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

Fear Not!

Goal for the Session *Adults will consider how to use their talents as they wait for the realm of God.*

PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Matthew 25:14–30

WHAT **is important to know?**

— From "Exegetical Perspective," Thomas D. Stegman, SJ

The parable of the talents is situated near the conclusion of Jesus' discourse on the end times (Matthew 24:1–35:46). It is the third in a series of parables that teach what constitutes proper conduct as people await the return of the Son of Man in glory. Implicit is that the return of the master brings about the fullness of the reign of God (see Matthew 25:1). The opening words of verse 19 refer to the delay of the return of the Son of Man in glory. This delay is a key theme in Jesus' discourse.

WHERE **is God in these words?**

— From "Theological Perspective," Mark Douglas

This parable isn't so much about talents as about the third slave, the master, and the relationship between them. These characters more clearly reflect Matthew's theological vision of how we are to live between now and the eschaton. The emotion that drives the third slave creates the conditions that lead to his downfall: fearing his master. This passage is not so much about the wise use of resources as it 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

The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is not to risk anything—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. Jesus' warning is that the outcome of playing it safe is something akin to death, like being banished to the outer darkness.

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

— From "Homiletical Perspective," Lindsay P. Armstrong

What we think about God and *do* in response to the master's gracious trust is neither trivial nor incidental. What we do or fail to do shapes this world and our lives. God is sovereign goodness and is all that we need. Knowing this news and failing to share it with others is like knowing of a treasure hidden deep in the earth, but through indifference or inactivity, leaving that treasure buried, rather than taking the trouble to dig it up and enjoy its abundance with everyone.

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FOCUS SCRIPTURE
Matthew 25:14–30

Focus on Your Teaching

Perhaps there are persons in your group tempted to bury their talents rather than risk making mistakes. In a culture where being successful (and not risking failure) is a norm, adults today may be moved by the parable of the Talents to do the right thing and live courageous lives of faith. Leaders can be role models as they try new activities and teaching methods.

Loving God, inspire me with your loving Spirit so that fear and doubt are cast away as I use my gifts to prepare for and lead this group. In Jesus' name. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- ❑ Bibles
- ❑ board or newsprint
- ❑ markers
- ❑ copies of Resource Sheet 1
- ❑ copies of Resource Sheet 1 for the next session

For Responding:

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

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before participants arrive, prepare a chart on newsprint titled "Matthew's Stories about Waiting," which will be used in Exploring. Down the left-hand side print: 24:45–51; 25:1–13; 25:14–30; 25:31–46. Across the top make three columns and label them: Christ Returns, Judgments, How Those Waiting Spent Time. Save the chart for next week's session.

Greet each person. If you notice anyone who seems disconnected to the group, engage them in conversation.

To begin the session, ask participants to think of a teacher from their past whom they feared. Then ask them to think of a teacher whom they did not fear, but who encouraged them to take chances and trust themselves. Ask:

- Under which teacher did you perform better?
- Under which one were you more willing to take risks?

Suggest that they keep those memories in mind as they wrestle with the focus scripture for this session.

Pray this prayer or one of your choosing:

Heavenly Parent, we know you will come on your own time and establish your reign on earth once and for all. Teach us how to live while waiting for you. Amen.

EXPLORING

Have participants open their Bibles to Matthew 25:14–30. Assign these parts to five volunteers: the narrator, the master, and the three servants. Have them read the text aloud, reader's theater style, as others follow in their Bibles. Then distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Matthew 25:14–30). Have a volunteer read the "What" section aloud. Ask:

- Who does the master in this parable represent?
- Who do the servants represent?

Two Greek words commonly used by biblical scholars to refer to the end time are *eschaton* and *parousia*. *Eschaton* refers to the end time. *Parousia* means presence and refers to the Second Coming of Christ.

Draw their attention to the chart you prepared prior to the session. Remind participants that in the previous session, they studied a parable about the end time and how we are to act while we wait for God's return. The parable of the Talents is also about waiting for God's return. Invite them to complete the information on the chart for the parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14–30). Then return to the parable of the Bridesmaids (Matthew 25:1–13) and complete the chart for it. Although the first parable in this series in Matthew was not a focus scripture, have a volunteer read aloud Matthew 24:45–51. Complete the chart for it as well.

Form small groups. Half of the groups will read Matthew 25:14–30 and look for what can be learned about God from it. The other groups will also read the passage, but look for what the parable has to say about our conduct while we wait for the kingdom. While the groups are working, print two headings on the board: God and Disciples.

When they are ready, invite each group to report and list their findings under the appropriate column on the board. If there are more than two groups, invite them to add any ideas not on the board.

Lead a brief discussion with the whole group based on these questions:

- What does it mean that God gives different talents to different people?
- How does the reward differ among those who wisely use their talents?
- What does it say about God that the master (i.e., God) often leaves servants alone for long periods? (*Note:* This happened with the bridesmaids as well as with the workers in the parable of the Vineyard that was studied a few weeks ago.)
- How does Matthew 25:14–30 encourage us?
- What is its warning?

Have a volunteer read the "Where" excerpt from Resource Sheet 1. Repeat the last two sentences of the excerpt for emphasis. Remind participants of the discussion about teachers during Gathering. Ask:

- How does what the third servant thinks about his master affect what he does with his talent?

Have someone read the "So What?" excerpt from the resource sheet. Ask:

- How does the man with one talent display the sin of sloth?
- How would you apply the sin of sloth to the foolish bridesmaids?
- What does Jesus' parable teach us about risking and playing it safe?

RESPONDING

EASY PREP

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

1. **Which Servant Are You?** Distribute paper and pens. Have the participants turn the paper horizontally and print these column heads: My Talents, My Actions, The Risk, The Reward (whether you succeed or fail). In the first column, they are to list two or three of their talents. In the second column, they write how they use those talents. In column three, they identify risks they have incurred using their talents. Finally, they are to write the reward for taking the risk. After five minutes, ask volunteers to name one of their talents and what they wrote in the other three columns. Make sure everyone notes that the reward for using our talents is always the same: God's approval. Then suggest that they select one talent and commit to a way to use it in the coming week.

Perhaps some participants would like to discern their talents. Plan a special time to conduct a spiritual inventory. Do an Internet search for "spiritual gifts assessment." Several free assessment tools or quizes are available online.

2. **A Life of Faith** Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (A Life of Faith), which contains a longer excerpt by John Buchanan from the *Feasting on the Word* commentary for the parable of the Talents. Ask participants to read the quotation silently and think for a moment about how disciples today might spend their time. Have participants each select one way and write an acrostic poem, which doesn't need to rhyme. On the back of the resource sheet, they are to write the name of the selected action vertically down the middle of the page. Each letter will be part of a line of the poem (see example).

Acrostic example:

Find a **P**lace to pray
Whe**r**e you can be alone.
Give **A**ll cares to God
And use **Y**our gifts for others.

3. **Our Talents** Distribute strips of paper to each participant, enough to equal the number of participants present. Have extra strips available. Explain that often it is hard to identify our own talents but others can help us. Instruct everyone to write the name of each person present on a strip of paper as well as one or more talents they believe that person has. If your group is larger than ten, form groups of five and do this in small groups. When everyone has finished, have everyone give their slips of paper to the appropriate person. Have the participants read the things people wrote about them. Ask them to select one talent identified by others. Ask:
   - Which talents identified by others need to be used more?
   - How will you use that talent this week?

Close this exercise with a prayer of thanksgiving for the talents we have all been given and for friends who encourage us to use them.

CLOSING

Form a circle and hold hands. Instruct everyone to repeat to the person on their right this phrase: "God has given you many talents. Use them boldly." Pray the Lord's Prayer together.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for the next session, 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.

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A Life of Faith



Now for most of us, religion, our personal faith, has not seemed like a high-risk venture. In fact, it has seemed to be something like the opposite. Faith has seemed to be a personal comfort zone. Faith, many of us think, is about personal security, here and in the hereafter. Faith, we think, is no more risky than believing ideas in our heads about God and Jesus, a list of beliefs to which we more or less subscribe intellectually. Faith, we think, because that is what we have been taught, is getting our personal theology right and then living a good life by avoiding bad things. Religion, we think, is a pretty timid, nonrisky venture.

> 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.
>
> —Excerpted from John Buchanan, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4,* ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 312.

Write your description of what a faithful life of discipleship includes. Perhaps you can write a letter to God, a text message to a friend, or a poem.

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