



## **The Parable of the Talents, The Judgment of the Nations, and Fossil Fuel Divestment** *A Bible Study for Churches*

*This Bible study, in two parts, is designed to help church groups discuss the moral significance of fossil fuel divestment and clean energy reinvestment. Either part may be used independently. If you use only one part, we recommend the first.*

### **Introduction**

For decades, religious groups have invested enormous effort and resources to address hunger and poverty in the developing world. They have saved lives and brought hope for those most in need by supporting schools, agriculture, small business, public health, and more. But through climate change, the fossil fuel industry threatens to undo much of the progress faith communities and other institutions have made worldwide in terms of public health, food distribution, and infrastructure development.

Climate change creates weather conditions that increase the spread of many diseases and makes it harder to grow crops. It exacerbates extreme weather events, destroying roads, bridges, communications systems, sewage systems and ecosystems. Those people with the fewest resources are the most vulnerable to these impacts.

Faith-based institutions such as churches, synagogues, and religious pension funds and endowments, should divest from fossil fuels because they undermine the time, resources and energy that religious groups have made in reaching out to the poorest among us. Climate change increases poverty, disease and hunger—which is counter to the deepest values of faith communities. Religious groups' investments should promote and support their missions rather than working against them.

This two-part study reflects on the story in the New Testament that most directly discusses the topic of investment: The Parable of the Talents. This is a controversial and challenging parable. Many people believe that it exhorts Jesus' disciples to use their God-given gifts in the service of God. Others feel that it encourages successful enterprise and business acumen. Some Christians feel uncomfortable that the parable appears to praise the accumulation of wealth—and to condemn those who do not gather earthly riches.

Consider this passage in a different way. First, read the text in light of the passage that follows it, in which Jesus tells his followers that when they help the poor, sick, and imprisoned, they are helping him. The Parable of the Talents is one of a series of Jesus' teachings about preparing for the coming of God's realm. How should we understand the Parable of the Talents given the one that immediately follows it?

Second, read this passage with the understanding that the talents represent not our own financial resources, but rather the natural resources that God has placed into our care. We understand the master in this story to represent God in Christ, the servants to represent God's people, and the talents to represent the resources of creation. Is it faithful to read this parable as an allegory for



human's temporary stewardship of the Earth? Might this parable challenge us to think about how our use of nature's God-given bounty helps nature (the talents) increase—or how our lives degrade the natural world? Perhaps, in a different way than we'd previously imagined, this parable invites us to reflect on the values that should shape our stewardship of creation.

Both parts of the study close with the reading of Psalm 112. Not everyone has access to significant financial resources, but for those who have enough to invest and share, this psalm provides Biblical values for framing financial decisions.



## **Part 1: The Parable of the Talents and Divestment**

### **Read:**

Matthew 25:14-30

### **Discuss:**

- If you interpret this parable literally, what do you think Jesus is saying about how we should invest our money?
- Think of other passages in the Bible where Jesus talks about money. Does a literal interpretation of this parable seem consistent with Jesus' financial values?
- Think of other parables in the Bible. Do you think we should interpret them literally? Why or why not?

### **Share:**

*This story, like other parables, is an allegory--a story with a concealed meaning. Many people immediately assume that the parable should be interpreted as a teaching on how to manage financial resources. Others suggest that the talents symbolize our gifts and skills, which we should increase for the glory of God.*

*But what if we considered a third possibility: that God wants us to consider the talents as representing the bounty and resources of Creation--resources that are given to us to manage, but for whose use, increase and well-being we are accountable to God?*

*This way of thinking is consistent with the ancient Israelites' understanding of the relationship between the land, their God, and themselves. They knew that the land was God's and God's alone. It represented the promise of God's favor--a gift from God, rather than a human-owned asset. God tells the Israelites: "No land may be permanently bought or sold. It all belongs to me—it isn't your land, and you only live there for a little while" (Lev 25:23). Unlike kings in surrounding regions, the king of Israel was expected to "manage the land as a gift entrusted to him but never possessed by him." [1]*

### **Discuss:**

- If the talents represent the earth's resources, how does that impact your understanding of this parable?
- In what ways does your life support the flourishing and increase of Creation? In what way does your life harm or degrade Creation? Are you accountable to God for this?
- If the talents represent the earth's resources, how might this parable inform faithful approaches to the investment of religious funds?

### **Share:**

*For decades, religious groups have addressed hunger and poverty in the developing world by investing in schools, agriculture, small business, public health, and more. These investments have helped millions of people across the world.*



*But through climate change, the fossil fuel industry threatens everything that religious groups have accomplished. Climate change creates weather conditions that increase the spread of disease, makes it harder to grow crops, and destroys vital infrastructure and natural ecosystems through extreme weather events. Those with the fewest resources are the most vulnerable to these impacts.*

*Fossil fuels undermine the investment in time and energy that churches make in reaching out to the poorest among us by exacerbating climate conditions that contribute to disease, hunger, and poverty.*

**Discuss:**

- Should churches earn money from sources that act in contradiction to their values if it allows them to fund their ministries? Why or why not?

**Closing Reading:**

Psalm 112



## **Part 2: The Judgment of the Nations and Reinvestment**

### **Discuss:**

Recap the previous conversation about the Parable of the Talents. Invite participants to share new reflections on that parable since your last meeting.

### **Read:**

Matthew 25:31-46

### **Discuss:**

- What does this passage say about the significance of helping those in need?
- How should this passage shape the work of the church?
- What relationship do you see between the Parable of the Talents and this passage?
- With both the Parable of the Talents and the Judgment of the Nations in mind, what values should inform church investment strategies?

### **Share:**

*The developing world has a massive need for clean energy. In poor, developing countries, access to energy is life-saving. When poor countries gain access to electricity, life expectancy increases and infant mortality drops. Energy creates much good. But pollution from fossil fuels undermines the progress that energy itself creates. In India, air pollution—most of it from various fossil fuels--kills over half a million people annually. For the sake of the world's most vulnerable, we need a clean energy revolution.*

*Divestment from fossil fuels and reinvestment in a clean energy future is a values-based act of commitment to a healthy future for the poor. Using profits from fossil fuels to fund our outreach to the poor undermines that outreach because climate change exacerbates conditions that contribute to hunger and poverty. What's more, fossil fuel share prices fail to take into account the heavy price on God's people and creation that oil and gas create. Our investments must support our work as stewards of God's creation and caretakers for the most vulnerable.*

### **Discuss:**

- What are your reactions to the concept of fossil fuel divestment? What questions come up for you as you consider this? If you do not believe in divestment as an expression of religious values, why not? Is any investment too immoral for people of faith?
- Should churches invest and use their financial resources to allow the people and resources of the earth to flourish? Why or why not?
- Matthew 6:21 says, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." What does this mean to you?

### **Closing Reading:**

Psalm 112



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*[1] Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith, Overtures to Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), 70.*

*This Bible study was written by the Rev. Jenny Phillips (United Methodist) and the Rev. Fletcher Harper (Episcopal). Permission is granted to excerpt with attribution.*