. Invite any observations participants have about the text, especially as it compares to the previous three stories.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Matthew 25:31–46) and have volunteers read the "What" and the "Where?" excerpts aloud. Ask:

✪ What in the excerpts helps you think about the parable?

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (What Do You Think?). Form groups of two to four persons. They are to discuss the questions on the resource sheet and be prepared to report the main points of their conversation to the whole group. After ten minutes, gather as a total group and invite each group to report and explain their image of the final judgment.

They may have found in their discussion that some ideas in the parables don't fit together. Show the group the newsprint you prepared with the sentences below:

✪ We are saved by how we treat other persons.

✪ No one but Christ Jesus is in a position to condemn us.

✪ We live by grace alone.

Ask participants how they think these statements might be reconciled. After a few have spoken, tell the group that some commentators suggest there are different currents of belief about this in the Bible and perhaps we cannot totally integrate them. Ask:

✪ One commentator says that just as Jesus' role is fluid in today's Bible text and moves from being the judge to being the least of these, perhaps our role also changes. Maybe we are each unbeliever and believer, goat and sheep. What do you make of this point of view?

Finally, direct attention to the chart about the parables. Invite them to summarize the main points of the four parables they studied (Matt. 24:45–25:46). Then ask:

✪ What have you learned about what Christians are to do as we wait for Jesus' return?

Work together to summarize the major themes from the four parables in Matthew 24:45–25:46. Discuss what Jesus' teachings say about living in God's kingdom now and in the time to come.

RESPONDING

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

- 1. Discipleship Wellness Check** Distribute paper and pens. Instruct participants to view today's text as a discipleship wellness checkup. Ask them to imagine being the sheep, who got a surprise evaluation from Jesus. They had done good deeds and seen Christ in people who were marginalized and disenfranchised in society. Then ask them to imagine being the goats, who were shocked by their bad evaluation.

**EASY
PREP**

Suggest that participants take a few minutes to write the evaluation they believe they might get on their discipleship. Then challenge them to write a course of recovery for those points where they are not living up to their goals. Encourage them to refer to this course of recovery as the church enters a new liturgical year.

- 2. Collage** Create a collage that depicts groups today who might be considered “the least of these.” Provide poster board for the background. In the middle of the poster board, print “Lord, when did we see you?” Put out the magazine pictures or images you printed from the Internet. Work as one group to find images of all the categories Jesus names in Matthew 25:35–36. Fill the entire poster board with pictures. Display the collage in your church where all can see it as a reminder of Christ’s way of discipleship.
- 3. Guest Speakers** Invite one or two members of your church who have worked or volunteered with people in one of the groups named in Matthew 25:35–36. Talk with them beforehand about the focus for the session. Ask them to tell about their particular ministry and how they have grown through this work. Invite them to bring information on volunteer opportunities, if appropriate.

CLOSING

If the group made the collage in Responding, place it where everyone can see it. Invite someone to read the “So What?” excerpt from Resource Sheet 1. After a few moments of silence explain to the group that you will lead them in prayer during which they will have the opportunity to name people who are among those Jesus named.

Loving Creator, as we wait for your kingdom to come and your will to be done, thank you for showing us how to live lives of faith. We know that you will not only judge us, but that you are also found in the very lives of the weakest members of society, whom we are to serve. We put names to those categories of people now silently and aloud:

Those who are hungry or thirsty . . .

The strangers in our midst . . .

Those in need of clothing or housing . . .

Those who are sick . . .

Our brothers and sisters in prison . . .

Give us courage to find ways to minister to you in this messy world. Amen.

Dismiss the group by saying: Go in peace, serve the Lord.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for December 3, 2017, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and Resource Sheet 1 before the next session.

Advent and a new liturgical year begins next week. Consider using an Advent wreath or a circle of candles throughout Advent. Perhaps a group member would be willing to provide it.

Focus on Matthew 25:31–46

WHAT is important to know? — From “*Exegetical Perspective*,” Thomas D. Stegman, SJ

The last judgment scene is the final and climactic passage in Jesus’ discourse on the end times (Matthew 24:1–25:46). Matthew draws on imagery from Daniel 7:13–14—where the Ancient of Days bestows dominion and glory on “one like a son of man”—to set the stage for the full manifestation of God’s reign. Jesus is portrayed in his glorious return as a shepherd, an image Matthew employs throughout his Gospel. The picture of the Son of Man then morphs into the image of Jesus as king. Indeed, Jesus’ kingly/messianic identity is a major theme for Matthew.

WHERE is God in these words? — From “*Theological Perspective*,” Mark Douglas

The one who sits “on the throne of his glory” (v. 31) and has the power to separate the sheep from the goats is also the one who lends his identity to “the least of these.” Given not only the fluidity with which the Son of Man reveals his identity, but also his complex willingness to identify himself with those who live dependent on others, perhaps treating our own identities as more fluid and complex than we often do may remind us not to assume too much about ourselves, our places in this text, our relations to our neighbors, or our places in eternity.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives? — From “*Pastoral Perspective*,” John M. Buchanan

“What you do for me and to the least of these—sick, hungry, homeless, oppressed, imprisoned—you do to me.” In these familiar words of Jesus are three important ideas. The first is about God: God is here, in the messiness and ambiguity of human life. The second is about the practice of religion: There is only one criterion, and that is whether or not you saw Jesus Christ in the face of the needy and whether or not you gave yourself away in love in his name. The third is personal: God wants to teach us the fundamental truth that to love is to live.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do? — From “*Homiletical Perspective*,” Lindsay P. Armstrong

The emphasis on freely sharing with all who are hungry, thirsty, naked, and /or sick is a key diagnostic tool to help assess our righteousness. If we cannot share freely and fully or if we do not make ourselves available to do so, this indicates that our relationship with God and the world is not as healthy and whole as Jesus’ triumph on the cross makes possible. Loving those for whom Jesus gave his life, particularly those who are undervalued, is a primary expression of our love of God and our experience of God’s love for us.

What Do You Think?

Matthew 24:1—25:46 is the only place in the New Testament where the final judgment is described in detail in four stories. Recall these parables that Jesus told and discuss these questions:



1. What gets people in trouble with the king or leader in each one?
2. Does the parable of the Sheep and the Goats apply to all people or just Christians? (see Matthew 25:32).
3. Based on these four parables, how do you imagine the final judgment? Write or draw about what you imagine: