

Matthew 25 Bible Study

For prayer and reflection



MATTHEW 25



Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
Presbyterian Mission

Welcome and introduction

The Matthew 25 vision calls for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) — from members to mid councils — to be actively engaged in their communities by working toward:

- **building congregational vitality**
- **dismantling structural racism**
- **eradicating systemic poverty**

To be a Matthew 25 church, mid council or agency simply means that you are committed to pouring love, energy and action into one or more of these three focuses. These urgent tasks are a direct response to the good news of Jesus and a faithful expression of what it means to be Christ's disciples in this time and place.

The Matthew 25 vision grew out of the work of the 222nd General Assembly (2016) and the 223rd General Assembly (2018) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). It represents a call to congregations, presbyteries, synods and other entities of the denomination to strengthen the collective work and witness of the PC(USA) to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Accepting the Matthew 25 invitation is easy. To begin, simply go to the Matthew 25 website (pcusa.org/matthew25), sign up and commit to work on one or more of the three focuses, joining a growing group of Presbyterians addressing these great challenges. There you will also find more information about the Matthew 25 vision and additional resources that may be downloaded for your use. We encourage you to invite others to explore these opportunities as well.

This introductory study provides background and theological reflection for the Matthew 25 vision. We hope you will pray with it, discuss it, discern from it and proclaim “from the rooftops” the call of Jesus to love, justice and mercy in our world.

Thanks for your interest in the Matthew 25 vision. May the life of the resurrected Jesus guide us, may the presence of the Holy Spirit inspire us, and may the strong word of God direct us as the Matthew 25 vision guides us in actively engaging our world for the sake of the gospel.

*Diane Givens Moffett, President and Executive Director
Presbyterian Mission Agency of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*

Matthew 25 Bible study

The Matthew 25 vision of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) focuses on building congregational vitality, dismantling structural racism and eradicating systemic poverty. See the leader's guide on page 6 (or pcusa.org/matthew25) for more information about these three missional priorities for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

When leading this study with a large group, we recommend breaking into smaller groups for the purpose of responding to the discussion questions in the study. Have the smaller groups discuss and then report out to the full group. This will take time, so you may want to skip from Part 1 (Welcome) to Part 3 (Engaging Matthew 25: the two parables).

1. Welcome

Welcome the group engaging this study to the work they will be doing together: studying Matthew 25 and looking for the ways in which the Matthew 25 vision enables congregations, mid councils and other PC(USA) groups to put into action a commitment to follow Jesus Christ in the ways Christ calls for in Matthew 25. [See part 1 of the leader's guide for reflection on the nature and purpose of visions; see part 2 of the leader's guide for background on the origin of the Matthew 25 vision in the PC(USA).]

Outline for the group how the study will unfold: Reflect on the context of Chapter 25 within the Gospel of Matthew, study the three parts of Matthew 25, focus more closely on elements of Matthew 25:31–46, and consider the Matthew 25 vision and its three focuses as a way to live as Christ calls us to in Matthew 25:31–46. [See part 3 of the leader's guide for descriptions of the three focuses of the Matthew 25 vision.]

Pray for the group's time of study. Praise God for God's love of us, and of all creatures. Thank God for calling us to join in God's mission of bringing all creatures into the fullness of life. Claim God's promise to move among us by the power of the Holy Spirit when we seek guidance through the study of Scripture. Ask God to quiet the things that could distract us, to give clarity of thought and openness of heart.

2. Setting Matthew 25 in the context of the Gospel of Matthew

Five discourses. Note that the Gospel of Matthew is structured around five major discourses. These are long passages of Jesus' teaching. These five discourses echo the first five books of the Bible, called the Torah. There is some disagreement about exactly where some of the five begin, but it is clear that there are five and that they shape the Gospel. [See part 4 of the leader's guide for more information on the literary structure of the Gospel of Matthew.]

Identify these five discourses.

- A. The first discourse is the Sermon on the Mount. Ask a member of the group to **read Matthew 5:1–3**. That's the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. Ask the group: What is the situation in which Jesus teaches? Who is present to be a learner? Ask the group members to *identify where the Sermon ends*. Ask a member of the group to **read Matthew 7:28**, which marks the end of the Sermon. Ask the group to *identify some of the topics covered in the Sermon*.
- B. The second discourse is Jesus' instructions to the disciples when he sends them out on mission, in Matthew 10. Ask a member of the group to **read Matthew 10:5**. Ask the group: What is the situation in which Jesus teaches? Who is present to be a learner? Ask the group members to *identify where the instructions end*. Ask a member of the group to **read Matthew 11:1**, which marks the end of the instructions. Ask the group to *compare Matthew 7:28 with 11:1*. Ask the group to *identify some of the topics covered in the instructions Jesus gives in this discourse*.
- C. The third discourse is a discourse of parables, in Matthew 13. Ask a member of the group to **read Matthew 13:1–3**. Ask the group: What is the situation in which Jesus teaches? Who is present to be

a learner? Ask the group members to *identify where the parables discourse ends*. Ask a member of the group to **read Matthew 13:53**. Ask the group to *compare Matthew 13:53 with 7:28 and 11:1*. Ask the group to *identify some of the topics covered in the parables discourse*.

D. The fourth discourse is teaching about the church. Ask a member of the group to **read Matthew 18:1**. Ask the group: What is the situation in which Jesus teaches? Who is present to be a learner? Ask the group members to *identify where this discourse ends*. Ask a member of the group to **read Matthew 19:1**. Ask the group to *compare this verse with Matthew 7:28, 11:1, and 13:53*. Ask the group to *identify some of the topics covered in the teachings about the church*.

E. The fifth discourse is Jesus' teachings about the end of all things, the final judgment. This is a way of thinking about what really matters, ultimately. Ask a member of the group to **read Matthew 24:3**. Ask the group: What is the situation in which Jesus teaches? Who is present to be a learner? Ask the group to *identify where this discourse ends*. Ask a member of the group to **read Matthew 26:1**. Ask the group to *note the similarity of this verse with Matthew 7:28, 11:1, 13:53 and 19:1*. The similarities in these verses mean that the Gospel writer has put them in place as a distinct marker. Ask the group to *identify some of the topics covered in the teachings about the end of all things*. Ask the group to *identify what happens in the story of Jesus after chapter 25*. Note that what comes next in the Gospel tells about Jesus' death and resurrection. His teaching in the fifth discourse is his last before his death.

3. Engaging Matthew 25: the two parables

Matthew 25 is made up of three parts. Verses 1–13 and 14–30 are two parables. Verses 31–46 give us a saying of Jesus, in the form of a story about the final judgment of all people. [See part 5 of the leader's guide for further explanation of the power of teaching in stories, and on parables as a specific kind of story.]

A. The first parable: the ten bridesmaids. Ask a member of the group to **read Matthew 25:1–13**. Ask the group to *respond to the following questions*:

- Who are the characters in this parable (story)?
- What is their relationship to one another?

This parable presents a situation with a problem.

- What is the problem?
- Who responds to the problem in the right way?
- What is the mistake made by those who respond in the wrong way?

Often our impulse when we read the parables is to identify one of the characters with God.

- Is there a character who fulfills the role of God in this parable?
- What is it about that character and what that character does that is like God?

B. The second parable: the talents, the master and the servants. Ask a member of the group to **read Matthew 25:14–30**. Ask the group to *respond to the same set of questions provided above (concerning characters, the problem and the role of God)*.

4. Engaging Matthew 25: Jesus' judgment

The third part of Matthew 25 gives a saying of Jesus about the final judgment of all people.

A. Ask a member of the class to **read Matthew 25:31–46**. Ask the group to *respond to the following questions*:

- Who are the characters in this parable (story)?
- What is their relationship to one another?

This parable presents a situation with a problem.

- What is the problem?
- Who responds to the problem in the right way?
- What is the mistake made by those who respond in the wrong way?

Often our impulse when we read the parables is to identify one of the characters with God.

- Is there a character who fulfills the role of God in this parable?
- What is it about that character and what that character does that is like God?

B. Focus on “the nations” (Matthew 25:32) Ask the group: Who are these nations? When we have nations, we have structures that go beyond the individual. These structures and the systems they form are present from early in the Bible until its very end (**read Genesis 10:5, 20, 31–32 and Revelation 21:24–26**). [See part 6 of the leader’s guide for reflection on the importance of such structures, and the power of systems.]

C. Focus on “the least of these” (Matthew 25:40, 45) Ask the group: Who are “the least of these” in the story? Who are “the least of these” today? [See part 7 of the leader’s guide for reflection on “the least of these” and their relationship to the Matthew 25 vision.]

5. Matthew 25 and the Matthew 25 vision

A. Have the group read the three focuses of the Matthew 25 vision. [See part 3 of the leader’s guide for descriptions of the three focuses of the Matthew 25 vision.]

As part of our Matthew 25 commitment, we pledge to embrace one or more of these three areas of focus:

- **Building congregational vitality** by deepening and energizing our faith and growing as joyful leaders and disciples actively engaged with our community as we share the gospel of Jesus Christ in word and deed
- **Dismantling structural racism** by fearlessly applying our faith to advocate and break down the systems, practices and thinking that underlie discrimination, bias, prejudice and oppression of people of color
- **Eradicating systemic poverty** by acting on our beliefs and working to change laws, policies, plans and structures in our society that perpetuate economic exploitation of people who are poor.

B. Ask the group: How do the three focuses identify “the least of these” in our time and place? How do the three focuses identify who is called to be God’s presence in working for fullness of life for the least of these? What opportunities are open for your congregation, mid council or group to join the Matthew 25 vision and seek fullness of life for the least of these? [See part 3 of the leader’s guide for descriptions of the three focuses of the Matthew 25 vision.]

C. **Close with prayer** in these or similar words:

Lord Jesus Christ, Shepherd and Savior,
you come to us in unexpected ways.
Help us to recognize your presence
in the faces of our neighbors in need,
so that we may love and serve you
as we love and serve one another;
in your holy name we pray. **Amen.**

Leader's Guide

1. What is a vision?

“Where there is no vision, the people perish” (Proverbs 29:18, KJV). A vision is a picture of a preferred future. God uses visions to equip us for faithful living.

The Bible is full of visions of God's preferred future: Abram and Sarai's vision that they will become ancestors to “a multitude of nations” (Genesis 17); Isaiah's vision that the wolf will dwell with the lamb, and a little child will lead them (Isaiah 11); Mary's vision that God will bring down the powerful from their thrones and lift up the lowly (Luke 1); Jesus' visions of the kingdom of God, expressed through parables, such as the ten bridesmaids, the talents, and the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25); and Revelation's vision of a new creation and a tree of life with leaves for the healing of the nations (Revelation 21–22). These visions were evoked for the people of God in particular times and places — yet they speak to the present moment as well, and continue to comfort, empower and guide us today.

A vision is not a plan. It provides a picture of a destination, but it is not a set of directions for covering the next mile. The Matthew 25 vision points toward a new creation in which racism has been fully dismantled, discrimination has ended and human differences are understood as God's good gift; poverty has been eradicated and all creatures flourish, their lives no longer bound by an inability to meet needs; the church triumphant gathers at the throne of the Lamb, and saints of every time and place bear witness to the eternal and abundant life that is ours in Jesus Christ.

There are many particular routes that lead to these destinations. Those who join the Matthew 25 vision will follow the route that best enables them to move toward God's destination for all creation.

For further reflection

Why is it important to have a vision? What vision do you have for your life? How does a clear vision bring life to a person or group?

2. The Matthew 25 vision

The Matthew 25 vision of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) began with an overture from Cascades Presbytery to the 222nd General Assembly (2016). This overture called Presbyterians to be a missional people, actively engaging the world in the name of Jesus Christ. The 223rd General Assembly (2018) reaffirmed this commitment, distilling a number of other overtures into a sharper focus on three areas: building congregational vitality, dismantling structural racism and eradicating systemic poverty. These actions of the General Assembly are consistent with our belief that we are “saved to serve” — delivered from sin and death in order to show the love, justice and mercy of Jesus in our words and deeds.

The themes of the Matthew 25 invitation are grounded in the gospel. Jesus calls us to serve with and for “the least of these” (Matthew 25:40) — not as a group to be pitied, but as people who are deeply loved by Jesus. They de-center our assumptions about what it means to be a beloved child of God. They challenge the authenticity of our faith and remind us that what we do matters to God.

The tenets of the Matthew 25 vision are also embedded in our denomination's spiritual DNA. The Presbyterian/Reformed tradition is marked by a deep concern for the flourishing of all people. Our confessions make this clear. For instance, the Confession of 1967 condemns the evil of systemic poverty in our world. The Confession of Belhar challenges us to confront racism in church and society. A Brief Statement of Faith imagines congregations fully alive in the glory of God. These themes are evident in the life of the PC(USA) today, as many people and congregations are already involved in Matthew 25 ministries, addressing poverty, racism and congregational vitality.

The Matthew 25 vision is offered, above all, for the sake of the whole world God loves. But we believe it will also help the PC(USA) in three particular ways: to connect, clarify and celebrate. First, sharing in the Matthew 25 vision will allow us to connect with other Presbyterians throughout this nation and with partners in mission around the world, providing a common language to articulate our service in Jesus' name. Second, the Matthew 25 vision will enable us to clarify our self-understanding, so we can begin to live out our calling as followers of Jesus, sharing the love and justice of God among those who are most marginalized. Third, being a part of the Matthew 25 vision is a way to celebrate the witness and work that unites us as people of God in the PC(USA), a vision large enough to embrace us all, yet specific enough to respond to the needs of local communities.

How will we know this vision is being fulfilled in the PC(USA)? We will know it by its fruit: an increase in spiritual energy, evidenced by joyful worship, faithful discipleship and loving service; the impact of the church in the local community and around the globe; an influx of new believers, church growth and stronger participation in ministry; and an igniting of the PC(USA)'s work and witness. We believe God is calling this denomination to be more outwardly focused, missionally oriented, and actively engaged in proclaiming our faith in Jesus through our words and deeds. We pray that people will come to think of this denomination as a sign of what God is doing in the world.

The Matthew 25 vision is, admittedly, audacious. Comprehensively build congregational vitality? Completely dismantle structural racism? Totally eradicate systemic poverty? These challenges are enormous. And yet we affirm that God is always immeasurably greater. God “is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine” (Ephesians 3:20).

For further reflection

What are the visions that have sustained and guided your congregation, presbytery or other group? Where have you found these visions and how have you identified them?

3. The three focuses

The Matthew 25 vision involves three focuses for the work of the PC(USA): building congregational vitality, dismantling structural racism and eradicating systemic poverty.

Building congregational vitality refers to the intentional and continuous faith development of pastors and members of a congregation that leads disciples who are members in a church to actively engage with their community.

Congregational vitality is not determined by the size of a church or its budget, but by a church's faithfulness in demonstrating the love and justice of Jesus. One good test of a congregation's vitality is to see how its members and neighbors answer the question, “If this church were to close, who would miss it and why?” When a congregation is committed to the work and witness of Jesus Christ, its mission becomes an essential part of the local community.

This is the example set by Jesus. He would gather his followers, teaching them and modeling a very different way of life. Then, out of compassion for those in need, he would send them out in mission to teach, heal and confront evil (see Matthew 9–10). This rhythm of gathering and scattering is at the heart of the worship and service of the church: We learn from Jesus and are sent out, then return to experience more of God's reign of justice, hope and peace. Congregational vitality arises from the development and practice of faith. It leads to church growth and the development of new disciples in communities with large populations.

The congregational vitality focus in the Matthew 25 vision encourages congregations, mid councils and other groups to choose specific initiatives that fit their interests, resources and mission. In building congregational vitality and carrying out Jesus' mission, a congregation may choose to work on poverty and racism (the two other Matthew 25 focuses), or it may choose other areas, such as human trafficking, gun violence or earth care.

The Presbyterian Mission Agency has developed a comprehensive curriculum to help a church become a vital congregation; see [pcusa.org/vitalcongregations](https://www.pcusa.org/vitalcongregations). The Vital Congregations Initiative is a two-year process designed to be used in the context of presbytery support. The Vital Congregations Toolkit is intended for congregations.

Dismantling structural racism involves breaking down the laws, policies, practices and structures that reinforce and perpetuate discrimination, bias, prejudice and oppression of “people of color.”

Racism and white supremacy are sin, violating the truth that all people are created in the image of God. This sin results in fear, violence and destruction. We acknowledge the documented disparities with African Americans and other people of color in every area — including housing, education, employment, health, immigration and incarceration. As such disparities reveal, these aren't individual issues, but institutional injustices in our society. That is why we are committed to addressing them as structural problems.

The PC(USA) aligns itself in this work with the teaching of Jesus to love one's neighbor as oneself and to respond to the least of these — people who are marginalized and brushed aside — with compassion and justice. We follow the example of the early Christians, who sought to build new forms of community in which there was no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female (Galatians 3:28).

The concept of white supremacy is correlative to racism. This dates back to the earliest history of the United

States. White supremacy was the motivating factor that led early European settlers to steal land, kill Native American peoples and destroy communities under the guise of the Doctrine of Discovery. White supremacy led Europeans to enslave African people, kidnapping them and forcing them to come to America to serve as a supply of free labor to build the “new world.” White supremacy undergirds violent gun attacks and mass murders of people of color by white people in this country to this day.

While the focus is on racial oppression, the intersectionality of racial oppression against other oppressed groups — including women, LGBTQIA+ people, and people who are disabled — is a vital consideration. We encourage Presbyterians to include efforts to combat discrimination and oppression of these groups under the rubric of racism.

The Presbyterian Mission Agency offers a variety of helpful materials for the work of dismantling structural racism, including the “Facing Racism” curriculum. See pcusa.org/facingracism.

Eradicating systemic poverty refers to the elimination of the economic exploitation of impoverished people through laws, policies, practices and systems that perpetuate an impoverished state.

Eradicating systemic poverty means confronting the systems that create and perpetuate poverty. This area of focus moves beyond the important acts of compassion listed in Matthew 25 — offering compassion to individuals who are hungry and thirsty — to address the factors that cause such outcomes for large groups in our society and world.

There is a saying: If one fish winds up on the shore, one may ask, “What’s wrong with that fish?” But if a school of fish washes up on the shore, one must ask, “What’s wrong with the water?” Solve the problem with the water and the fish can swim in safety. Our society focuses on the fish. We try to fix individual people who end up on the margins. While it is important to respond with compassion to each person who is impoverished, the bigger question is: What is causing them to end up and remain there?

Jesus was not crucified because he was feeding the hungry and healing the sick. He was persecuted and executed when he “troubled the waters” — disturbing those with political, social and economic power. For example, when Jesus cast out a man’s demons and those demons drove a herd of pigs into the sea, this economic loss and tampering with the system caused some people to want Jesus to leave their community (Matthew 8). Confronting systems is challenging work — systems develop powerful defenses.

As with the other areas of focus, the Presbyterian Mission Agency offers a number of programs and resources that may aid congregations in developing or joining ministries that deal with systemic poverty.

As with other areas of focus, the Presbyterian Mission Agency has programs and resources to aid congregations in developing or learning about ministries that deal with systemic poverty. Presbyterian Hunger Program (pcusa.org/hunger) and the Presbyterian Committee on the Self-Development of People (pcusa.org/sdop) are two such programs that have for 50 years connected and equipped congregations, presbyteries, and Presbyterians on root causes of hunger and poverty through worship and educational resources and avenues to take action on hunger, poverty or homelessness in your community.

For further reflection

What are some examples of ways in which PC(USA) ministries are already engaging poverty, racism and congregational vitality at the local, regional, national or global level?

4. The shape of the Gospel of Matthew

The book of Matthew is the first of the four New Testament Gospels — biblical accounts of the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Scholars believe Matthew’s Gospel was written in the last decades of the first century of the Common Era. It was written especially for second-generation Jewish Christians, struggling to make sense of their identity as children of Israel and followers of Jesus. As such, this Gospel serves as a kind of bridge between the Old and New Testaments.

The Gospel of Matthew has a distinctive structure. It begins, like Mark, Luke and John, with the origin of Jesus (Matthew and Luke begin with Jesus’ birth and infancy; Mark and John begin with Jesus’ baptism). It ends, like the other Gospels, bearing witness to his suffering and death on the cross and his resurrection on the first day of the week. In between, however, Matthew is organized around five “books,” like the five books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) or Torah that would have been familiar to Matthew’s Jewish/Christian audience as

the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures. Each of the five “books” in Matthew consists of two parts: (a) narrative, accounts of the actions of Jesus, and (b) discourse, speeches or sermons by Jesus.

5. Stories and parables

The discourses in Matthew, especially Chapter 25, teach by telling stories, especially stories in the form of parables. Stories are a powerful form of communication. Stories awaken imagination and cause us to ponder possibilities that can lead to resolution and response within the hearts and minds of listeners who are drawn in and become captivated by the narrative. Research on storytelling reveals that this form of communication can encourage co-operative activity, encompass holistic perspectives, value emotional realities, link theory to practice, stimulate students’ critical thinking skills, capture complexities of situations, reveal multiple perspectives, make sense of experience, encourage self-review and construct new knowledge.¹

The stories Jesus tells are like wrecking balls, set in motion to dismantle oppressive systems and challenge the legitimacy of cultural norms. The reaction to Jesus’ storytelling will vary, depending on the one who is listening. For those in power, the parables threaten their authority. For the poor, the teachings of the kingdom are good news, revealing God’s bias and love toward them. Through these stories and parables, Jesus is asking his followers to commit to active engagement in his kingdom instead of the systems of the world that disregard the needs of the least of these.

For further reflection

Why are stories so important in Christian faith, life and worship? How do stories teach us? How do they communicate what is true and good? How do stories make a difference in our lives and in the world?

6. The impact of systems

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a system as “a regularly interacting or interdependent group of items forming a unified whole.”² All people are impacted each day by a myriad of systems, seen and unseen. The solar system lights up the sky, forming day and night, and providing a pattern from which humanity devises time. Technological systems allow aircraft to be flown, boats to be chartered, goods to be created, and services to be provided to people across the street and around the globe. Social media systems instantly connect us to people within our neighborhood and in other nations. Family systems shape and form our personality and character. School systems impact our intellect and develop our minds. Court systems allow people to present and receive judgment on lawsuits brought before judges and jurors.

Systems can bring life or create death, depending upon the design of the system and the status and position of the people impacted. Oppressive systems harm people who are part of a specific social group viewed as “deficient” by the dominant culture. This judgment may be based on gender, color or race; economic situation, power and privilege; or even insider or outsider status in the church. Individuals may be mistreated simply because they are not members of the privileged group.

Carol Cheney, Jeannie LaFrance and Terrie Quinteros have written about the work of nonprofit groups with oppressive systems. Their research suggests that institutional oppression occurs when established laws, customs and practices systematically reflect and produce inequities based on one’s membership in targeted social identity groups. Such oppression may occur in spite of the best intentions of people in the dominant culture. As the authors assert, if oppressive consequences accrue to institutional laws, customs or practices, the institution is oppressive regardless of whether the individuals maintaining those practices have oppressive intentions. The result of institutional oppression is a system of invisible barriers and walls that limit people based on their membership in unfavored social identity groups. The barriers are only invisible to those seemingly unaffected by it.³

In Matthew 25, Jesus speaks to the nations. Nations create systems to govern people. These systems can either respond to the “least of these” or not. They may work to ameliorate structural racism and systemic poverty, or they may uphold and exacerbate these problems. Citizens of nations may acquiesce or support oppressive systems, or work to put in place systems that encourage all to flourish. Congregations also create systems. They have their own patterns of action that can serve to welcome or exclude, reach out or withdraw.

Jesus came proclaiming the reality of new system — the kingdom of God. Scholar and theologian Marcus Borg makes the point that Jesus’ teaching, preaching and actions reflect his alternative vision of the world as God’s kingdom.

1 Maxine Alterio, “Using Storytelling to Enhance Student Learning,” *The Higher Education Academy*, 2003.

2 <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/system>

3 Adapted from <https://www.pcc.edu/illumination/wp-content/uploads/sites/54/2018/05/institutionalized-oppression-definitions.pdf>

According to Borg, “Jesus was not talking about how to be good and how to behave within the framework of a domination system. He was a critic of the domination system itself.”⁴ Jesus was compassionate toward victims of oppressive social systems; at the same time, he was an advocate for dismantling the systems causing the oppression. His protest went beyond words into powerful action to liberate the oppressed from the hands of their captors. His ministry was deeply spiritual and political at the same time. Jesus’ teaching and healing moved him from the sideline to the front-lines as he became a threat to Roman authority. And you know the rest of the story: Jesus was executed for sedition against the Roman empire. On his cross were the words: “The King of the Jews.”

For further reflection

Can you name a system that has been life-giving for you? How did this system impact your thoughts, attitudes and relationships with others? What about a system that has negatively impacted you or someone you loved? How did this system impact your thoughts, attitudes and relationships with others?

How does your congregation relate to your local community? What systems — political, religious, cultural or social — are involved in this relationship?

7. “The Least of These”: Justice and mercy

It has been said that “character is what you do when no one is looking.” The compassionate nature of the sheep in Matthew 25 reveals the authenticity of their character. They are not trying to impress Jesus or earn their way into the kingdom through their works. They are simply responding compassionately when they encounter people in need. Those they care for have basic needs that must be met in order for them to live, and to live fully: hunger, thirst, welcome and human community, clothing and shelter, health and vital connection to the wider community. Those with such pressing needs are counted among “the least of these” by Jesus.

Following Jesus faithfully means putting Christian love and compassion into action. Jesus’ teaching in the Gospel of Matthew resembles the “love ethic” described by thinkers such as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and poet bell hooks. This love ethic leads Jesus and would-be followers to respond to the least of these. Cornel West states that “that justice is what love looks like in public.” Indeed, Jesus and justice go together as two sides of one coin. Matthew 25 suggests that a special blessing is pronounced for those who are transformed by God’s love and who love and serve others in Jesus’ name.

If the purpose of Jesus’ stories is to transform those who learn from them, then the good news in this story is that goats can become sheep. We still have time to get our act together. Transformation is possible for those who recognize what Jesus is saying and understand where God is coming from — God’s kingdom. It our hope that the PC(USA) will align with the sheep so we may be transformed and become agents of transformation through Jesus Christ.

For further reflection

What is your self-understanding as a follower of Jesus? How is this understanding seen in what you do? How do your actions demonstrate the justice and mercy of God?

How is the church responding to issues of poverty and racism today? And what does Matthew 25 suggest about congregational vitality? How is the church responding to marginalized communities such as those who disabled or those who are part of the LGBTQIA+ communities? How does this work help us as Presbyterians understand who we are as followers of Jesus?

Invitation to discipleship

The invitation is before you — to join God’s mission in the PC(USA) through one or more of the three focuses of the Matthew 25 vision:

- **building congregational vitality**
- **dismantling structural racism**
- **eradicating systemic poverty**

Which of these will you commit to in your church, mid council or agency? Which area of focus (if not all three) best matches the needs in your community, the gifts you have to offer and your sense of God’s calling? Devote some time

⁴ Marcus J. Borg, *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith* (HarperOne, 1998).

to prayer, discussion and discernment with the appropriate bodies in your congregation, mid council or other entity as you consider these questions. Find out what actions or decisions need to happen before you take the next step in responding to the Matthew 25 invitation.

When you're ready to sign up, go to the Matthew 25 website: pcusa.org/matthew25. Your name will immediately be added to the hundreds of churches, presbyteries, synods and caucuses that have already signed on. You will also find resources to help you live into your commitment. If you have questions about the Matthew 25 vision, please do not hesitate to contact the Presbyterian Mission Agency. You may reach us at **800-728-7228** or info@pcusa.org. Let us know what you need, and we will connect you with the right staff person.

How can you assess your progress in responding to the Matthew 25 invitation? One measure is qualitative: Keep track of your stories and tell us about the impact of this vision on your congregation or group. Please share your stories with us and help to encourage others by contributing narratives at the Matthew 25 website: pcusa.org/matthew25. Another measure is quantitative. Churches, presbyteries, synods, caucuses and other entities may use the “20–80 principle” in reflecting on your progress. In any given organization, 20% of people often do 80% of the work, so 20% becomes a kind of “tipping point.” If 20% of your congregations, presbyteries or groups join the Matthew 25 vision, this will have a transforming effect on the culture of your whole organization. Church growth through new disciples or new ministries can be another useful quantitative measurement. The important thing is to make commitments and keep working toward the stated goals.

We hope and pray that all Presbyterians will respond to this Matthew 25 invitation to discipleship. We believe that, in doing so, our whole denomination — members, congregations, mid councils and other entities — will grow in faith and faithfulness as we actively engage in God's mission. We believe this is “what the Spirit is saying to the church” (Revelations 2:7) in this time and place. We believe this is what it means to share the good news of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, with the world God loves.



Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
Presbyterian Mission

100 Witherspoon St. | Louisville, KY 40202
PDS: 1005019001