

What Would Jesus Recycle?



Session 3



Matthew 6:25–34; Luke 10:25–29

Session Objective

Our Christian faith revolves around the person of Jesus the Christ. His words and example are inspiration for our behavior. His crucifixion impels us to make sacrifices for our neighbors. His resurrection gives us hope. Today's session explores what Jesus teaches us about environmental stewardship.

Faith Statement

God has created the peoples of the earth to be one universal family. In God's reconciling love, God overcomes the barriers between humans, and breaks down every form of discrimination based on racial or ethnic difference, real or imaginary. The church is called to bring all humankind to receive and uphold one another as persons in all relationships of life: in employment, housing, education, leisure, marriage, family, church, and the exercise of political rights. . . . Congregations, individuals, or groups of Christians who exclude, dominate, or patronize their fellow person, however subtly, resist the Spirit of God and bring contempt on the faith which they profess.

—Confession of 1967 (9.44)

Session Overview

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Enhancements

Family Connections
Web Connections
Church Tour



The coffeehouse version of this session is available at: pcusa.org/webelieve/faithquestions/creation32.htm



Download the Web Resources at pcusa.org/webelieve/faithquestions/creation32.htm.

Spiritual Reflection for Leaders

Our world is full of brokenness. Wars rage; poverty spreads; disease chokes. The greed and ignorance that continue to hurt creation only exacerbate this pain. Even the most conscientious of us are indirectly culpable of hurting our neighbors, insofar as we cannot divorce ourselves completely from our culture of consumption. What would Jesus do, if he were here today, after seeing the environmental challenges that our society faces?

Many well-intentioned proponents of environmental justice are quick to work as activists, to bring about much-needed change. But fanatics for productive change, who do not maintain a sensitivity to God's subtle voice, become stuck in a passion that takes them away from peace and empathy. Jesus, on the other hand, was a revolutionary who never strayed from the source of his strength or the faces of the people he helped.

As you lead your students to think more deeply about how they can heal God's creation, consider Jesus' attitude. Go outside, to a place where you can feel close to God's creation, or far from environmental exploitation. Take ten full minutes to breathe deeply, to pray, and to feel solidarity with our neighbors who suffer because of the abuses and consumption that our culture takes for granted.



Understanding the Scripture

Matthew 6:25–34 comes from a passage commonly known as the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' longest sermon. Jesus begins by sharing the Beatitudes, a list of spiritual conditions that he calls *blessed*. None of these conditions would be considered very agreeable in the dominant culture of his day, nor of any day, for that matter. By raising the images of meekness, mournfulness, and purity, Jesus is challenging prevailing thought.

The remainder of the sermon (through Matthew 7:27) includes many more challenges to dominant cultural concepts of normal, good, or *blessed* living. Six times Jesus uses the phrase "You have heard it said . . . but I say to you . . ." And other passages follow a similar pattern of "Do not do as _____ does, but do this instead." The topics addressed in each passage are very diverse—adultery, prayer, love, fasting—but the message is clear that Jesus is out to change people, to set them free from bondage to the cultural norms that separate them from God.

Within that context, verses 25–34 urge us to give up the struggle for image and comfort, and to have faith in God's providence. People who blindly followed the values of dominant culture in those days, just like those in the mainstream of popular society today, worried more about themselves than about anything else in creation. (We all know the type, right? A particular cosmetic is more important than the suffering endured by animals on which it was tested. The low cost of some fast food is more important than the challenging times endured by the poverty-stricken farmers who grew it.) To those of the world who ignore their self-centered effect on God's creation, Jesus says to be more like the birds and flowers: live simply and God will provide.

Luke 10:25–29 comes soon after Jesus "sets his face" (9:51) toward his fate in Jerusalem. The first narrative Luke shares after this pinnacle verse (9:51) is about Jesus' rejection by the Samaritans. This is interesting because in the next chapter, Jesus raises up a Samaritan as a model of Christian charity. Whether or not Luke intended anything by that literary connection, the main topic of his Gospel in this section (9:52–10:42) is

the demanding nature of following Christ: give up your jobs and families, cure the sick, expect some people to not welcome you, do not be distracted.

Within that context, we read about a lawyer who asks a sincere and serious question about following Christ. As is so usual, Jesus does not answer this question directly or very clearly. The parable that follows expresses what it is to be a good neighbor. Jesus leaves it to the lawyer, and to us, to define *neighbor*. Only someone who is beaten? Any person who is in trouble? Considering the radical inclusiveness that Jesus shows throughout his life—fraternizing with tax collectors, prostitutes, and the powerless—it seems clear enough that his idea of neighbor is very broad. Who are we to limit it to persons? That is, if the lawyer was bold enough to push Jesus again to define the word, should we suppose that Jesus contains love to humans, or that he spreads it to the united creation to which we are all interconnected?



Understanding the Faith Statement

The Confession of 1967 is primarily concerned with reconciliation. It is a spiritual response to personal and systematic abuse, especially racism. The writers might not have considered the abuses that modern culture imposes on the earth and on the people who suffer as a result of environmental ignorance, selfishness, and exploitation. However, the writers' message is absolutely appropriate for a church and people called to repent and to commit to sustainable living, so that lands and neighbors can live freely, as God intended.



Teaching Today's Question

Jesus did not say anything directly about environmental stewardship. Christians interested in environmental justice have to accept this and turn toward passages like the ones highlighted in this session that support stewardship and sustainable living. This is perfectly normal biblical interpretation. Anyone who cares about what Jesus would say and do about current issues can and should consider the values that Christ consistently promoted. One good way to answer this challenge is to raise the classic question "What would Jesus do?" Would Jesus throw out his aluminum cans, or walk the extra mile (Matthew 5:41) to recycle them? Would Jesus waste energy by leaving on lights and computers, or would he conserve every iota of God's creation?

Another challenge that may arise is defeatism: We can't turn this around, the argument goes, so why bother? In this case, remind your students that God uses our hands to enact justice. Also, you can help your students understand that Jesus' resurrection gives us hope that evil can be conquered—and that includes the evils of environmental exploitation.



Enter

Option A: Disappearing Resources Game

- Masking tape, 8 1/2" x 11" paper in two colors

Divide the class into small groups with five or six participants in each group. If you have fewer than five participants, do this activity as one group. Use tape to create one large square on the floor in your meeting space. The diagonal of the square needs to be about 3 feet across per person in an average small group. Place a sheet of the same color of paper at two opposite diagonal corners of each square and place sheets of the other color of paper (one for each group member) randomly throughout the square.

Share the following instructions with the participants:

- You are going to try to use resources wisely, in order to get across the square.
- You must enter the square at one of the entry points (sheets of paper on the corners) and make your way together diagonally across the field by stepping only on the resources (the papers inside the square).
- No resources or entry points can be moved, and you can enter and exit only at an entry point.
- All small group members must enter the square before any members can exit the square.
- You can touch the resources only when inside the square. Anyone who touches the floor apart from a resource must return to the entrance. (Modify this for participants with physical challenges.)
- Once a resource has been used (touched), someone must continue to touch it or it will run out, and the leader will take it away!
- If too many resources run out, the game starts over.

Allow each small group to complete this challenge, and then explore the following questions together about conserving resources.

- What did you need to succeed in this game?
- How did you as an individual work with or against your small group?
- What might these resources represent?
- How do you conserve resources in the real world?
- Whom do you work with or against to conserve or exploit resources?

Option B: Puzzle Banner

- Puzzle banner from previous sessions, markers, tape

Display the banner that your group began in Session 1 and continued working on in Session 2. Have any participant who wasn't present in previous sessions draw a puzzle piece on the banner, in any shape, color, or detail, and have them write their name in the puzzle piece. Have each participant draw a new puzzle-piece shape for some part of creation to which they feel connected, and invite them to choose a different part of creation than the part they chose last time. Encourage them to think broadly, to draw their part of creation in some way that resembles that aspect of creation (for instance, "sky" might be large, blue, and near the top of the banner), and to leave space for drawing puzzle pieces for one more session.



Engage

Option A: Resting with the Question

Gather the participants in a comfortable location and use the following conversation starters to guide a conversation that explores the question “What would Jesus recycle?” Encourage the students to ask their own questions that relate to this question during this time. Then pray the opening prayer with the participants.

- Are humans more important than other life on earth? Why or why not?
- Which is more distressing: what our waste and abuse of resources can do to the earth or what our waste and abuse of resources can do to the people who suffer as a result?
- Is it sinful not to recycle everything we possible can? Why or why not?
- Based on what we know about Jesus Christ, how would he approach recycling and how we use our resources?

Option B: Poster Questions



Copy of “Engage Posters” (Web Resource 3a) or newsprint and markers, tape

Post the following questions around the meeting space. Either print out the questions, using “Engage Posters” (Web Resource 3a), or write each question on a separate sheet of newsprint.

- What have you recycled in the past week?
- What is one item that you could have recycled in the past week, but didn’t?
- Are humans more important than other life on earth?
- On a scale of 1 to 10, how important is it for YOU to recycle? (1 = not important; 10 = very important)
- Is it sinful not to recycle everything we possible can?
- Which is more distressing: what our waste and abuse of resources can do to the earth or what our waste and abuse of resources can do to the people who suffer as a result?
- Based on what we know about Jesus Christ, how would he approach recycling and how we use our resources?

As each participant enters, give him or her a marker and invite him or her to respond to each question posted around the room by writing something on each page or sheet of newsprint. After a few minutes, gather the group together and review the responses for each question. Then pray the opening prayer.



Explore

Option A: Matthew 6:25–34



Bibles

Tell your students that this Scripture passage comes in the middle of a series of short passages in which Jesus urges us to be free from bondage to the cultural norms that separate us from God. Make sure each participant has a Bible and invite a volunteer to read Matthew 6:25–34. Explore the following questions:

Opening Prayer

Holy God, be with us as we once again come together in your name. We’ve come here today with different personalities and for different reasons. Bring us together, God, so that we may become your people as we listen to each other and challenge each other. Amen.

- Jesus says that many people worry about what they eat and drink, what their body looks like, and what they wear. Do you know people like this? Are you like this? Why do you think people can be like this?
- What does a follower of Jesus Christ care about when it comes to buying clothes or food?
- What are some normal cultural comforts that you use that are not so good for the earth or for other people in the world? What are some product choices or food choices that you have made in order to be a good eco-steward?
- This passage says that God takes care of the birds and flowers. Is God still caring for nature, or has God given up, or have humans overwhelmed God, or what?
- If, as Jesus says, we are of more value than birds and flowers, can we trust that God will fix the environmental problems of our world?
- If you really trust God, as this passage also urges, why should you do anything to conserve?
- Some people might think that verse 34 tells them not to worry about how creation will be taken care of in the coming generations. What do you think this verse means?

Option B: Movie Clips: *Wall-E*

DVD of *Wall-E* (2008, G), television, DVD player

Clip 1

Chapter: 1 (start cue: 0:45, end cue: 2:05)

Play clip 1 from *Wall-E* for the participants and then explore the following questions together about environmental abuse and neighborliness:

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- Is it possible for Earth turn out as it is depicted in this clip? Do you think it will? Why or why not?
 - How can we slow the excessive use of energy and other things that are damaging God's creation?

Make sure each participant has a Bible and ask a volunteer to read Luke 10:25–29.

- Who is our *neighbor*? Can trees, water, or animals be neighbors?
- Would Jesus use this passage to urge Christian eco-stewardship?
- Is it an “eco-mandment” (*an ecological commandment we learn from the values expressed in the Bible*) to conserve, reduce, recycle, and reuse? Why or why not?
- Is throwing away recyclables a sin? If adding unnecessarily to landfills ruins a water source, which leads to poverty and pain for our neighbors, then is it a sin to throw away recyclables?

Clip 2

Chapters: 30–31 (start cue: 1:24:14, end cue: 1:30:15)

Play clip 2 for the participants. Then tell your students that the movie *Wall-E* is not a story just about waste and excessive consumption and that the point of the movie is that love and hope exist, even in the darkest places. Explore the following questions together:

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- Where is the hope in our current environmental situation?
 - How can you contribute to that hope? How can you help others contribute to that hope?



Express

Option A: Coffee Talk

- Coffeemaker, coffee filter, decaffeinated Equal Exchange (fair trade) coffee, organic milk or cream, organic fair trade sugar, organic juice, reusable or recyclable cups, copy of “The Presbyterian Coffee Project” brochure for each student (printed from pcusa.org/coffee/pdf/pamphlet.pdf)

Without telling participants that there is anything special about the drinks, offer each participant a cup of coffee or juice. Ask if they taste anything different about these drinks, and then reveal that they are fair trade and organic. While they are enjoying the drinks, give each participant a copy of “The Presbyterian Coffee Project” and spend some time reviewing it before exploring the following questions together:

- What does *fair trade* mean? (*Fair trade means that a product from a developing country was produced with fair labor conditions, fair wages, and environmental sustainability.*)
- What does *organic* mean? (*grown without chemicals that hurt the environment*)
- How do organic and fair trade products help God’s creation?
- Other than coffee, what other fair trade products can you purchase? (*various products, including tea, chocolate, fresh fruit, rice, honey, and flowers*)
- Would you be willing to pay more for organic and fair trade products? Why or why not?
- Should churches pay extra for fair trade and organic goods, or should they save their money to give to the poor? Why?
- Do you consider it an “eco-mandment” (an ecological commandment we learn from the values expressed in the Bible) to buy organic or fair trade products? Why or why not?
- Do you think it is a sin to buy conventional products when there are organic or fair trade alternatives? Why or why not?
- How would the Lord’s Supper be different if the elements were organic or fair trade?

If you have Internet access in your meeting space, consider exploring the following Web sites together: pcusa.org/coffee and equalexchange.coop.

Option B: Listen and Pray

- Recording of “Big Yellow Taxi” by Counting Crows (originally released by Joni Mitchell), legal copies of lyrics of “Big Yellow Taxi,” pens, music player

Encourage the participants to sit comfortably while you play the recording of “Big Yellow Taxi.” Encourage them to follow the lyrics while listening to the song. Play the song a second time and ask the participants to circle at least ten words or phrases that stand out. Then ask each participant to write a short prayer that includes the circled words.

Option C: Create or Develop a Recycling Program

- Recycling bins, trash bins, or cardboard boxes, markers, tape, scissors, copy of “Recycling Symbol” (Web Resource 3b)

If your congregation does not yet have a recycling program, work with the participants to create and manage one. Decide what items will be collected, how they will be collected, and how the items will be taken to a recycling center. Work together to create recycling bins and put a recycling symbol on each bin. A copy of this symbol is available on “Recycling Symbol” (Web Resource 3b). Place the recycling bins throughout the church building.

If your church already has a recycling program, lead an evaluative conversation with the participants about it. How could the existing recycling bins be nicer looking or more user-friendly? Where do bins need to be added or replaced? What items are currently being recycled and what items need to be added to the list? How can your participants get involved in the recycling program? If possible, walk around and inspect the existing recycling bins. Based on the responses from the participants, create new recycling bins or improve the existing ones. Make sure each bin has a recycling symbol on it. A copy of this symbol is available on "Recycling Symbol" (Web Resource 3b).

Explore the following questions with the participants:

- How many of your friends and family members regularly recycle as many items as possible? Is recycling a regular part of your lifestyle? Why or why not?
- Do you consider recycling an "eco-mandment" (an ecological commandment we learn from the values expressed in the Bible) or just something extra to do?
- Should we expect everyone to recycle? Is it sinful to not recycle?



Palms Up and Down Prayer

Give each participant an opportunity to share one thing that he or she learned in today's session. Go around the group a second time and give each person an opportunity to share one thing that he or she would like to have lifted up in prayer. Gather the participants in a circle and ask them to hold out their left hands with palms facing up. Then ask each person to place his or her right hand (palm down) on top of the hand of the person on his or her right. Say the following to the group:

This circle represents our community of faith. In this community we are always supporting people around us (*call everyone's attention to their left hands*) and we are letting our brothers and sisters in Christ support us (*call everyone's attention to their right hands*).

Closing Prayer

Loving God, who called us together today to study, grow, and have fun, send us out into the world to search for our calling in their world. Help us to put our faith into action by living lives that are holy and acceptable to you. Help us to be stewards of your creation by going out of our way to reduce what we take from the world, to reuse as much as possible, and to recycle more things than we send to the trash dump. Amen.

While the participants are still in a circle, say the closing prayer.



Enhancements

Other Ways to Connect with the Session

Family Connections

"Family Connections" (Web Resource) has a set of discussion questions for each of the four sessions in this course that families can talk about after class. Provide each family with a copy of this resource.

Web Connections

E-mail the following links to the participants and their families and encourage them to explore the Web sites together: pcusa.org/coffee and equalexchange.com/pcusa.

Church Tour

Spend time touring your church building, looking for your church's good choices for the environment (for instance, low-energy lightbulbs) and for places in which the church could make better choices (for instance, leaky faucets). Based on the information collected, create a plan for what your group can do to help make less of an environmental impact.